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# CREATING THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

A practical guide to addressing  
whole-system change

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First published in Great Britain in 2013

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST  
[www.spckpublishing.co.uk](http://www.spckpublishing.co.uk)

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-07077-0  
eBook ISBN 978-0-281-07078-7

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press  
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

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# Foreword

The Bible is not short of examples of complex organizational processes taking place in the life of the people of God, especially at moments of challenge or threat. Jethro saw that a more dispersed leadership structure was needed for God's people as they waited to enter the promised land. The walls of Jerusalem had to be rebuilt after the years of neglect during the Jewish exile. Deacons were to be appointed if the apostolic ministry of the Church was to be sustained. Decisions had to be made and implemented about the integration of Gentiles into the kingdom of God. Each situation demanded clear leadership, shared vision and cumulative effort. Behind it all, of course, was the providential hand of God guiding and shaping his people. But the God of Israel and Incarnation operates in and through human activity.

What was true then for God's people is true for us today as we hold the providential hand of God and allow that strong and gentle hand to lead us towards the promised land of God's kingdom by steps that require insight and planning, courage and calculation, careful thought and daring determination. As of old, we are called to be clear about who we are, and to live out that calling faithfully in the present conditions of life but always looking to the future that God has for us, moving in that direction with God, hand in hand, step by step.

This short book, written by a person with a great love for God's people and a genuine confidence in God's purposes for his people in the world, takes seriously what we might call *the incarnational principles of God's providence*. With hard-won experience of organizational change, Keith Elford provides some clear and practical advice on how the leadership of the Church in its various spheres, and at its many levels, can rise to the responsibility that we have been given in our age, and become more skilled in our use of the social processes that help us walk in step with the Spirit. The

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Church, being and bearing the Body of Christ, is the transformative agent of God's purposes in the world. We can only be so, and do so, if we are a transformed Church. This book, with its practical wisdom, is a valuable tool for that end.

*Christopher Cocksworth*  
*Bishop of Coventry*

# Acknowledgements

I could not have even contemplated this book without the knowledge and learning gained from 12 years of working with colleagues at Telos Partners. I am extremely grateful for that experience, for all my colleagues have taught me and for the direct and invaluable feedback I received about this book at various stages of its development.

The greater part of the learning comes from our clients, of course. My special thanks go to all those I have worked with. I believe that consultancy should operate as a partnership in which the learning goes both ways – I greatly value the trust and friendship that have grown as a result. I would like to thank clients for permission to include examples of their work.

A number of clergy, church officers and bishops provided information, advice and insights during the book's preparation. I have appreciated and valued every conversation, and am particularly grateful for the encouragement and wisdom of the following: Bishop John Gladwin (now retired, he was my boss when I was his chaplain in the 1990s, and a valued friend); Karen West (Archbishops' Adviser on Bishops' Ministry); Julian Hubbard (Director of Ministry for the Church of England); David Jennings (Senior Strategy Officer, Church Commissioners); Malcolm Grundy (the doyen of church writers on leadership and management); and Bishops Christopher Hill, Steven Croft, Tim Thornton and Chris Cocksworth. Many thanks also to David Parry of Christ Church, Barnet and the Revd Trevor Denley of St Aidan's, Fishponds, in Bristol for sharing their stories of growth with me and giving me permission to share them.

I also owe a debt to the clergy and people of St James, Weybridge for offering me a spiritual home and keeping me grounded in the realities of parish life.

My thanks go also to Ruth McCurry and her colleagues at SPCK for giving me this opportunity to get these ideas 'out there'.

## *Acknowledgements*

I greatly appreciate all their help to get the manuscript in the right final shape.

Finally, my wife Annabelle has been a constant source of support and belief during the book's long gestation – to her, a heartfelt 'Thank you'.

# Introduction

What is the Church? The question can be answered in familiar theological and poetic phrases: ‘The body of Christ’, ‘The people of God’, ‘A royal priesthood’, ‘The new Israel’. But the Church is also a human institution, an organization. In fact it is several such organizations. These all see their core identity in the theological terms above, but they all have an all too human history. Most of them have their origins as organizations in periods and circumstances very far from the communities that first described themselves as the body of Christ.

What happens if we consider the Church as an organization like other organizations? What happens if we apply to the Church what we now know about what makes organizations successful over the long term? These are the simple questions behind this book. The questions and the activity that follows from answering them are not offered as a substitute for prayer, discipleship, spirituality or any of the traditional ways the Church nurtures itself. This book proposes a parallel, not an alternative endeavour, in the conviction that while the Church is more than an organization it is not less than an organization.

