

Rickety Religion (Part Three: Advent, Time and 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 third question we now turn to is: “How can the structures of the Church of England be reformed?”

Sociologists claim that institutions have two primary functions: socialization and stabilization. The extended family is perhaps the smallest and oldest forms 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. 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.

Now, every family needs some organisation. But it is particular, seasonal, time-specific, adaptable, organic, reciprocal and humane. No family is organised like a commercial company or industry. Families have values, and as we are raised with these, so may we have the opportunity to replicate or reform as we age. Marriages and their ancient predecessors are similar – again, they all require an adaptability, stability and selflessness to thrive. Marriages, like families, need love, honesty, integrity, patience, kindness, self-control, humility, gentleness and faithfulness.

So, as the previous article invited us into an opening scenario, so we continue with another here. I want you to imagine the exercise of an Annual Spousal Appraisal. These were introduced for good reasons, not least to see if they might provide a mechanism to check rising rates of separation and divorce. So, a good thing? Maybe.

In our imagined scenario, a spouse hands the form over to their partner to be filled in. There are questions to answer, such as ‘how have you grown and developed this year?’, ‘what extra training have you done?’, ‘have you read anything helpful to you in your spousal role?’, ‘have you met the goals and targets from last year?’ (last years’ appraisal form enclosed), and ‘did you manage to get away for a break to refresh your sense of purpose in this relationship?’.

The partner may find this exercise a tad trivialising, but there is an opportunity to expand on your responses. In one box on the form, you are asked to write in not less than 300 words how your vision for this relationship is being worked through. Another box asks you to write down what has been challenging this year. There are more boxes to indicate extra training or support you might want to make the relationship even better. Your continuous improvement as a spouse is such a given that there is no need to question the setting of goals, and any means of achieving them. Why would you not want to improve?

To help this exercise be more effective, the architect of the appraisal scheme recommends you invite some other spouses in from your neighbourhood, and other members of your household, to comment on your performance. This is explained as ‘good practice’. Because we can always learn from the insights of others, and if we are to grow in our roles, then we should be open to constructive criticism and how others see us. There is no need to worry about the confidentiality of this process – the form is filled in, signed, and then returned to those in authority who

can discuss this with you later. It is pointed out to you that appraisals are helpful in all other work-related roles, and any objections you have to this being an annual process are unreasonable, “because this is standard practice in all other places”.

Whilst I accept that this kind of annual exercise might take quite a dark turn – *Stepford Wives* or *The Handmaid’s Tale* come to mind – the parallel is intentionally comedic. Who in their right mind would not see the functionality and triviality of this exercise as something to be resisted and rejected? How could it *not* be demeaning of the persons-in-role? And yet, those in religious orders or ordained – at least in Catholic and Orthodox traditions – will see themselves as ‘married’ to the church. Even in ordinary parlance within the Church of England, how many wives, husbands and partners speak of the parish as being “the other man/woman in the Vicar’s life”.

In ministry, we often experience ourselves as being married to, or engaged in the parenting of, the parish and congregation. The New Testament, moreover, provides plenty of references to and images of filial, parental, household and marital motifs to help us identify the role of the minister in relation to those s/he cares for, loves and cherishes. Fathers or Mothers in God (Bishops) is hardly casual terminology. It is not uncommon to refer to other clergy in the same way.

I am not sure what an appraisal of my parenting would look like, or where to begin to assess my ‘performance’ as a husband in an annual appraisal. As a minimum, I would hope to be valued, loved, appreciated and respected. However, I am not sure how I would respond to the box asking me to specify targets and goals for next year, and what would happen if I didn’t meet them. I guess it depends on what else life had in store. I mean, if I suffered a serious bereavement or health-related problem, would my spousal targets be adjusted? Would they even matter? Who decides?

Well, so much for the annual spousal appraisal. Although when I did suggest this exercise to a Cathedral Chapter quite recently, most chuckled (uncontrollably); a few said they thought it might not be a bad idea (if they were doing the appraising); and one much older gentleman informed us all that he had been subject to such daily appraisal for much of his married life. Behind this wry remark, however, there was a serious point: how do we reflect upon *any* of our relational roles in life? And, of course, many clergy come to rue a moment when they discover they were only as good as their last sermon, or most recent pastoral visit. They are never good enough, and live in a constant state of scrutiny, judgment and inchoate appraisal. There will always be some in the parish or congregation who believe they could be better. It is hard for clergy to be “engaged” in such committed relationships. The last thing they need from their Bishop is another appraisal. Some care and love would be better, ideally some empathy and compassion. (I dare to live in hope).

Annual clergy appraisals were introduced many moons ago, and they are part and parcel of a very long game. As the Church of England struggles to explain itself as a

public, transparent and accountable utility in the modern world, it resorts to – ‘magpie-like’ – picking up shiny concepts and phrases that it thinks will make it look like other kinds of organisation. It does so in the hope that if the world recognises the currency of these concepts and terms generally, the church will be less ‘other’, and remain accessible and perhaps maintain its plausibility.

Of course, this does not work. Not for a moment. For a start, the things the magpie-like church picks up tend to have been cast away ages ago. I recall reading extracts of the Green Report to a gathering of University Business School lecturers and professors. After the first paragraph – read, I might add, sincerely – the audience began to chuckle, and by the time I’d read the third extract, they were laughing.

They saw immediately that the language of the report was out of date by about 25 years. Likewise, in another similar gathering in a different university, there was a similar reaction to the language of vision, strategy, aims, objectives, outcomes, SMART targets and other metrics.

