

Rickety Religion: Post-Advent Structures

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The first in a short series of Advent reflections on mission, money, sex, power, integrity and identity within the Church of England.

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 (common in Dorset and Somerset) for the condition. 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, such that would not be dependent on the kindness and care of 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 those cracks in the earthenware vessels that we are, and we begin to become the body of Christ as we come together, can the truth of Jesus (the verb of God made flesh) 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.

One general approach to writing job specifications is to set out what one might require from candidates applying for the post. What are the essential qualities, skills and experience a candidate needs? What are the desirable ones, but if necessary the organisation or institution could manage without? Assuming, that is, that they find a candidate that wants the post, and meets all the essential criteria required.

Now, suppose for a moment the tables are turned, and the candidates approach each vacancy with the same list. As they do not need this new post, they can afford to browse, and probe the interviewers searchingly for responses and answers that satisfy the interviewee that their own essential and desirable criteria are addressed. Most of us don't tend to approach job interview like this – at least not consciously. Yet to do so, in part, might help us understand a bit more about the deeper synergies that underpin workers and their workplaces.

Now suppose by extension, we ask parishioners and church members to say what they want from their parish church? Parishioners in most places, or places with chaplains serving the workforce, if an opinion is expressed, will typically want their clergy to be accessible, and for the ministry to be kind, pastoral and authentic. They will want comfort, care and compassion. And yes, a Christian faith and ministry that serves others, speaks for those who have no voice, and is extensive in its outlook. Comfortable pews and good coffee at the end of a service are desirable, but not essential. Good and truthful clergy are essential, not desirable.

Church members, in contrast, might see things slightly differently, and expect and hope for a ministry that is less extensive and focussed much more on the intensive. We can sympathise with this. After all, 'members' are the committed ones, and in that commitment have reasonable expectations of their intensive concerns being met and addressed, rather than seeing their resources, labour, time, clergy and pastors dissipated through seemingly endless extensity.

The gospels, early church and New Testament paint a picture of the extensive and the intensive together. Often, the two are held in tension, which can be a creative harmony, but sometimes prompts serious disagreement. Is this the time to withdraw from the crowds and pray alone, seeking the face of God? Yes. However, the crowds don't have much time for disciples developing their spiritual intensity. This crowd is needy right now, and they did not walk miles so that the disciples could simply slip away on some private retreat. As all clergy know – you cannot win on this one.

Ministry, of course, is not a game, and so there are no winners. Ministry is not a competition with prizes to be handed out in various categories. (Brief interlude – firmest handshake in the Deanery; most reassuring, upper-middle-class modulated preaching voice [sub-category: male, evangelical]; do add your own...). Ministry is demanding, 24/7, perpetual, unending, seasonal, exhausting, exciting, exhilarating – and exhausting. Think: slow roller-coaster, but without health and safety audits.

So the puzzle we have before us is this. How has the centralisation of services offered by any Diocesan HQ – the centralisation of powers and permissions – been allowed to grow at such a steady and growing rate in the post-war era? It is not unfair to characterize the Church of England in the post-war years as having moved from being over-led and under-managed to one of being over-bureaucratized and under-led.

Kenneth Thompson addressed this in *Bureaucracy and Church Reform: The Organizational Response of the Church of England to Social Change – 1880-1965* (OUP, 1970). Yet for most clergy, the new shapes of the Church of England has simply produced slow, rising levels of anxiety and disenchantment. Moreover, as the managerial-bureaucratic centralization is resisted and rejected – by all wings and quarters of the Church of England – this only causes the church to search for even stronger forms of management, together with rationalizing and efficiencies that will deliver reinvigorated public recognition. (Clergy appraisals, discussed in our earlier piece, are part of this. Likewise, the Church of England’s ‘Core Groups’ in safeguarding – but having no resemblance to their social work counterparts).

The key question is this: what is essential in a diocese, and what is (merely) desirable? If you’d asked this question of the Church of England in the first half of the twentieth century, there would be little to place in the ‘essential’ category. Other than a Bishop (probably only one per diocese, mostly) to be available to talk to and care for the clergy, and regularly visit the parishes. A Bishop to speak for the region when needed (public theology and social advocacy). A Bishop to ordain, confirm and baptise. There might be a Chaplain to keep the Bishop in order, and possibly a secretary to handle correspondence and communications. (Both of these, arguably, were desirable, not essential). There would be a Registrar for legal services, and a Chancellor to manage the seasonal spats on church re-orderings and graveyards.

Most Dioceses in the Anglican Communion get by with this infrastructure, with some provinces managing with less. The Church of England managed for more than a few hundred years like this. So the infrastructure today is puzzling, and would confound Archbishop Benson and Bishop King. It would baffle Bishop George Bell and Archbishop William Temple. Now, I don’t want to suggest for a moment that we could manage as they once did. The world has changed. The nation is different, and culture transformed. So, let me add some new ‘essentials’ to the short list above.

First, I think HR is a growing need in churches and parishes, and whether parochial staff are paid or unpaid, many issues of congregational intra-relations now require HR counsel. Choirs that fall out with clergy and congregations; or bell-ringers, youth leaders, and more besides. Clergy and PCC’s rarely have HR expertise. A Diocese could provide it. It is astonishing that most dioceses provide no HR counsel to their own clergy and PCCs as they struggle with their own local legal and personnel issues. It would make an enormous difference if the Dioceses did help.

Second, following the example of the dozen or so major mainline denominations in the USA, most of their national offices are staffed with officers (several) who are skilled in mediation, conflict resolution and the pastoral care of congregations impacted by grief, trauma or catastrophe. In some cases, these officers can spend months or even a few years walking alongside the congregation or parish, whilst it recovers. Routinely, the presence of such officers is premised on them not being a candidate for any clergy vacancy. Like a good doctor (for the cure of the bruised collective soul), they come with healing balm, care, compassion, experience and empathy. The patient is treated, and the doctor moves on.

