

# God: Some Conversations

How do you speak about God?

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Participant Papers

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ST GEORGE'S HOUSE CONSULTATIONS

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***Churchyards: burden or a gift in how they speak of God***

## Churchyards: burden or a gift in how they speak of God

The churchyard is a special place to visit, away from the hustle and bustle of the world, to come and rest in the peaceful ambience and allow your soul to be restored. The dead rest quietly here. The quiet is interrupted by birdsong, the rustle of the leaves and grasses, other visitors and the church clock chiming, reminding you that life and death meet in this place. Although I may be an 'outsider' in this community, I do not feel an outsider to the God who always feels particularly close here.

This rich experience and encouraging words were recently spoken to me, the local vicar of the said parish church and churchyard which is also fraught with many challenges. Yet, along with this lady, it is fair to say that more people spend time in this churchyard than attend the church in any one month. This essay draws upon lived experiences of those who both visit churchyards and those who engage in 'churchyard' ministry, in Church of England parish contexts, as I seek to explore the burdensome and giftedness of churchyards in how they speak of God. This essay considers two inter-related areas of exploration: first, the use of language, symbol and remembering and second, redeeming the land with priest as mediator for God and people.

### The use of language, symbol and remembering

What language is used to speak about the walled off land surrounding a church building? When my local parishioners are asked how they viewed the said land, in descending order, the words cemetery, burial grounds, a rest place of the dead, garden, church grounds, graveyard and churchyard are used. The latter three are more associated with church attenders but cemetery can slip off their tongues too! Garden was used generally within the context of remembrance rather than wildlife. Within a wider Church of England context, additional phrases such as 'a setting for worship' and 'holy ground' were used. However, words expressing 'burden' featured predominantly and 'gift' rarely.

Examples of 'burden' include using the churchyard as a dog toilet and for drugs but burden generally expressed the lack of resources: financial, temporal and human and its irrelevance in terms of mission was mentioned often. The resource element impacted maintenance: grass cutting, general upkeep and memorials; the administrative and legal side: risk assessments, policies and procedures, record keeping, plans and the faculty process and, from my conversation with clergy, this also included dealing with memorial applications which are often both time consuming and pastorally challenging and many concurred with Cocke (2001, 80) and resented 'spending time dealing with memorial applications, regarding it as a distraction, from their "real" work.'

From my inherited context, the perception of the churchyard as cemetery, is displayed in the materials and designs used for memorials during the last thirty years, over-sentimentalised inscriptions and non-religious symbols alongside the introduction of other materials beyond the scope of the Chancellor's Regulations which govern the said churchyard for the 'positive purpose of protecting the special status of a churchyard' (ibid, 2). The language of ownership – "I've bought my plot" is familiar language and can be extrapolated and often articulated, in many geographical contexts, to say, "I can do what I like with my space". There appears to be little understanding that placing a memorial in the churchyard is a privilege not a right and that permission must be sought for all memorials. *The Churchyards Handbook* rightly acknowledges the pastoral challenges this brings when designs for monuments 'not

only lack aesthetic distinction but take little account of the essentially Christian nature of a churchyard' (2001, 23). I wonder what work could be invested with funeral directors and stonemasons in advising families on appropriate memorials for churchyards, in the first place.

However, this has not always been an issue. The oldest part of my closed churchyard, and others I have had oversight of or visited, which date back centuries, are home to large stone memorials which display religious symbols and 'broadcast messages about the dead's life and their faith' (Bowdler, 2019, 49). These memorials collectively commend the deceased to God's loving care; from them grieving families have been able to draw comfort and hope over the centuries. The churchyard's giftedness is revealed in the vast history recorded on these memorials of local communities and their faith.

I wonder, can the dichotomy between today's worldly and the Church's perception of the churchyard be, in part, explained by whether the land is viewed in terms of 'space' or 'place'? Land, according to Brueggemann (2002, 3), "is a central, if not the *central theme* of biblical faith". He helpfully proposes that a sense of place is a primary category of faith and offers this insight:

Space means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority....and is characterized by a kind of neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing....Place is a very different matter. Place is space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment and undefined freedom (ibid,4)

Within churchyard contexts, "This is my space", "this space looks disgraceful", "this is a peaceful space", are common language used to describe space. There is vested interest in the public space of churchyards as a variety of people use them. Space can depict positivity and negativity. Yet, as Cocke (2001, 2) rightly states:

'a churchyard is not neutral space. It is consecrated to its purpose in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and, in any works to it, let alone any burials, this special status must be recognised...'

This consecrated status would be accorded more to the church building in my context. However, the churchyard often gets a mention in the reason why wedding couples wish to get married at the parish church - several generations are buried in close proximity to it. This sense of place, remembrance and connection root couples and their loved ones in their corporate identity as family, and individually how the couples remember themselves in relation to these previous generations. This sense of connection also offers stability in an ever-changing world.

The churchyard is a liminal place where joy and grief, comfort and peace as well as life, death and rebirth meet together. The churchyard reminds humanity that we are 'part of a chain, going through the cycle of birth and death as those who came before and will come after' (Stanford, 2013, 241). The gift of the churchyard as a perpetual remembrance counters societal individualism. It is a place where our mortality and the

questions of life and death can be contemplated and death, a societal taboo, is also faced.

