

Churches Experiencing Change

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Introduction

In this paper we want to present some ideas which raise fundamental questions about some assumptions which may lie behind this title.

What **change** are we talking about? And what is the **experience** we are having?

We suggest that one response to the experience of change we are seeing at the moment is where the church is trying to meet the changes taking place in the world by making changes in the **church**, rather than equipping Christian lay people to go out and experience those changes in the **world** and respond to them there. The church seems preoccupied with adapting itself by getting its presentation, marketing and branding right, offering more and more jobs to the laity in the church. In the Grubb Institute we have a hypothesis that because the clergy don't know how to prepare the laity to work in the world they offer them jobs in the church.¹

This occasion is an opportunity for us all to slow things down a bit, to give ourselves time to get in touch with our actual experience of what is going on, where we are, and to work at the meaning of it. It is so hard to do because the feelings associated with change raise anxiety and the natural reaction is to want to leap into action to deal with the turbulence and discomfort.

An editorial comment in the Church Times of 21 June referring to the agenda for Synod this week possibly illustrates the pressure for action over against looking at experience.

An oddity of next month's General Synod sessions in York is the presentation "Shapes of the Church to Come". We might have expected a presidential address from Dr Carey, drawing on some of his experiences from the past 11 years, and perhaps expressing his hopes for the future. Instead, after leading a short Bible Study, Dr Carey will hand over to the Bishop of Rochester, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, and it is he who will suggest models for the future; these will then be discussed in small groups.

¹ This paper was presented by Jean Hutton at the Summer School for the Diocese of Durham in July 2002.

Experience

We need to say a bit here about the idea of experience and experiencing. In The Grubb Institute, where we spend our time with people on their working experience, to enable them to see how to find, make and take their roles so that their actions really benefit the aims and visions of their institutions. Our clients come from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, people with no professed faith or with a faith which may or may not be Christian. Our task is to engage with them continuously as they think and feel about their experience and its meaning.

“Experience” is what a person builds up in their inner world over time. It is a mental construct formed by the past and present impact on them of their thoughts, feelings, emotions, ideas, values, beliefs, knowledge, vision, fantasies which are continually occurring in their lives, as they engage with the external world, reacting, sustaining or innovating as appropriate to their situation.

Changing Perspectives

1 Organisation-in-the-mind and Institution-in-the-mind

When working in an organisation, that experience leads us to see that the organisation which may be described on paper, is by no means the same as the picture of the organisation which develops in one’s mind. We call this latter ‘organisation-in-the-mind’. An organisation is not something “out there”, it is within me, so I shape my behaviour in relation to this idea-in-the-mind. Each person in that organisation develops their own organisation-in-the-mind which may be very different from mine, so it is no wonder when apparently intelligent people disagree about what needs to be done. We think we are looking at the same activities and tasks and roles and objectives, but we are actually attributing different meanings to what we are experiencing because of the difference between our organisations-in-the-mind.

Although there will be aspects of experience of organisation-in-the-mind which we don’t identify or notice, it is nevertheless a fairly conscious intellectual and mental construct arising from our day-to-day experience of tasks and roles and rituals and accountabilities *etc.* The sad thing is that it is rare for people to see the need to try to communicate their understanding with colleagues, hence the misunderstandings.

But this is not the only problem. For each member of that organisation also has an unconscious construct which we call ‘institution-in-the-mind’. This is associated with emotional responses sometimes apparently causing people to behave irrationally and which focusses around the experience of ideas, values, hopes, beliefs, dreams, symbols.

When it comes to thinking about the church as a system of activities you can see how we easily confuse organisation-in-the-mind and institution-in-the-mind as we talk about “the shape of the

Church". We need to be talking about both if we are to make the most use of our experience. An example would be:

At a PCC meeting members may be talking about the changes and alterations which are needed in the Church. They debate it, and everyone thinks the ideas are good, and discuss if the church can afford it and the logistics etc. They all appear to agree when someone raises the question which people had taken for granted and says, "Why do we need all this? Will it really change anything?" It is an emotional response which opens up the issue all over again.

Organisation-in-the-mind describes church in terms of types of people, *ie* priests, laity, buildings, finance, liturgy, polity *etc* which have a common purpose which may or may not be clearly defined, and whose effectiveness can be judged by it. *Institution-in-the-mind* conceives the church with its values, beliefs, and traditions and hidden resistances to changes. Purpose is less important than in organisation-in-the-mind. Here purpose is subjectively believed in, rather than being objectively assessed.

2 The Kingdom and the new humanity

Our experience of change is not limited to responses in the Church. As we said earlier, we are experiencing changes in the world, *ie* in society, nationally and globally. We want to suggest that this experience is about being in another system of activities from the church. To the extent that we are conscious of the purposes of government, institutions, businesses, families *etc* we develop the concept of an 'organisation-in-the-mind', which St Paul called 'the governing authorities' (Romans 13.1), which he urges us to obey. It is about *doing*. This is elaborated upon in Ephesians 5 and 6 to include families and society. When we go deeper into the New Testament use of the word *cosmos*, translated world, and become sensitive to our emotional responses to its external powers and our involvement in their machinations, we form another darker picture, what St Paul describes later in Ephesians 6.12 as a struggle 'against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness', and not a struggle against flesh and blood. This level of experience can be described as 'institution-in-the-mind'. Instead of purpose here, there is identity and it is about *being*.