Nevertheless, the contention of the book is that applying what we know about organizational development would have a transformational impact on the Church. In the last 20 years in particular there has been a great deal of research and practical learning about what makes organizations sustainably successful. The results of this take us a long way from the managerialism about which many church people are so understandably sceptical. We are not talking about a series of management techniques, still less about management fads. In the 1970s, books were written about improving the administration of the Church by applying the techniques and practices common in private and public-sector organizations.<sup>1</sup> These were, no doubt, full of good practical advice but they were not likely to effect any kind of transformation – their intention

was tactical rather than strategic. This book is far more interested in the conditions that enable organizations and those in them to thrive. It is far more about people than mechanics. In fact we will be taken closer to questions of faith than we will to management techniques as commonly understood. In essence it is about taking a more coherent approach to the way we think about and 'do' Church. It is about the benefits that accrue from being more deliberate.

The scepticism with which many people regard management theory is understandable when one contemplates the contents of any bookshop's business section. So much on offer seems shallow and repetitive. 'Management speak' is not attractive and is an easy target for the media and clergy alike. Much of the negativity, however, results from an inaccurate and outdated understanding of what the best people from the business and management worlds are actually saying. This book aims to look a bit deeper.

There is an irony here, of course. A bishop told me about a conversation he had with a businessman from his diocese. The businessman offered the bishop his help in matters where his experience could be useful. The bishop replied that he would be delighted to accept the offer and wondered if he could offer his help in return. The businessman was puzzled – what did the bishop mean? The bishop asked him how long his business had been in existence ('15 years', the businessman replied), and then pointed out that he worked for an organization that had been in business for 2,000 years – perhaps it knew something about what worked?

I have worked as a consultant to organizations of many kinds, including religious bodies, for over 14 years. One of the key principles my colleagues and I employ is that the greatest experts in any business's issues are those who work for it and know it inside out. Nothing this book says is intended to minimize the knowledge and experience of people who belong to the Church, or the learning available from its venerable history.

The Church seems to suffer less from a lack of knowledge, experience or ability than from a lack of confidence and of rigour in applying what it knows. 'The future the Church is currently in'

is somewhat grim – if we do not change, I do not see a positive future for it. But rather than wanting to encourage gloom, I believe we can and should act to create a different and better future. The Church has plenty of resources available in its people, history, theology and Scriptures. To some extent this book will be about rediscovering principles and practices that have their origins in the Church – it was, after all, one of the first organizations, as we have come to understand the term, and words like ‘values’ and ‘vision’ were religious before they were managerial.

I long to see the Church become confident again in its ability to take control of its own destiny. One of the things a confident institution does is engage positively with ideas and insights that originate outside itself – it is insecure and consequently defensive organizations that reject good news from the world outside.

Despite this, some may be put off by the secular provenance of a great deal of the material in this book. I have noticed that many people in the Church do not want to move until they have developed a special Christian theology of organizations or leadership or whatever the subject may be. Perhaps it will help if I explain my thinking on this. I am wary of the need to put the words ‘Christian theology of’ in front of everything, as if there is on every subject a special Christian truth accessible only to religious people who understand God to be the Creator of this world and his Spirit to be the source of all life and truth. So there is no ‘Christian’ truth, as in truth that is the special preserve of the Church or of Christians, but only God’s truth, or *the* truth. So I am happy to learn from secular sources. This does not mean I do not view them through a Christian lens or appraise them carefully, but I do not feel the need to go through an exhaustive process before taking action. The theological reflection can be done – and may well be better done – as we work with the concepts in practice.

Much of what I have to say is based on my own work as a parish priest and Bishop’s Chaplain as well as, latterly, a coach and organizational consultant. It is intended to offer both an intellectual and practical framework for anyone interested in effecting a sustainable transformation of the Church, whether at national or

local level. It is in part a thought piece, aimed at exploring the issues that will arise when we set out on the path to tackling organizational problems, and intended to provoke and stimulate. At the same time it offers a route map, a process, a how-to guide for those who want to take action. A complete programme is presented in the order things are best tackled, but it is not intended to be completely prescriptive – life is rarely, if ever, as neat as such a programme might imply. Experience shows that organizations can do things in the ‘wrong’ order and not as fully as I might prefer, and still get good results. The process set out here could be characterized as an organized way of holding an honest conversation among concerned parties. The quality of the conversation and the willingness to include all those who need to be included are what matter most.