### Redeeming the land with priest as mediator for God and the people

Urbanisation, climate change, the environmental and biodiversity crisis alongside the five marks of mission, explicitly the fifth ('to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'), draw our attention to the importance of the whole of creation to God who, from the beginning, created, ordered, shaped and filled the void and empty place with life. The creation account in Genesis 1 reveals that the waters and the land were filled with many kinds of living beings. However, in terms of humanity's place within God's created order, Provan (2008, 6) highlights that they do not have a day of creation to themselves but share the sixth day with the other land creatures. The emphasis lies on the commonality that exists between the humans and the rest of the animal creation. Genesis 2 underlines this commonality, by telling us that humans are formed from the earth in the same way as the other animals.

In my predominately 'people focused' churchyard, "untidiness" and "disrespectful" become familiar words during grass mowing season and during Autumn, when the leaves fall. Strong emotions can be expressed when the people's burial grounds are not looked after in the manner expected. It is fair to say that my local context's experience would resonate with the respondents' experience in Betson and King's research in *The Nature of God's Acre* which demonstrated that churchyards are focused on people, rather than nature or God:

The apparent effort of a closely mown churchyard demonstrates to some that the space is cared for, that their future final rest in this place is secure, and that they will not be forgotten amongst the weeds. (2014, 43).

Yet for some of the respondents in *The Nature of God's Acre* (ibid, 44, 45), the churchyard is less people focused and more about nature, and also a place set apart from the rest of the world. The research revealed that for some respondents, God was associated with wildlife, contemplated and even named in the green and spiritual space. Respondents' spiritual encounters, illustrated below, pointed beyond themselves and pointed to new life within the ongoing cycle of life:

The more wildlife there is, the longer I would be likely to linger in the churchyard to enjoy the peace and quiet.

You can be alone, away from noise and other distractions and not feel isolated and 'lonely'. Wildflowers...birds/birdsong and butterflies can give hope and lift your spirits, a sign of life.

Seeing wildlife in the churchyard... reminds me how God cares about every tiny detail of his Creation and our lives; how He loves beauty; how he sustains his Creation and makes things work together harmoniously; the reliability of the changing seasons...

Wildlife in the churchyard shows the beauty of God's Creation, that the cycle of life continues and is forever renewing itself. It reminds me of Christ's resurrection and God's promise of everlasting life to all who believe in him.

Makes me realise that I am part of nature, part of something larger than myself. I feel in awe of the scope and breadth of the world around us and grateful that I have the senses to enjoy it.

The presence of wildlife in a churchyard changes the experience from what can be quite sombre to an uplifting one...

Churchyards are wildlife havens for insects, birds, reptiles and mammals; for grasses, lichens, mosses, liverworts, fungi, flowers and trees. In terms of the land itself, agricultural and building development elsewhere have meant that the churchyard has remained a refuge where once common plants and animals can still be found.

Nature trails and collaborative conservation such as the 'Churches Count on Nature' in June (a partnership between A Rocha UK, Caring for God's Acre, the Church of England and Church in Wales) and the national 'No Mow May' have created opportunities for engagement and deeper connection with God's creation in churchyards. Caring for God's Acre's 'Rake and Cake' initiative, for instance, has created opportunities to engage, connect and partner with the wider parish communities, including those who are not church attenders, in caring for God's acre and renewing the perception of the churchyard as a living changing churchyard. During the covid pandemic, there was renewed impetus to gather outside for worship. Forest Church, a fresh expression of church, was birthed within some churchyard contexts. The churchyard's potential for mission is pregnant with possibility for engagement with children and young people when we consider governmental statistics, published in October 2021 by Natural England<sup>1</sup>, which revealed that children and young people (aged 8-15) would like to do more to help look after the environment. Conversely, the Church of England mission statistics, published in 2022, revealed that only 19.4% of church attendees are aged between 0-18 years<sup>2</sup>.

How do we transform churchyards from a modernistic either/or approach which separates people from nature to a more holistic both/and approach where churchyards, God's acre on earth, increasingly becomes more harmonious and reconciled places for everything: biodiversity, wildlife, for contemplation, restoration and rest; a place for a peaceful moment and of encounter, where faith is discussed and a place for all people including the dead? After all, Brueggemann in *The Land* rightly claims that God's covenant purposes always involve the redemption of the land with the people as an integrated whole, reconciling the whole of creation and each of its elements, land, humanity, wildlife to the Godhead.

I would like to make the following suggestions of how a holistic both/and might be achieved in some churchyards, name your churchyard alongside your church on your noticeboard. Acknowledge the churchyard's original intention which prioritises God. In my local context, as we seek to redeem the churchyard from a cemetery, alongside our welcome to the said church and churchyard, we have added Psalm 100.4: 'You shall enter his gates with thanksgiving in your heart', on the noticeboard as people literally enter through the churchyard gates. Our welcome message also makes explicitly clear that the churchyard is a place for everything as listed above, as well as our desire to work with others in collaboration to restore the churchyard as a place for everything. Our second churchyard noticeboard contains the churchyard policy, the churchyard management plan and what the wildlife that can be found in the churchyard.

