

Richard Impey is Bishop's Adviser for Parish Development in the Diocese of Sheffield. He has served as an ordained priest in parishes in Birmingham, Blackpool, Norwich and south Yorkshire, and has been Director of Training in the dioceses of Bath and Wells, and Norwich. He is currently studying for a doctorate in practical theology at Chester University. He is married to Tricia who is also an Anglican priest. They have four children and seven grandchildren.

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR LOCAL CHURCH

Working with the wisdom
of the congregation

RICHARD IMPEY



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Preface

In an important sense I think I have been a theologian all my life – and in that same important sense I think many other people have been too. Whether we have been good or wise theologians is another matter, but most people are inevitably engaged in theology in some way, and unavoidably so when we involve ourselves in the life of a local church.

That conviction is my starting point and my theme, for I want in this book to help my fellow theologians to discover the practical theological wisdom that is already present in the congregations that make up local churches, and having discovered it, to join in the shared work of becoming wiser still.

For this reason my thanks are directed first to the congregations of ordinary theologians and saints who have shaped me and allowed me to play a part in their shaping over the years: St Saviour's, Raynes Park; St Mary's, Fetcham; St Martin's-in-the-Bullring, Birmingham; St Cuthbert's, Wells; St John's, Blackpool; St Francis, Chapin, South Carolina; St Mary Magdalene, Norwich; the Kings Beck Parishes in North Norfolk; St Barnabas and St Bartholomew, Heigham; Holy Trinity, Wentworth; and St Mary's, Ecclesfield.

Of course there have also been a number of universities, a good number of books, good friends, colleagues and excellent teachers to whom I also owe a debt of gratitude. To attempt to name them all would be a very long task indeed and so I excuse myself from it.

But the one person to whom I owe more than any other is Tricia, my wife, fellow theologian, companion on the pilgrimage and my tutor in love. To her I dedicate this book.

I am also especially grateful to the staff at SPCK for all their help and encouragement in what is for me the new adventure of writing a book: to Rebecca Mulhearn for the initial invitation; to Steve Gove for his diligence in making my original manuscript much more intelligible; and to Rima Devereaux for her guidance.

Introduction

Asking what people really think

This book is about developing the local church in ways that are appropriate to its own unique character and context. There are many challenges facing local churches today which question whether we should change the way we do things. A good number of people are sure we need to change and are convinced they know both the direction change should take and the way it should happen. I have no basic quarrel with such an approach, but mine is different. I suggest that the kind of change that will produce wholesome development is a shared responsibility of the congregation. We discover the nature of the development we need as we ask ourselves serious questions about the practical wisdom that already guides and shapes who we are and how we do things. Put another way, development begins with questions rather than answers, and the questions are addressed to us as members together of local churches.

What is a local church? The body of Christ

I use the term ‘local church’ in the ordinary sense of the church people go to, either regularly, or for special occasions like baptisms, weddings and funerals. I am not particularly referring to the worldwide Church or the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Communion or the Methodist Church, except that all these are made up of many local churches. A local church usually consists of three elements: a building, an ordained minister or priest, and a congregation. And at the heart of the local church is the congregation, a gathering of people who meet to worship God and express their Christian faith. The church can survive if necessary without the first two, but the congregation is essential.

It is surprising how often this fact is overlooked. There are lots of books about priesthood and the ordained ministry and quite a number about church buildings, but relatively few about congregations, about the people who together make up local churches. Yet it is the local church that is the body of Christ. ‘Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body; for in the one Spirit we were all brought into one body by baptism . . . Now you are Christ’s body, and each of you a limb or organ of it’ (1 Corinthians 12.12, 13a, 27; echoed in Ephesians 4.12; 5.30; Colossians 1.18).

When St Paul wrote this he cannot have been referring to church buildings or clergy; he must have meant all the ordinary believers, what we now call the congregation. It is they – or we – who are the body of Christ. By that image he seems to have meant that we are now the visible, tangible presence of Jesus Christ in the world, for each other and for other people. Unless we embody the Christian good news, other people will not discover its riches and importance. The invitation to become and remain a Christian is an invitation to be part of the body of Christ, which usually means a member of a local church.

