

Leaders Who Develop Community

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“If we had noticed that the young men of the present day found it harder and harder to get right answers to sums, we should consider that this had been adequately explained the moment we discovered that schools had for some years, ceased to teach arithmetic” (C. S. Lewis: *On The Transmission of Christianity*).

While working for the Diocese of Chelmsford, I asked one of their clergy who had been on a leadership development course “What is pastoral leadership for?” It was like watching someone fall off a bike in slow motion. We concluded that, although he had amassed a considerable repertoire of leadership and management skills, he wasn’t sure on what task these skills were to be used. Yet here we are, in these more bureaucratic days, with all kinds of measures to enable us to evaluate and develop our ministerial effectiveness. So, I ask again and more generally, what is Christian pastoral leadership for? What would be a good outcome? What do we intend to achieve? How might we evaluate ministerial effectiveness?

Before we can find an authentic vision must come an understanding of our common purpose. Why as Christians are we here? What is church for? Our problem may be that the way we ask these questions is rooted in a passing Christian paradigm (Christendom) and we will thus find the wrong answers. Finding the right question is key to appropriate change. There is an old counselling axiom: “Go on doing what you’re doing and you’ll get more of what you’ve got”.

It is a commonplace in the world of management to ask, when searching for answers and finding either none or confusion, whether we are asking the wrong question. To hark back to the early nineties, it would have been folly of Lord Sugar to ask, “How can we create a more attractive, faster and more versatile version of the Amstrad Word Processor?” when the market was being flooded by 386 PCs and the early versions of MS Word. It could be that, despite the floods of books telling us how to tweak, reinvent or restore the Church of England, they are the answers to the wrong question. What if ‘business as usual’ was not an option for next 40 years? In some rural dioceses, ‘we don’t shut churches’ is

the informal mission statement – indeed, the ancient parish churches are in better condition than they have ever been, thanks to English Heritage, but their clergy are run ragged, and a high proportion keep going by taking antidepressants, alcohol, occasionally but rarely sex, and food. The Church of England in the countryside might be considered the religious end of the National Trust. We spent our time organising quaint religious events in quaint religious places, often in a beautiful but antique version of the English language – indeed it could be argued that clergy, under the pressure of doing more and more, have become events organisers rather than the shepherds of God’s flock.

Another thing: under the steady accretion of management tasks, leadership creativity tends to be lost. There is a new experiment being tried: delivering ‘ministry’ to people with whom you have had no personal contact. Little proactive, purposive ministry in private takes place any more. Clergy in the Church of England rarely visit their flock. The only people who get a clergy visit nowadays are either the demanding or the dying. We have learned to outsource everything – evangelism, spiritual direction, pastoral counselling, even leadership development. Either the diocese or Christian companies offer most of the things that clergy used to do themselves and from which they found pleasure and personal profit. There is nothing like teaching a subject to enable you to learn it well. Most modern ‘ministry’ is all in the public arena, saying the liturgy and conducting events.

Effort or work?

There are two Greek words for work: *poiesis* and *praxis*. The former is simply a generic word for effort. The latter, *praxis*, is the word for work which is shaped by the end (*telos*) that it intends. Clearly, clergy would want their work, hard and unremitting as it may be, to be not simply effort, but rather *praxis* in which the effort was constantly illuminated and energised by the end to which it intended – the creation of Christian community, the illumination of hearts by the love of Christ, the release of mental and emotional prisoners by heavenly power. The end of the work of pastoral leadership is not a human possibility. It is the gift of God. It is a supernatural work to which we are called.

There is a history lesson for us embedded in the German Church struggle between the two great wars of the last century. The national church in German wholeheartedly backed the Kaiser’s

militarism in the name of being the moral guardian of German culture and civilisation. The Church of England largely took the same line. However, German Christianity threw up three towering figures who offer us challenges and resources in our own post-modern struggle for authentic church and ministry – Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Arnold. All three were shocked by the capitulation of Christian theology to the needs of society. The church had become encultured. The three would have all agreed with Leander Keck: “Mainline churches must free themselves from the notion that they have a God given responsibility for society and instead claim the freedom to become influential participants in society by being first of all accountable to the gospel” (*The Church Confident*).

Bonhoeffer was utterly changed by his experience of a black-led Pentecostal church in Harlem which recalled him to his German pietist roots. Barth took hold of the Bible in a new way (“like a bell rope in the dark” he said), and was launched on a theological career which took him into conflict with Hitler. “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” (*Barmen Declaration 1934*). The lesser known of the three, Eberhard Arnold, the founder of the Bruderhof, is the one who might challenge us harried ministers the most. Like Barth, Arnold turned to the gospels to find out what had gone wrong. It seemed clear to all these men that the Lutheran church had betrayed Jesus in spades. Like Barth, his instinct was to place Jesus Christ at the centre, but in seeking how to do this, Arnold turned towards the Pietists and then the Anabaptists. Christianity should be both institution (*ecclesia*) and fellowship (*koinonia*). He came to believe that Christ is visible or perceptible to the world through *gemeinde*. The word means that quality of presence which portrays the nature of the association or society. People occasionally or even regularly attending church services is not *koinonia* and thus cannot express *gemeinde*. The formation of *gemeinde* is only possible through the creation of radical Christian community – the Bruderhof, they called themselves – a community living in obedience to Holy Scripture and empowered by the Spirit. They so impressed Hitler that he threw them out of Germany! They still exist today as a prophetic community, in this country and in America.