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1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-80-of-young-people-eager-to-take-action-to-help-the-environment>

2 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/2021StatisticsForMission.pdf>

On reflection I increasingly have seen that the redemption of the churchyard is co-dependent upon a trinity of relationships, God, people and nature with the priest, serving within the middle of the triangle as mediator. The mediator's role is to represent and be present in all these relationships. We are accountable to the Creator as to how we care, serve and guard our respective part of God's acre.

This missional work is hard work, not just planting new ideas and creative collaborations and ways of being with God and God's creation. It also includes weeding out bad practice. It involves creating order and healthy boundaries, defining space within this holy place, establishing good governance and accountability structures, navigating difficult pastoral conversations and engaging in pain-bearing ministry as the mediator seeks to shed light in the darkness of people's lives and the world at large, and also to be salt with its cleansing, purifying and healing properties in the caring, tending and managing our part of God's acre. This work is holistic - respectfully managing the place so that it becomes increasingly a just and peaceable place where all creation is given the opportunity to thrive and flourish, and the deceased are honoured and remembered. As this work unfolds, the churchyard becomes a living sign of what a restored and reconciled Eden will offer, at the end of time, when God not only feels close, but walks once again with God's creation. This missional work is both conservation, worship and mission.

Recapturing the churchyard's giftedness is opening our eyes to discover the missional opportunities it offers, especially in contexts where more people gather frequently in churchyards rather than church buildings. Churchyards are consecrated holy places where life, death and rebirth meet and have done so for centuries. Our part in this cycle is represented by the memorials which, at their best, should speak of past generations and point beyond themselves to the Divine. Churchyard ministry thus necessitates a holistic pastoral approach which seeks to build right relationship between God and God's creation and demonstrates this by the extent the churchyards exhibit, mutual inter-dependence. Restorative and formative works run alongside the importance of good normative processes and working within the boundaries of those respective policies and regulations. Done well, the church, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, not only mediates but becomes a facilitator in enabling God's creation to walk with God in God's acre on earth which, in turn, points beyond itself to a promised place and a forever home within a new heaven and earth, where everything is perfected, made whole and where harmony, wellbeing and *Shalom*, are hallmarks, and the giftedness of the churchyard becomes the dominant mantra in churchyard ministry.



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**Christine Downey**

***Communication, and creativity in pop music.  
Can we reassess church communications and relationship  
building through a rhizomatic strategy?***

In April of 2020, I innocently watched a dance video on YouTube of a song, "Spring Day" by the South Korean band Bangtan Soyandan ((BTS), 2017), that sounded like a song about lost love. Then I watched the official MV (music video) and then the "Spring Day Explained video" (Anon., 2017) and like that, I just like that, the BTS rabbit hole swallowed me up and I had just unwittingly been exposed to the BTS phenomena. I became fascinated with the messaging of the South Korean band Bangtan Soyandan (BTS) and how the fandom (I later learned to call ARMY) would speak about these seven men. They spoke at the UN in [2018](#) (Anon., 2018), then again in [2021](#), (BTS), 2017), and most recently in [2022](#) (UN, n.d.) when they also visited the White House and addressed the press corps there. In June 2020, they were a part of the worldwide [Dear Class of 2020](#) (BTS), 2017) videos. I listened and learned about the "Speak yourself and love yourself" campaign run in conjunction with UNICEF, where they donated 3% of all album sales from 3 albums, whose sales reached over 70 million dollars, and 100% of sales from merchandise from those albums. In June 2020, Reuters New Agency found they had donated 1 million dollars to Black Lives Matter, and ARMY, in less than 24, hours matched the donation. (Bhandari, 2020)

I connected with UNICEF and attended an online youth symposium on the issues faced by youth regarding COVID recovery. Shortly after that that I learned of "[One in an ARMY](#)" (One in an Army, 2018), a clearing house and charity vetting cooperative that helps raise money and goods for charities around the world. These grassroots, acts of caring are in response to issues mentioned perhaps tangentially in a song. These spontaneous acts of charity, their size and impact were astonishing to me. Raising the question, "What on earth is this?" Is the way we in the church are trying to communicate our message nothing more than "sounds caught going around inside our own mouth" to paraphrase member Kim Seokjin in his song "Abyss" ((BTS), 2017).

These seven men from Korea singing and rapping in a language I did not understand were helping both directly and indirectly more people in more diverse ways than I could ever have imagined.

In her book, *BTS: Art Revolution*, Professor Lee Ji-young explores the band's unique relationship with the global fandom ARMY as one of the significant factors behind BTS' popularity that transcends borders. A scholar of Gilles Deleuze, she describes the relationship as "rhizomatic". (Young, 2019)

A rhizome is a philosophical concept developed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze to indicate an interconnected horizontal, non-hierarchical network, like rhizomes at the root systems some plants use to propagate themselves. A tree with an extensive root system supports the trunk and branches. However, if you look at a rhizome like ginger- no two look alike, and you have no idea where they will spring up next, much like the relationships formed through this new type interconnectedness.