What is development? Building up our common life

Development for a local church will mean different things for different churches. Much depends on your starting point. It may well be that a recent change provides the stimulus for development: the arrival of a new minister, a significant decline in membership, a financial crisis or even a substantial bequest. Development is not simply a matter of numerical growth. It is much more about the kind of change which builds up the church. In Ephesians 4, for example, St Paul speaks about how ‘each of us has been given a special gift’ (v. 7) in order ‘to equip God’s people for work in his service, for the building up of the body of Christ’ (v. 12), which involves unity and maturity. Development may take any number of forms, but its goal will always be building up the body of Christ.

As we respond to this high calling to be the body of Christ in and for the world, we realize that our life together will take some organizing. Indeed it is already being organized, one way or another. Each local church has its own unique way of doing things, just as each family has its own traditions about practical, everyday matters such as how the kitchen is used or how children should be brought up. Much of this book is designed to help us understand how we deal with such practical matters in our own local church. It is based on the conviction that we will only be able to build up the church effectively when we take the trouble to analyse these subtle and at first sight mundane features of how we organize our life together as Christians. At the heart of the matter lies taking the trouble to ask the people most involved what they do, and how and why they do it. This is also to respect them and take them seriously, which in turn is part of the love we as Christians owe one another.

Bothering to ask

I came across this parable years ago:

John and Mary had been going out together for so long that everyone assumed they would get married. But John and Mary decided

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that they were not really suited for one another and announced that they were going their separate ways when they discovered that Mary was pregnant.

John did not think he should marry Mary just because she was pregnant, but he thought Mary would think that.

Mary did not think she should marry John just because she was pregnant, but she thought John would think that.

Mary's parents didn't think they should marry just because Mary was pregnant, but they thought John's parents would think that.

John's parents didn't think they should marry just because Mary was pregnant, but they thought Mary's parents would think that.

You can see the way the story is going! John and Mary end up doing something nobody thought should happen because everyone acted on their assumptions about what other people thought, *without bothering to ask*.

My fear is that we have too many people who know just what local churches need but who *have not bothered to ask* the people most concerned. The only excuse for this is because they have not known how to ask. The rationale of this book is that it not only shows how some of these important questions can be asked, but relies on the members of the congregation to provide the answers, and then engage with the work of building up the body of Christ in the light of what they have discovered.

Practical wisdom

What I therefore want to draw on in the course of this book is what I might call the congregation's practical wisdom. When we become more aware of how we do things, we become more aware of the nature of our shared wisdom as revealed in our practice. Very much like common sense, our shared wisdom seems self-evident, the obvious way to behave. Our practice is for the most part natural to us: we don't spend a lot of time thinking about it; we just get on and do it. But when we do think about it we soon recognize that other people do not always share our practices, just as they do not share our common sense.

Think, for example, about how different people use a kitchen. There are some who restore the place to apple-pie order after every use; there are others who think there are far more interesting and urgent things to do than to wash and tidy up, so they leave it all until last thing at night or until there is not a clean cup left. Both practices work, but they

don't work well together. The two practical wisdoms clash. Who is to say which is best? Arguments can be summoned in favour of each: it might be considered best to keep everything clean and in order so things are available as soon as you need them, or it might be better to do menial things at the end of the day when you are tired, and save the hours when you have energy for the more important tasks of life. The advocates of both wisdoms will have words to describe each other's practice – slovenly, unhygienic, lazy; or fussy, wasting precious time, even paranoid.

This clash of practical wisdoms can happen when people come to marry or live together. Unresolved, it will be a permanent source of irritation: one partner is likely to do all the washing and tidying up, the other may well think that he or she is deliberately being made to feel guilty, never being allowed to perform household duties at the time that he or she prefers. Resolving the clash involves recognition of each other's different practices, and a negotiation to find a new pattern of practice which is satisfactory to both. It may be a trade-off: one does everything in the kitchen, the other does everything in the garden. It may be a change in both parties' behaviour: we agree to stack the dirty things tidily and clear away properly every night, possibly discovering that it provides a valuable opportunity to tell each other how the day has gone as we do it.

This may seem from outside to be a relatively trivial example. But if you are trapped inside it, it can be acutely painful. Many couples have had blazing rows about matters like this. Perhaps surprisingly, a good row may be a necessary step toward finding a solution, for it reveals the emotional content of the way we naturally do things. We discover we have a commitment to our practice. We are not likely to change our practical wisdom without good reasons, emotional reasons as well as rational ones. A good reason for changing our practical wisdom – for something still wiser – is that we love one another. This is not romantic love; it is straightforward, sensible, wise love, the *agape* of the New Testament.