This is not the whole story, for there is another perspective on the same thing which constitutes a different way of experiencing the world, that of the presence of the *Kingdom of God*. Speaking of personal family and society relations in Romans 14, Paul urges, 'do not let your good be spoken of as evil, for the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (v.17). He considers the Kingdom is here already for those who can experience it. Biblically the Kingdom has *been* since the beginning of creation, and will *be fully realised* at the judgement of all nations, but it is also *present*. The Kingdom is a prevailing theme of Jesus' ministry, and in the Kingdom prayer which he taught us, is included responses to the three dispensations: of creation - 'give us this day our daily bread'; redemption - 'for-

give us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us; and judgement - 'lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil', under the overall banner of 'Thy Kingdom come...'

This understanding of the Kingdom and its inheritance is by being born again. "No one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven without being born from water and spirit" (John 3.5). The gospels refer continuously to the Kingdom of God, of seeing it, of entering it, of being members of it, excluded from it. Jesus also claimed that he came that we "might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10.10). We suggest that this is the life which is lived in the Kingdom of God and realised in our day by day exercise of 'going in and out', with Jesus as the 'Gate' (v.8.9). It gives a picture of the life of people moving in and out between the church and the world.

How can these people be described? Paul in Ephesians deals with the argument between Jewish or Gentile origins by stating that Christ superseded them both by creating in himself 'one new humanity' (Ephesians 2.15). Those who inherit the Kingdom and become members of it may better be described as the 'new humanity' rather than 'Christian'. Such people shadow Christ's incarnation by becoming one with all humanity whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist etc. The 'new humanity' is no special label, the only distinction is shown by the manner of life displayed in living practically in the world. So all changes in the world impact on them and their newness of life is evidenced by the way they respond to that experience.

3 Differentiating clergy and lay roles

This brings us full circle. We proposed at the beginning of this address that ways of responding to the experience of change could be different for different members of the people of God - for the ordained clergy and for the unordained people of God. The complexity of understanding the role of laity was well expressed by Pope John Paul II:

The Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world. (Christifideles Laici, John Paul II, on the Vocation and Mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world, 1988)

The primary task of the ordained is to minister the word and the sacraments to equip the unordained 'saints' for the work of ministry. This entails preparing them as Christians to be the new humanity - that is to find, make and take the role of a member of the Kingdom of God as a follow-on from finding, making and taking the role as a member of the Church, the Body

of Christ. The inter-relation between these roles can be understood by the work of Christ as expressed in Colossians 1:13-20. God has made us “fit to share the heritage of God’s people by bringing us into the Kingdom of his dear Son through whom our release is secured and our sins forgiven, and he is the head of the body the church”. Also his is “the primacy over all creation, in him everything was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities and powers; the whole universe has been created through him and for him”. As *redeemer* Christ is the head of the church, as *creator* he is Lord of creation. We distinguish two different roles for the people of God in these over-lapping systems - the reconciled role in the church and the human role in the creation. And this leads to differences of focus for those appointed primarily to the Church and those called to the creation arena of the Kingdom.

In the church the people of God worship and serve Christ who is *in the midst*. He is proclaimed as Lord and calls directly for a response from us there. By contrast, in the world he is treated as if he is *absent* from the cosmos he has created. Church members often see themselves needing to take Christ with them into the darkness of the world. Yet as creator of all, he is *already present and working* and waiting to be encountered and served by members of the Kingdom. Here we are not only thinking of the poor, homeless, imprisoned and hungry of Matthew 25, but of the authorities, the governments, the businesses, the occupations of our age. This is more than personal ministry to the disadvantaged and vulnerable; it includes those people and institutions engaged in growth, development, and creativity; not only the pastoral service but being accountable for the way human beings organise their lives in society through the development of power and authority.

The changes brought about by technological innovation enable more efficient resources to be available to the marginalised and powerless. However the deployment of such resources depends on political, economic or cultural factors. These are the sectors of society which are most susceptible to change for good or evil.

It is here that the members of the Kingdom are able to engage as informed human beings. It is tough, turbulent and very confusing to engage with the Kingdom. We believe it is the task of the clergy to hold the church as a stable centre so laity can be free to create and change the world and to be equipped and trained to take the risk of faith like Abraham of going out into the world to engage with the changes and the turbulence. The clergy can find their leadership roles in the organisation and institution of the church when they see how their work in the church relates to the Kingdom and the roles of the laity.

Initiatives to achieve this understanding between clergy and laity are being sponsored by agencies like Springboard and the Windsor Leadership Trust who have gathered together Christian professionals and business people to dialogue with clergy and other leaders, both in the context of church life and also in commerce and political life. Their purpose is both to make people aware of this challenge and to stimulate them to learn to respond to it in their

own work-place. The Grubb Institute pioneered this kind of interaction, beginning in the 1960's under the name Christian Teamwork and gathering Christian professionals and leaders to work together on issues, questions and problems raised by those who wanted to change the world. It is from that work that in the Institute we have developed our theology and our research into human systems and roles. The Grubb Institute continues to exist to develop these ideas and to support changes to equip the laity in their working experience.

In Conclusion

We have attempted to show the importance of discerning and engaging with the experience of change which clergy and laity are currently having. We have offered a different way of thinking about the task before us, and suggested that we need to focus on the Kingdom in order to know how to refind our respective roles and take appropriate action.

We end with the voice of the poet:

*“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.” (T S Eliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding)*

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