These seemingly haphazard connections show us that there is still amazing connectivity even in this age of information overload.

People have always commented on how technology is changing us and how it separates us. Critiques of radio and television were the same.

Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced with still newer information. Our electronically configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step because instant communication ensures that all factors of the environment and experience co-exist in a state of active interplay.(P.63) (McLuhan, 1967)

We talk about connectivity as either virtual or real. But 60% of people surveyed in developing nations believe that personal technology and social media have improved social bonds, and 36% per cent of respondents in the West think it has improved social bonds. (LinkHumans, 2015).

In the paper "Social Media–Driven Routes to Positive Mental Health Among Youth: Qualitative Enquiry and Concept Mapping Study."

The authors write, "Some participants with a history of psychological distress, school drop-out, risky behaviours, substance use, and incarceration had access to smartphones and used a wide array of social media. They used social media platforms to create and follow online identities, communicate with friends and family, build social networks, and access information resources relating to news, fashion, hobbies, sports, health, and employment...The analysis suggested that three features of social media, namely, connection, content, and outlet for creative expression, influenced multiple aspects of positive mental health. These pathways contributed to the following five positive mental health components: (1) positive relationships and social capital, (2) self-concept, (3) coping, (4) happiness, and (5) other relevant aspects of mental health (positivity, personal growth, and psychological well-being)." [\\_\(@Janhavi Ajit Vaingankar, 2022\).](#)

In March 2021, Gallup released polling data (Gallup, 2021) showing that 46% of people identified as Christian across England and Wales, unlike in 2001, when 71% identified as Christian.

I hear in the pews, but mainly among the clergy, "the party line", which is to blame "this generation" for being less faithful and obsessed with their phones. I hear social media being blamed for corrupting hearts. Taking prayer out of school, stores opening, or sports scheduled on Sundays are also blamed for the lack of engagement. We hurl insults and make fun of, or fear what we do not understand. Twitter has become a lifeline for many, but we say, "Oh, but that is not a real community". But we formed a community when in 2021 while the Spring Revolution raged outside a young girl hiding under her bed, in Myanmar asked on a large group of us Twitter what she should wear to get food in case she had to run from the violence outside her door. We affirmed our community with another young woman when we helped her find a

fresh water supply for her village virtually wiped out by mudslides caused by Tropical Storm Nalgae in the Philippines. Both these young women were ARMY. They reached out, and a whole interconnected world mobilised.

This poem found on tumblr caused me to rethink my attitude toward young people and their attachment to their phones and how they see themselves connected.

**[text] 'Live tweeting the Apocalypse' poem by Tumblr user herrsassyfras**

"Your generation would probably 'livetweet' the apocalypse", you  
say, and you laugh  
You mean it as an insult, and I understand,  
Or you don't  
because the word lies awkwardly on your tongue, stumbles as it  
leaves your lips, air quotes visible  
You meant it as an insult, so you don't understand, when I look into  
your eyes and say "Yes"  
Because we would.  
It would be our duty, as citizens on this earth  
to document it's end the best way we know  
and if that means a second by second update  
of the world going up in flames, or down in rain, or crushed under  
the feet of invading monsters  
so be it.  
It would mean a second by second update of  
"I love you"  
"I'm scared"  
"Are you all right?"  
"Stay close"  
"Be brave"  
It would mean a second by second update of humanity's  
connection with one another,  
Proof of empathy, love, and friendship between people who may  
have never met in the flesh.  
So don't throw the word 'Live tweet' at me like a dagger, meant to  
tear at my 'teenage superiority'  
Because if the citizens of Pompeii, before they were consumed by  
fire,  
had a chance to tell their friends and family throughout Rome  
"I love you"  
"I'm scared"  
"Don't forget me"  
Don't you think they'd have taken the chance?"

William Dyrness, professor of theology and culture, in his book *The Earth Is God's: A Theology of American Culture*, writes "If theology and the Christian faith is going to be intelligible or make sense to anyone in the modern world, it really has to come from a place of being conversant with culture. We need to honor(sic) and respect the things we're engaged in dialogue with just as if it were a person sitting across a coffee table from us... We tend to speak before we listen, and when we do that, we're not actually hearing what the culture is." (Dyrness, 1997)

People are still seeking justice, forgiveness, hope, love and belonging. People are still desperate for mercy and understanding, searching for meaning and for second chances. So, the problem of lack of church engagement is not with those outside the church, and it certainly is not with God. People do connect but in ways we don't yet fully understand.

In an article published by the World Economic Forum 2018 (Vanham, 2018), Peter Vanham writes in his essay "Here's what a Korean boy band can teach us about globalisation 4.0" "We can observe globalisation 4.0 that is much more diverse than before; the phenomenon where BTS' Korean songs are captivating the entire world (symptomatically) shows the structure of change that is occurring on a global level." In his book *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Schwab, 2017), Klaus Schwab speaks of this same new industrial revolution, also referred to as Globalisation 4.0, just emerging, and its two core values which are sharing and caring. He says, "Today's world is continuously changing through values and relationships that are distinguished from those of the previous era's globalisation, which was based on a one-way order centered (sic) around countries of power."