In the same way a local church has its own practical wisdom. It will not be the wisdom of the ordained minister, or of any particular person. Rather it will be the shared wisdom of the congregation, of everyone involved, and it will be rich and complex, made up of all sorts of things – including especially habits moulded by the successes and failures of the church's story. It will be how we do things together. But it may not be as wise as it might be; indeed it is likely not to be, because nearly everyone and every organization will allow that there is room for improvement. However wise we are, the challenge to become wiser still is not an insult (unless we already think we know everything). So you

will find that this is not a sharply critical book, exposing the failings of congregations. Rather it sets out to help you – together preferably – discover your practical wisdom and to ask yourselves how that precious wisdom can become wiser. Only in that sense is it about the development of the local church.

What kind of practical wisdom will we be looking at? I have chosen six kinds to work with:

- the wisdom enshrined in the story of the local church
- the wisdom associated with the size of the church and how that might be changing
- the wisdom involved in balancing the implicit purposes of the church
- the wisdom reflected in the church's outlook on life
- the wisdom implied in the stage it has reached in a suggested life cycle for congregations
- the reasons why people choose and value a particular church, and the wisdom for development that this suggests.

The book is divided into two parts of different lengths. The first is designed to help local churches become more aware of their own practical wisdom by reflecting on a number of broad themes. Each of the first six chapters is dedicated to examining one of the above aspects of your church's practical wisdom, while the seventh draws together some other elements not covered within these six themes. The second part consists of two chapters which expand on the practicalities of working with the wisdom of the congregation.

Three perspectives

In summarizing the analytical processes carried out in this book I shall look at what the congregation has discovered via three contrasting perspectives.

Holding up a mirror

One of the most useful ways of considering the process of self-discovery is to think of it as looking in a series of mirrors. Most of us, if we look in a mirror, sense that something needs attention – we straighten our ties or change the necklace for one that better matches our dress. Similarly, when things have been done in the same way for long enough it is easy to assume that this is the natural and right way of doing them; as we become aware of what we are taking for granted, we also become aware that there may be other ways of doing things which could be an improvement. This is something we shall try to understand throughout the course of this book. These symbolic reflections offer a useful summary of who

we are and the way we do things, while also providing a quick method of making comparisons between congregations.

These reflections also draw attention to the importance of self-awareness in our common life as a congregation. When we look in a mirror, it is we ourselves who see our reflection; it is not a description provided by anyone else.

Taking a health check

A second metaphor is that of a health check. In this way the exercises for the congregation suggested in this book can be likened to a medical examination. Such an examination may confirm that, as far as we can tell, all is well. On the other hand, it may identify certain undefined sensations or pains as symptoms of a particular illness, a problem for which some treatment is advisable. And if something is wrong, the sooner it is diagnosed and treated the better. At least that is the most straightforward response, though it is surprising how often both individuals and local churches are reluctant to take the steps which promise to improve things. We shall try to understand this reluctance as well.

Drawing up plans

A third metaphor is to think of the local church as a building, which from an architect's point of view needs plans and elevations and specifications to describe it adequately. The information we learn about the congregation can be thought of in terms of such plans. When an architect designs a building the builder needs all this information if he or she is to be able to construct something which corresponds to the ideas expressed in the drawings. Or, to bring the metaphor closer to our purpose, if we are going to reorder or redesign the local church we have to know with some precision what is already there. Part of the value of this way of looking at ourselves is to recognize the significant role of good design and careful planning.

Who is this book for?

This is a book of *practical* theology, and the *practice* is essential. The book will be most valuable when it is read and worked with collectively by local church members, for it will help you understand your common life a great deal better when used in this way. It contains a number of practical exercises, which will be invaluable in helping you discover your congregation's shared wisdom. In particular you will discover more clearly what you are good at, how you are likely to flourish and which particular aspects of your shared life need attention. If, for example, you happen to be looking to appoint a new minister, this will enable you

to provide a comprehensive account of who you are as a congregation, and ask prospective ministers relevant questions.

One discovery that you may make if you are able to study this book as a congregation is that it raises questions which are not easy for an individual member to raise in case it appears that a personal criticism is being made. What for you might seem a delicate matter of personal relationships can be seen as a common predicament for many local churches.