The book is in two parts. Part one is more philosophical and sets the scene by describing the challenges facing the Church today. Many of these problems and issues are relatively well known but the intention is to demonstrate the need to think more strategically and less tactically. I then describe my approach to organizational renewal, as well as the intellectual framework that informs the rest of the book.

Part two begins by describing the process I recommend, and each subsequent chapter describes a stage in that process. These chapters also have philosophical passages but are more practical, offering a step-by-step how-to guide for those who want to take action. Each chapter begins with a description of the thinking that informs the process: these passages are intended to be a relatively objective account. This is followed by a consideration of questions and issues that will arise in the Church: these sections are intended to help, provoke and stimulate, and more frankly represent my views. Each chapter concludes with a sometimes detailed account of how the process can be implemented: these sections are intended to guide action.

I hope that disagreement with particular observations will not impair the book’s overall usefulness. And although it is argumentative, I do not offer answers to the questions raised by the thinking and the process, or put forward my views on the purpose, values

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or future strategy of the Church. The point of the book is to suggest a framework and a process that will allow readers to find their own answers.

Who is it aimed at? It will be most obviously useful to people holding positions of leadership in the Church – clergy, bishops – but it is intended to be relevant to anyone who wants to influence the future of the Church for good. Because I am an Anglican and know the Church of England best, it is to that Church I explicitly address what follows. Although I believe a national programme is both possible and desirable, the description of the implementation of the process is focused on the diocese and the parish – the two main units of the Church of England. Readers should be able to adapt the process for other Anglican organizations or other Churches relatively easily.

A few years ago I met the Superior General of a Roman Catholic order of Sisters. The Congregation provides care for the aged in five regions across the world. The Sisters are a dedicated, capable, down-to-earth and charming group of Christian women – and very good indeed at providing care. They were facing a number of difficulties, however: they were becoming fewer, ageing and could see a time in the not too distant future when they would be none; their way of working was inefficient and outdated; public expectations and government regulation were ever more demanding and difficult to keep up with; their buildings were, in many cases, no longer fit for purpose, in need of major refurbishment or replacement; the financial future looked bleak. Faced with this, the Sisters' default strategy had been to close houses – about half of them over a 30-year period.

We worked together for four years, following the thinking and the process set out in this book. The Sisters have reversed the policy of closure and are thinking about expansion. The ministry is being run ever more efficiently and the Sisters are seeing significant gains in financial performance, with the promise of further improvement. Buildings are being gradually repaired or renewed. None of this has been at the expense of the core beliefs, values or caring ministry of the Sisters – on the contrary, a renewal of the sense of mission and purpose has been at the heart of the process. Above

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all, perhaps, for the first time in a generation the Congregation is looking to the future with hope.

Yes, a religious order is a more discrete entity than the Church of England; yes, its commitment to a common ministry provides a focus less readily available in the Church. But do not underestimate the Sisters' achievement at a time when the active orders, in particular, are in real trouble – they still have plenty to do, but they have come a very long way. The national Church, dioceses or parishes can take similar action with similar results *if they really want to*. It can be done.

Part 1

UNDERSTANDING  
THE ISSUES



# 1

## Face the facts

The Church is one of the world's most successful organizations yet also extremely vulnerable in the West. The Church of England is deeply embedded in the social fabric, is still a major force in the land and does have its success stories – but it faces many problems and cannot, on the basis of recent and current trends, contemplate the future with a great deal of hope.

This chapter describes the challenges facing the Church and clergy and bishops operating in the current environment. It acknowledges that there has been change, intended to respond to shifts in that environment, and recognizes the potential evidenced in growing churches and dioceses. It sets out the contention that, overall, changes have been too local and piecemeal to constitute an adequate response, and argues that what is required is a more fundamental, strategic, rethink of the Church's role and operation. The chapter begins with some remarks about the Churches more generally before concentrating on the Church of England.

### ***Cameo 1: Some of my own recent experiences and impressions of the Church***

Working with the ministry team of a united benefice in Lincolnshire that consists of three groups – a total of 24 churches covering over 100 square miles, served by three full-time clergy and a number of voluntary lay ministers. Not sure whether to regard this as evidence of a dreadful decline or an exciting new model of rural ministry – probably both.

Reading Rowan Williams' remarks about the coalition government pursuing policies that electors did not vote for and thinking that his critique would have more weight if the Church of England did not appear to be so dysfunctional itself.

## *Acknowledgements*

I greatly appreciate all their help to get the manuscript in the right final shape.

Finally, my wife Annabelle has been a constant source of support and belief during the book's long gestation – to her, a heartfelt 'Thank you'.