One example that symbolically shows this new distinction is the BTS phenomenon. At the core of BTS' new mobile-network-based art form is sharing value; the horizontal relationship they form with the fandom is the foundation upon which the value of caring can be actualised.

Many musicians worldwide have talent, sincerity, active SNS (social networking service) accounts, and fans following them. However, why does the dedication of ARMY stand out compared to other musicians in the global music industry? How has BTS been able to grow such dedicated international fandom? Musical and performance abilities, sincerity, and interactions with fans through social media are known elements of success in the industry. However, more than these are needed to explain the distinct connection between BTS and ARMY. More to the point, Professor Lee Ji-young argues that "there is a certain resonance in the directionality of the two. This resonance occurs between the direction in BTS' music and the direction of ARMYs' lives." (Young, 2019) We clearly see this rizomatic form of communication at work here, where completely disparate individuals with little in common either economically, socially, or in terms of education find themselves and others connected through BTS.

To explain, let us, for a minute, turn to the social backdrop against which BTS and ARMY have emerged. Today, the globalisation of capital and automation of technology geared towards maximising profit has led to a growth of underemployment, unemployment, and despair. In

many measurable ways, according to the World Economic Forum in 2016 (Myers, n.d.) this generation is worse off than the previous one for the first time in modern history, and they face the news that many of the impacts of global warming are now simply "irreversible" according to the UN's latest assessment coming out of COP26. (McGrath, n.d.).

People can no longer afford houses, children, or dreams. (Abbie Sharp, 2020). This results in a growing number of people that suffer from undefined defeat, apathy, anxiety, and loneliness. People worldwide are coping with the uncertainty and instability of their futures.

Due at least in part to the generational ease of navigating the Internet and social media, a large portion of the younger generation is accustomed to sharing their thoughts, anxieties, and dreams of a better future with one another openly through various media platforms. BTS's music is a medium that allows for the struggles and desires of young people worldwide to be heard and understood. Their music is a medium for empathy at a time when young people desperately yearn to hear their own stories.

BTS addresses diverse types of structural oppression, injustice, sexual and racial inequality, and mental health issues through music and other endeavours. These issues are not generation specific, so people feel seen and heard across the generations. Because BTS' diagnosis of reality and call for social change transcend boundaries between nations, fans worldwide empathise with the lyrics strongly. Thus, in a deeper and less conscious form of artist-fan interaction, BTS and ARMY walk in the same direction— "toward transforming unjust structures of society, challenging violence of every kind and pursuing peace and reconciliation."

The secret of BTS lies here; they are sincerely empathetic and have managed to communicate that by using stories and language that come directly from an actual lived experience. To further spread this message of loving oneself and caring for others through the music of BTS has meant for their fandom, learning new strategies and setting them in place for the music of BTS to enter the global music industry. ARMY, a voluntary and spontaneous formation of fans without access to the marketing skills, networks, or resources of the music industry, having no way to pay for spins, instead organised spontaneous campaigns out of love and support for BTS, the result is they often outsell western artists. The result, intended or not, is that ARMY's online and offline grassroots movements have brought about social and cultural changes outside of the corporate structure and media that have long ruled the music market. These changes are not restricted to the music industry.

ARMY's way of supporting BTS started as online cooperative projects but eventually penetrated offline spaces and created new ones, creating fissures in our hierarchical structures. The mobile network generates hybrid spaces and, in turn, creates online movements that can transform the off-line reality, allowing this online power to infiltrate into actual spaces. These social and cultural changes have hindered the existing power of the media and eroded the established power dynamic between races, cultures, and languages. Even though ARMY's activities were not aimed at political transformation, we can see these significant political implications as a rhizomatic revolution. One example that made headlines was when ARMYs

bought thousands of tickets and sold out an arena for a [Trump](#) political rally and then did not show up, much to the confusion of the conference organisers. (Kenya Evelyn, 2020)

The second part of the phenomenon involves the art form itself being transformed. BTS music videos and other video content are not only tools to promote the songs, but their effect has been to expand the meaning and message of the songs in various ways. BTS' many music videos, some of which were released years ago, are all interconnected within the Bangtan Universe, a fictional storyline which runs through the videos, with members as various characters or themes focussing on different eras. Sometimes the video has much more to do with a background story than the lyrics on the screen. It is sometimes difficult to decipher a single video without watching the others.

Because of this internal referencing, their online videos attract participation from the spectator; spectators add theories and produce their own videos that create connections between BTS' videos. For as long as BTS and their fans continue to produce creative work, an individual work of art continuously forms diverse networks with others, expanding and transforming the collective work's meaning.

Professor Lee Ji Young again, in the preface to the English edition of her book, suggests a new term for this unprecedented assemblage of online videos. She calls it the "network image." She writes: "BTS and their fans together produce this new form of art, the network image, and propose a new social value of art that the present era requires, "sharing value." (Young, 2019) Unlike a previous conception of art where the receiver appreciates the artist's work and perhaps tries to discern the artist's intention, the sharing value is represented by continuous co-production of artists and receivers. The owned territory of the artist becomes fluid. The artworks travel beyond the media in or from which they were created and, in doing so, begin to dismantle the hierarchical boundaries between producers at the top and consumers at the bottom, between artist and receiver. This kind of interaction is perhaps the most current example of the democratisation of art, first recognised in the 1960s.