Third, there is a clear need for national and local diocesan advocacy, support and therapy services. The offer of “pastoral care” is always appreciated, but many issues faced by clergy cannot be addressed by this. Pastoral care without advocacy will be ineffective in the face of systemic racism, sexism, bullying, discrimination and other forms of serious and long-term contextual conflict. Pastoral care is not a panacea, and if we treat it as such, we relegate ‘cure-alls’ to being a placebo. Clergy and congregations need remedies that are effective, and this means dioceses being much more serious about the conditions of being clergy – a paid coordinator of an entirely voluntary body – but where there are no contracts to bind or oblige the volunteers.

This then leaves us with what might be “desirable” for the infrastructure of a modern diocese. Although by this, I really mean that the following are “non-essential”. In putting forward these nominations, I invite us to think of how the Church of England can manage with less, and yet do and be more, *locally*.

Diocesan communications and newspapers are non-essential. Dioceses just end up promoting the value of the centre to the parishes. Few parishes need a Diocesan newspaper; even fewer read them. They are not, in any case, newspapers in the conventional sense. You’ll never read a critical leader-article about the bishop. This is Pravda-World: a monthly PR communication to the outlets. In contrast, parish magazines are invaluable local resources and highly collectable, as they tend to tell you what is really happening – locally. Equally, it is hard to find Diocesan communications team that reaches beyond its own constituents, and makes any real public impact. There are sometimes reactive responses to be made in the event of occasional crises, but it is hard to see the point of proactive communications when the market for these is almost entirely for internal consumption.

Diocesan Mission and Evangelism presupposes that the Diocese has a meaningful identity and value in the parishes and beyond. Bishops (in role) do, but few people in the Church of England have a commitment to or affection for their Diocese. As an institution, it is not likely to (ever) be a port of call for a baptism or bereavement visit. The Church of England is most alive and authentic in the local. And that is where its mission and evangelism is best understood. A post for Diocesan Mission established at the Cathedral makes sense as the mother church of the diocese.

Otherwise, there seems to be little value in creating costly central services that then have to be sold to the very people who have already paid for them.

Third – and here I stick my neck out a bit – almost everything else that is left in most current Diocesan HQ's will be also non-essential. Stewardship? That exists in part to support central services and homogenize the giving across the Diocese. It might be more effective to incentivise parishes differently, such that the funds churches raise locally were spent locally, or shared in local or missional projects, including overseas. Safeguarding? A significant number of mainline denominations in the developed world don't recognise the concept, or understand what the Church of England thinks it is doing. Danish Lutherans use the term *beskyttelse* – meaning protection, precaution, cover, refuge, shelter or shield. That is the conventional meaning of safeguarding. A recent conversation with a senior Danish Lutheran cleric was instructive, as they were utterly bewildered by the practice of the Church of England. As the cleric reasoned, if you have cause for concern about inappropriate behaviour, have a word with that person. If it is serious cause for concern, you could involve HR and introduce appropriate monitoring. If it is criminal cause for concern, use the police, courts and the criminal justice system.

It would surprise the Church of England if the local level of subsidiarity could divest itself of the frenetic organisational activism that is created by most dioceses, and then demands more money off the parishes in order to feed the HQ's growing sense of self-importance. Diocesan HQ's – and their growing numbers of 'Chief Executives' – have become soft instruments of bullying powers, pushing appraisals, demands, organizational language, mission targets, money targets, pressure to conform to uniformity and branding, and sign up to mission plans, vision statements, new strategies and more visions. If we are not careful, we are going to end up with a business infrastructure where we have one company HQ sited on some forgettable industrial estate, employing several dozen people, but with no staffed outlets in the villages, suburbs and cities.

Churches are, first and foremost, a vision of local 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, nationally or otherwise. She was not impressed with the Archbishop's attempts to make some kind of Communion-wide impact. 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 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.

So, if our post-social, post-truth and post-religious age is to be addressed, spiritual courage, prescient wisdom and public theology are needed, and they are at their strongest where they are best known; and that is local. If the churches are to remain resilient, and Christianity is to survive as an agent of social capital in the service of humanity, then we need to re-comprehend where they are most authentic. That is also about being local, enabling us to understand the church as body language of God, or the verb of God made flesh: the place where God has placed us.

As the grip of our 'emergent ecclesiococracy' (a phrase coined by Jonathan Kimber) has increased in the post-war era, so our grasp of ecclesiology and public theology has weakened. Indeed, we may be running serious risks in talking up the prospects for growth and management, whilst on the ground the situation is escalating complex patterns of churchgoing, increasingly stretched resources, fewer stipendiary ministers, and ever-greater pressures on clergy and churches.

This is potentially quite serious for our national mission. As Professor Linda Woodhead's research recently showed, the vast majority of the population remain well-disposed to the Church of England. What puts them off, however, is too much talk from inside the church of money, management and numerical growth. The church – in continuing to stress these concerns – may imagine it is being proactive. But these foci represent reactive responses to wider cultural concerns, which can occlude the deeper character of the church.

Our absorption with management, leadership, reimagining, vision, strategy and growth dominates our selection processes – from top to bottom. Correspondingly, it is rare to see an advertisement at the back of a church newspaper seeking a Vicar who will lead a church into deeper theological learning, or open up the riches of contemplative prayer to the wider parish. This Advent, let us hope and pray for the flourishing of the local church and chaplaincies, remembering that most of Christ's life and ministry was very localized and highly intensive. Only because of that, did Christianity ever become extensive. We need a new Advent Revolution in the Church of England. Maranatha: Come Lord, Jesus, Come.