I should also say about the process at this point that it is usually both demanding and great fun! You will, I hope, initially find it very interesting to look at yourselves in this way, draw the symbolic reflections you see in the mirror and begin to put your practical wisdom into words. Later, as you get further into it, the process can become more difficult. This will be because the work you have done will push you up against challenges that need facing, hard decisions to be made. I can however encourage you in two ways. First, the challenges and choices you face will be those which *you* have identified (you won't be responding to something an outsider is urging you to do); and second, those choices are likely to be life-giving, transformative ones.

A workbook is available

I have produced a simple *Workbook for Developing the Local Church* which presents the practical work proposed here in a more accessible form. It focuses on the metaphor of the mirrors, and results in the production of a series of 'reflections in the mirror' which summarize a great deal of the congregation's character. The workbook is ideally supported and explained by the much fuller discussions available here. It is published by 4 M Publications and available through <www.4mpublications.co.uk>.

If on the other hand you are reading this book as an ordained minister or other local church leader, I hope you will see its potential as a basis for developing better mutual understanding between yourself and the congregation as a whole. In particular, if the exercises are presented as a programme such as 'Training the New Minister', it will be a valuable way for clergy and others recently appointed to a post to improve mutual understanding. And if you have responsibility for making church appointments and structural changes (such as the combining of congregations), it may help to reveal to you some of the complex dimensions involved in the process, and suggest useful preparatory work that you might want to initiate.

However, I hesitate to recommend this book for close study by people preparing for ordination or leadership roles in local churches. This is because it is essentially about *congregations and the shared ministry of the local church*. There is no way you can discover a church's shared ministry without the cooperation of a particular local church, for this is the only form in which it exists. I would like students to be aware of the book, of course, and to think of it as a valuable resource when they come to play their part in a local church. But please don't think that the value of what is offered here can be judged by examination of the text alone. In that respect the book essentially forms a piece of practical theology, designed to be tested and assessed in local churches rather than in classrooms, studies or learned journals.

A note on language: One drawback with the simple English word 'you' is that it is not immediately clear whether an individual or a community is being addressed. In many languages this difference between the singular and plural 'you' is built into the very language itself, something we used to enjoy with the difference between Thou and You or even Ye, but which now feels very old-fashioned when used in modern English. Most of the New Testament passages which address us directly use 'you' in the plural; and when I use 'you' in this book I am trying to speak to you as a congregation, as a community of Christians, rather than to you as an individual.

A note on prayer

Building up the body of Christ, developing the local church, will also involve prayer. How to pray together for guidance in these things can be a tricky matter. On one hand, a short prayer at the beginning and end of planning meetings can seem to be little more than a nod in God's direction. On the other hand, the allocation of longer time to open prayer together can unwittingly encourage some folk to use their prayers as advocacy for their own preferred solutions.

How do we expect God to answer sincere prayers for guidance? This is also a question to ponder together. My suggested answer is that God will guide us as we pray *and* as we seek to develop our shared wisdom *and* make careful decisions together. There is no absolute guarantee that our decisions will be right every time, but with prayer every decision can also lead to a deepening of our wisdom.

Building up the body of Christ is not something we do all by ourselves as a result of careful thinking and imaginative experiment: it will be a gift from God. The mysterious and wonderful relationship between God's gracious giving and our faithful receiving is part of what

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we explore as we pray. Different Christian traditions will have their own pattern of praying for the development and well-being of the church, including for their own local church. I would like to encourage this prayer for the development of the local church, and so I have ended each chapter with a brief prayer of my own. These prayers are written in a meditative style, continuing the conversation which we have with ourselves, with God and with the issues raised in the book. They are not prayers of intercession which can readily be included in typical Sunday worship, but they may be prayed and pondered in small discussion groups or by members of congregations who together are working through the challenges presented by each chapter.

Lord, we have to admit the church today isn't what it used to be.
We know some churches seem to be growing and doing all sorts
of wonderful things,
but many more are struggling.
How should we pray for the development of our church?
There are so many things we could include in our prayers
(though it can make praying seem a bit like compiling a
shopping list)
We would like more people and more money and a better spirit
of tolerance and encouragement; that would be a lovely start.

Can we hope that this book might show us how to do that?
Looking in the mirror seems simple enough
and health checks are always a sensible idea
while thinking of ourselves as a building that may need re-designing
is,
well, we will have to wait and see what that really means.
But the wisdom bit should be no trouble:
we have so much experience,
we already score highly there!