This horizontal participation emphasises a particular direction of change in modern society. "Good Art" points to something beyond just ourselves and sheds the light of redemption. Something we instinctively know is somehow bigger than us suddenly becomes demonstrably more significant through this cooperative exchange between artist, inspiration, and consumer/co-creators-us.

One may perhaps justifiably question how enthusiasm for a "boyband" can shift artistic understanding or affect societal change. And yet, we know that the advent of any new art form almost always encounters some resistance and perhaps even some mockery. As the great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria's court photographers, R.W. and D. Downey, I like to remind people that even though photography is now widely accepted and unquestioned as an art form, its artistic value was at the centre of dispute upon its emergence. In this dispute, as Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, writes "what matters is not just the artistry of photography, but that it is in fact the symptom of a historical transformation the universal impact of which was not realised by either of the rivals. The



transformation dispels the illusion of "the autonomy of art" when the age of mechanical reproduction separates art from its religious and ritualistic base. "(Benjamin, 1935).

The way BTS communicate, what they share, and how it has been received, interacted with, and changed, sheds some light on emerging systems of interaction with societal structures that do not reflect our traditional understanding. Can the church make use of this emerging communication and relationship forming structure? Perhaps we can. Will we allow ourselves to trust that the changes this new network brings about are at least worth our attention? If we do, it could demonstrate how we honour and respect the things we are engaged in dialogue with. It might even direct us to another way of understanding this culture that so longs for more.

## **Alison Hardy**

***How do we speak about God ...in fragile & ageing rural congregations which share a small percentage of a vicar and would benefit from local leadership to enable the worshipping community to witness to the full presence of Christ in their midst?***

## Introduction

*How do we speak about God ... in fragile & ageing rural congregations which share a small percentage of a vicar and would benefit from local leadership to enable the worshipping community to witness to the full presence of Christ in their midst?*

This is a question which taxes me daily. I am an incumbent in Truro Diocese in multi-parish ministry. One part of my role is as Rector to seven rural parishes; the other part as Team Vicar in a shared town ministry. There is not the possibility to give any one church the dedicated care and support they either need or expect. Local leadership could enable these churches to flourish.

Our current deanery plan aims to raise up local leaders, identifying and training those who have the potential and the will to become the local minister. Furthermore, Truro Diocese are implementing a process of ministerial change in which incumbents will operate as oversight ministers, and local worshipping communities will provide their own leadership. This is a slightly daunting journey as the diocese addresses a means of meeting the twin challenges of falling attendance and corresponding income.

In this paper, I use local stories to explore how God is speaking to us. After all, Jesus used stories to convey spiritual truths. Perhaps in our stories we may hear the voice of God which, in turn, may help us to speak about God in our situation.

This paper covers a swift journey through a range of sources to attempt to understand better how to implement local leadership. I look at two key priorities that we have identified from our experience of raising and resourcing local leaders: both the time required to train a local leader; and the time needed to embed cultural change within a congregation's expectations.

I turn briefly to the Bible to seek an understanding of local leadership in scripture. This is compared with my experience of church planting and growth in India, where local leaders are appointed, equipped and supported by an oversight minister. At the same time, I share post-covid stories of what is happening in the parishes where I work and how we perceive God speaking to congregations and their community about what it means to be church in this new era.

In closing, I make a plea for resources to ease the journey from traditional church leadership to locally led congregations, in the shape of interim ministerial support.

## The priority of time for building up congregations and leaders

When I was appointed to this group of churches, I outlined a plan to invest in one congregation at a time. It seemed to me that working with one congregation at the expense of others was better than not investing in any satisfactorily due to a busy workload. I am sure that many can testify to the difference investment of time makes to a church, as in this illustration:

Through God's blessing, curate Nicki was keen to embrace an investment of time into St A's on the edge of Bodmin Moor. She knocked on every door, began to understand the community, and encouraged the tiny congregation to grow in confidence. Nicki has completed two years with this church, the first six months she gave them wholly of her time, and since then has supported them alongside a second, and then a third, congregation.

During this period there she has seen an increase in average Sunday attendance, started an additional service attended by several new families and has seen all the PCC offices filled - quite a challenge for a tiny parish. Outsiders have been drawn in, including one woman who was invited by Nicki when she knocked on her door and now, two years later, is a churchwarden. St A's has grown numerically and in confidence; yet a local leader remains to be appointed.

Clearly Nicki's investment of time has established the importance of leadership in the local church which engages with, or springs from, the community. Her impact has strengthened the church. Knowing that she will soon leave, they are aware of the need to raise their own leader and they are in a much stronger place from which to do so. However, a leader has not been easy to identify. Except, that is, for one surprising offer from a neighbour:

The neighbours watched from a distance some of the changes around the church. Initially they weren't too happy. However, they were asked to lock the church at night and began to talk to church members. One day they asked if the church could marry them. During the booking visit, the husband mentioned he'd looked on the internet to find out what vicars do. He was enthusiastic: 'It's actually really good stuff! Every village should have one!'