Both audiences were uncomprehending of the church at these points, and on two counts. First, the dated concepts in use, which academics and practitioners had set aside decades ago. Second, how, in any case, could such concepts ever be a ‘fit’ for an institution such as the church? They simply weren’t applicable.

I have long held the view that clergy do not have *work* to do. When they are classed as part-time, full-time, stipendiary or NSM, we are placing them in a category that is comparable to mother, father, parent, spouse, partner. Are you a part-time spouse? Can you ever be a full-time parent? What does that even mean? (This is explored in significant and rich depth in Emma Percy’s *Mothering as Metaphor for Ministry* [Routledge, 2014] and *What Clergy Do: Especially When It Looks Like Nothing* [SPCK, 2015]). Can there be any “time” when you are not in these relational roles? The words “part”, “full” and “non” surely relate to contracts, money and other employment – but they have little to do with your role.

For this and other reasons, I have argued that clergy, like some other roles, are better thought of as an ‘occupation’ than as a job, or even as a profession. Being clergy is not a ‘profession’ in the conventional work-related sense of the term. True, it involves the profession of faith in word and deed, and in life and limb.

So, it becomes quickly apparent on a rudimentary comparative basis that the role of clergy is not a profession in the way that a doctor, dentist or solicitor might be. No-one checks in for an appointment with their non-stipendiary dentist, or sees a doctor who only practices at weekends as they have a different job during the week. Nobody instructs a solicitor who lacks the relevant academic or professional qualifications. To be ordained, it is desirable, but not mandatory, to have a degree or other theological qualification. Nor do you need to have passed an exam, or qualified in the way that other workers would for their profession.

Clergy, in this regard, are more like poets, writers and artists. It is hard to say what a “productive day” consists of. Their work is creative, never-ending, tidal and seasonal. It depends on a spirit of generative goodwill. The nature of this occupation to which clergy are bound is threefold.

First, to be occupied with God. Second, to be as preoccupied as you can be what you think might occupy God’s heart and mind. Third, be an occupant, as Christ was, in the world; he ‘dwelt amongst us’ – to abide with people in a particular time and place, and in a way that manifests the love and grace of God drawing near to those who are far off, lost, lonely or in need.

I have yet to see a clergy appraisal form that appears to understand what clergy are for, and what they ‘do’. In most cases, if not all, the role of clergy has been completely misconceived as a set of functional tasks and targets that belong to the world of work. They have little to do with prayer, abiding, caring, nourishing and cherishing. The work of a parent, to some extent – a role that can, some days be rewarding, and other days thankless.

Clergy, like parents, are dependent on the behaviour, maturing and respect that those they care for might return to them. And if they receive no such tokens, they cannot dismiss their children or congregation, or put them on probation, with a view to a process of redundancy, or even firing them. No. They have to love them through this. Sometimes for a long season. Sometimes for several seasons.

You can begin to see why Bishops have become so tempted by the grammar of appraisals, reviews, discipline, permission to officiate and licensing. It is the antidote to their helplessness, and it bypasses their need to be patient, and to care for the clergy and the congregations under them. If insistence does not work, the gears move swiftly through admonition and review processes, until we get to something close to a take-it-or-leave-it exit interview.

None of this culture can ever read or respect the vocational life, with all its ambivalence. Soft bullying is quickly re-narrated into ‘pastoral reorganisation’. If you are hurt or crushed by that, you can have ‘pastoral care’ – but let there be any doubt about what that consists of, it will not involve advocacy. Sympathy yes; empathy too; and perhaps compassion – but not any support in refusing the changes being imposed.

In Kenneth Thompson’s *Bureaucracy and Church Reform: The Organizational Response of the Church of England to Social Change, 1880-1965* (OUP, 1970), he argues that the church has been moved around on some very significant cultural tectonic plates in the wake of the industrial revolution. The relationship between church, land and locality has been fundamentally disrupted. The Church of England responded to the huge changes in urbanization and migration (the population of England was 75%

rural, and in the space of 50 years, became 75% urban and inner city). New churches were built to cope with the population flux, and tried to establish themselves (imposing their taxation rate upon the locals) in these new emergent cities. In many cases, the new churches were unwelcome.

The Church of England responded to this alienation with more organization and differentiation as they became more specialized and delimited in their functions. Frenetic organizational activism was one way to achieve self-validation, and hopefully achieve public recognition. But frenetic organizational activism rarely attracts the public as whole, though it will, for a season, increase membership.

These changes all led to highly rationalized bureaucracies being formed, and ideologies that supported their legitimization quickly came into being. In practical terms, this meant the Church of England, as an 'institution' slowly shifted towards becoming a smaller, more rationalized and measurable 'organization'. In turn, our Bishops have just been drawn into a cultural movement from the leadership of institutions into management of organizations.

Advent is a season to reflect on time, and on what matters – what can be cast away, and what is now to be taken on. Increasingly, it is becoming clearer that what the Church of England has taken on over the course of the last two centuries is less than conducive for its health and identity. The magpie-mentality has not served us well.

We are in a new century and a new cultural season, where imitating the world of work and business no longer grants us public plausibility – if indeed it ever did. It is time to get back to basics. We could hardly do better than ask, “what kind of body does God ask the Church of England to be for the nation and in our communities, and for whom are our clergy, churches and chaplaincies for?”.

Our best answers will certainly involve less power and resources gravitating towards some remote HQ, and return to comprehending that the Church of England (and God!) are experienced most truly when alive in the local. Bishops will always be most welcome to visit such places, time permitting.