Ecclesia or Gemeinde?

The clergy have become caught up in the maintenance of the institution (*ecclesia*) and forgotten that Christ is only shown, witnessed to and truly worshipped when there is fellowship (*gemeinde*). We do not need God to create or maintain a religious business. Anyone with half a brain can run a decent Christingle. We do need God to create *gemeinde* because the church as *koinonia* is not part of some human, spiritual evolutionary, pan-mystical process. The church of God is created by the Spirit of God *ex-nihilo*. “She is his new creation”. Some of our human developmental maps, helpful though they are in some regards, do not serve us well here. The creation of *gemeinde* is off the map – we are required to ski humanly ‘off piste’. As ministers we are called to have things in our diaries, projects in our hearts that no power on earth can deliver. The miracle is not that people learn to be spiritual. Individual spirituality would be commonplace in our individualistic and narcissistic age. The miracle is when bent, disturbed people, with a high level of propensity to mess up, learn to live together in harmony, with profound levels of joy, peace and forgiveness. Richard Hays says : What is God doing in the world in the interval between resurrection and parousia? According to Paul, God is at work through the Spirit to create communities that prefigure and embody the reconciliation and healing of the world.

³¹ The constant factor is that he imagines God's eschatological salvation in corporate terms; God saves and transforms a people, not atomized individuals. Consequently, the faithful find their identity and vocation in the world as the body of Christ.³²

It is precisely the movement from institution into *gemeinde*, into *koinonia*, that the miracle occurs. This is where we are called to minister. We are called as priests or pastors or ministers to this transitional space, this liminal place where Christian faith community is created, where more than the usual business is transacted and where church as institution serves its proper purpose to midwife the birth of this fragile, sometimes fleeting miracle. We have set the bar too low. We ask not too much of ourselves, but too little.

³¹ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 32.

³² Hays, 36

What we need is agreement about best practice in ministry and what a healthy church looks like. Dorothy Bass' suggests a number of indicators:³³

- Honouring the body – healthy churches help people to honour and not abuse their physicality, where creaturehood is celebrated.
- Hospitality – authentic churches welcome the stranger. They are places where the offer of sustenance, food, friendship reaches beyond coffee in the north aisle after the morning service.
- Household economics – a genuine community of faith understands that it is part of a wider, global community and caught up in exchanges of goods and services often prejudiced in favour of those who already have. In these communities we 'peace' is fruit of justice.
- Saying Yes and saying No – a community of disciplined people arises whose odd and perhaps disturbing standards emanate from a corporate, communal reading of the gospels.
- Keeping Sabbath – a church where we are not the 'willing slaves' of the system, but able to disengage from our smart phones, dumb phones and laptops to find a capacity to 'be' for 24 hours a week.
- Testimony – in healthy faith communities there is not a gulf between the 'professionals' authorised to talk about God and the non-professionals who have only been authorised to talk about God in the privacy of the house group. Healthy churches challenge the hegemony of the clergy, their need to always have the final word. Healthy church communities enable every member to speak their faith and experience.
- Discernment – authentic churches know the difference and the tension between rational, even faithful planning and discerning the call of the Spirit.
- Shaping Communities – *gemeinde* churches are shaped by their rituals, their worship practices, their capacity to open space for the coming of Jesus. Such communities are shaped by what they habitually do together. They form a culture.
- Forgiveness – forgiveness is the miracle that offers love before we are sorry. Fellowship is the company of the forgiven and forgiving.

³³ Dorothy Bass, *Growing Our Faith* (Jossey Bass)

- Healing – because the grace of Jesus fills this fellowship, we move into healing of mind and soul and body.
- Dying well – it takes a community of faith and prayer to help us to die well.
- Singing our lives back to God – when we sing rather than say, we engage our emotions in our believing. We are moved and delighted, and praise arises within us when we sing well.

We are not called to be religious events organisers. We are called to work alongside the breath of God to bring to birth something new, communities of faithful people who themselves are the first taste of something coming to us from our creaturely future and which has only arrived here and there. It is the coming of the resurrected Christ and his kingdom of *shalom* in which all shall have a place and all shall have a voice and all shall be “one equal music”. Arnold might call it an everlasting *gemeinde*. It is the work of ministry to offer creative leadership which enables people to move into this new way of being human, the fellowship of Jesus.

*Bring us, O Lord, in our last awakening
into the house and gate of Heaven, to enter into that gate
and dwell in that house, where there shall be
no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears or hopes, but one equal possession;
no ends or beginnings, but one equal eternity,
in the habitations of thy glory and dominion,
world without end. (John Donne)*

Exploring the D-word – a personal and theological reflection

James Ashdown

Church In Wales Licensed Reader

On July 1, 2012 I was licensed as a Reader in the Church in Wales at Brecon Cathedral. It was a positive and happy experience, with friends and family and members of the churches from where I live swelling the congregation. I did, however, manage to delay the