Vicar: 'I agree. Sadly there is no longer funding for every parish to have a vicar.'

Husband: 'Give me a few years. When I've taken early retirement, I'll be the vicar here.'

Vicar: 'That's a great offer. Would you like to start by exploring baptism?'

How do we speak of God when he calls an unbeliever to see the advantage of local church leadership and wishes to respond? How is God speaking to us through this story? As we continue to pray for local leadership to emerge in St A's, it is salutary to note the actions taken in a neighbouring parish.

Noticing the opportunities, St B made changes of their own. They deliberately worked hard at drawing in new people to the PCC, making a point of finding someone from the community to fill a slot rather than double up on roles themselves. They chose their service preferences and pattern to suit themselves, not the clergy. Eighteen months later, a church member was appointed and trained as their worship leader.

This church has not had an investment of dedicated time from a member of the clergy, although they have had clerical support in their choices. Change happened as they took advantage of the permission to create their own way of being church.

Convinced that in both these examples time is an important ingredient in the process of change, I turn to both a biblical perspective and experience from my visits to India.

### Biblical wisdom and ministry in India

If time is an important factor in building up churches and leaders we would expect to see this factor evident in the early church. The Book of Acts outlines some of the timescales adopted by Paul to establish mature congregations (quotes from the NRSVA):

*Acts 11.26 'for an entire year [Barnabas and Saul] associated with the church and taught a great many people.'*

*Acts 18.11 '[Paul] stayed there for a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.'*

*Acts 19.10 '[Paul taught in Ephesus] for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.'*

*Acts 20.31 'Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.'*

*Acts 28.30 'He lived [in Rome] for two whole years ... proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ...'*

These referenced congregations received sustained periods of support from the apostles in their early development. The time frame is between one to three years. It is apposite to reflect that Jesus spent three years training his disciples. From these references, one could argue biblical evidence for such a period being necessary to establish a mature congregation - or indeed, to build up an existing weakened one.

This process of church growth mirrors the work I have witnessed in India through the work of Brother Samuel John. He has planted over 250 churches in the last forty years through his missionary organisation *Reach the Unreached*. Churches are established where faith develops and they are supported for a similar number of years until self-reliant. The support takes the form of teaching, preaching and training up local leaders. The teaching is necessary as the congregations come from non-Christian backgrounds. Old gods need to be rejected, new ways adopted and the cultural change takes time to be effectively embedded.

In some churches a natural leader is discipled into the Christian faith as is seen in these two stories:

In February this year, I visited the first church planted by an Indian friend, Brother Samuel John. It happened this way. He travelled to a village with friends, a microphone and booklets to share the gospel. The villagers were not welcoming. Eventually the village headman approached with a challenge. His daughter had failed her school exam twice. She had one more chance before being dismissed from school for good. 'If your god is that powerful, ask him to help my daughter. If she passes her exam then I will believe in him.'

The prayer was answered. Because of his position, the headman's conversion led most of the village to follow him. Although looked to for leadership, he nevertheless needed the time and support of Samuel John's ministry to equip him for the task. Every one of the 250 churches he planted are supported in this way until they develop mature local leadership.

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Samuel John's second church began in a village his group were passing through to preach in a further place. Every day they travelled through on their way. One day the wife of the Hindu priest stopped them and asked for prayers for her husband. He was lying on his bed in the road as he was close to death. The group challenged her, 'We are Christians. How will your husband respond if he is healed by Jesus Christ?'

'If your God heals him, then he will become a Christian,' she promised. They stopped and prayed for him. That evening on their return he had improved. Over the course of three days he healed completely. He became a Christian and the natural church leader, leading many others in the community to follow his new faith.

Some of the church leaders are already community leaders and require teaching about Christianity as is evidenced above. In other churches potential leaders are trained at a Bible College and return to lead the church or plant others. Note that the appointment of leaders does not necessarily occur at the time the church is established. We observe this also in Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas did not appoint elders in the churches at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch until their second visit, confirming that the raising of local leaders requires time.

My hope is that the above brief look at church growth and leadership - in the local church, biblically and in India - argues a good case for sustained teaching and training to enable congregations to thrive with local leadership.

However, as the stories show in part, there are a few surprises. We saw in St A's example that building up a church does not necessarily produce a local leader immediately, and may even reinforce the practice of traditional parochial leadership. In St B we noticed that change in church culture can be caught rather than taught. And in the stories described above we observe that God raises up some surprising people as church leaders: an unconverted parishioner; a village headman; a Hindu priest. What do we understand from these stories and how do they lead us to speak about God in these situations?

### Stories: living through change

Reflecting again upon the church in India, Covid19 was a great game-changer. Many church leaders died during the epidemic, leaving churches without leadership. Out of this gap a number of young leaders emerged, in several cases sons and daughters with the experience and aptitude required. At the same time, anti-conversion laws clamped down on open-air preaching. This was overcome through a rise of women in leadership who visit homes and thereby grow the church through door to door evangelism. The old model of church growth has been supplanted by a new model led by women and the young, elevating their status and challenging pre-existing models.

In the UK, we also are affected by post-covid change. We see the changing patterns and decrease in church attendance. We observe a new openness to faith outside of the church, an eagerness to hear the stories of Jesus. How is God speaking to us in these changing times? One answer is to take heed of the stories around us, of the rise of faith in unexpected places. I include just one of many we have witnessed:

The householder arrived home to find his letter-box damaged by one of our church magazines pushed through the door. He immediately phoned; land and mobile numbers conveniently displayed on the magazine. I picked up several irate messages. Phoning back in some trepidation I quickly understood that the damage had been repaired but decided a visit was in order.

When I turned up, only his wife was in and she looked a little unsure to find a vicar on her doorstep. The conversation was stilted until her three-year old pushed past her to see who had come. Recognising me from pre-school he asked, 'Why are *you* here?' Suddenly light dawned upon his mother, with delight she began to tell me all the stories and activities her son brought home from pre-school. 'He keeps all his things. He has his angel in his room, and his cross, and his prayer-box. He tells us all the stories. Every single word.' As she continued, I realised that her toddler had become an evangelist to his mother, his father, and his older brother, and that his mother was keen to know more. 'He tells us every word of the Bible stories.'

If God can use a tiny child as an evangelist, he can use any one of us. This should give us hope. There are other stories I could relate, of God speaking to us in ways which are unexpected and surprising, of faith emerging outside of the worshipping community, of the church becoming a source of information and wisdom to those who seek Christian spirituality.

The stories are not limited, but our response may be if we do not address the urgent need to grow the local church. It is essential to enable the congregation to grow to maturity to provide a place for healthy, flourishing discipleship and genuine welcome. This can happen through intentional input in the shape of interim supportive leadership - teaching and training until the church is self-led through raising its own leaders.

## Conclusion: Plea for interim support

In the illustrations above, I hope I have argued the importance of allowing sufficient time to build up a congregation until it is able to raise its own local leaders. Returning to the first examples, St A have not yet identified a local leader and St B have. In the remaining congregations in the benefice, four have local leadership developing at various stages of emergence and two have none. Some congregations remain small or vulnerable, others are growing in numbers and in hope. None of this would have been possible without curate support. And yet, there is still a journey to travel until churches are self-led.

The introduction to this paper briefly summarised our diocesan vision to develop local leadership with the incumbent taking on the role of oversight minister. Notwithstanding that the term 'oversight minister' is yet to be fully defined, it appears that the process of change will be a slow one. My concern is how we move from the position today in multi-parish ministries with congregations dependent upon an incumbent to a future vision of self-led churches. It is difficult for an incumbent in multi-parish ministry to find the time needed to address and change expectations when working across many churches simultaneously.

One solution could be provided through a form of pioneer interim ministry in which churches are allocated pioneer ministers for two to three years to teach and to train and develop effective community links under the leadership of the oversight minister. As in all good succession planning, the role will be one of planning ahead for a healthy handover of leadership to locally grown and appointed leaders. There will be an expectation that this is the natural state of the local church. That churches are sustained in Christ and not in the incumbent.

How this works - or how effectively - depends upon much that has not been properly explored in such a short paper. The topic of local leadership has been briefly addressed but much has been left unsaid: for instance, the definitions of 'oversight minister'; 'self-led church'; 'pioneer interim minister'; of the relationships between them; of where the sacramental provision lies and much else besides.

However, my plea is this: in a time of transition, there is a need for purposeful short-term and full-time support in parishes to enable the journey from incumbent-led to self-led. This is one way of how we speak of God in today's parishes: through resourcing churches on the ground - to be the presence of Christ they are called to be from a place of renewed strength and confidence.

Alison Hardy, June 2023

## *Synopsis of the Argument*

Working as an incumbent in multi-parish ministry I argue for the need of both time and interim support to enable churches to move from dependence upon a vicar (or part of one) to a place of confidence whereby the individual churches each flourish under their own locally grown leadership.



**Philip Hobday**

*Trust*

## Trust

### P.P. Hobday

#### *Synopsis*

Western society finds it hard to trust – whether it's trusting political institutions, each other, or God. This paper identifies some reasons why trust is harder for us, as a society and specifically as clergy. Using two philosophers, one theologian, some research into faith among Generation Y, and the Letter to the Hebrews, it considers two factors (competence and connection) which might help clergy promote trust in the church, the faith, and each other.

#### *Introduction*

Jack, the hustler from steerage, reaching out to Rose, heiress from first class; the street urchin thief offering his hand to the princess from the palace: at crucial points in *Titanic* and *Aladdin* we see an invitation to, an exercise of, *trust*. More basically, we couldn't live without trust: I trust the hygiene standards in the St George's House kitchen, I trust the train-driver who got me here knew when to speed up and when to apply the brake. Yet twenty years ago the philosopher Onora O'Neill already asked whether we lived in a crisis of trust. This paper begins first with O'Neill's analysis to examine why trust has become even more problematic since she wrote – both in our culture generally and (with help from theologian David Hoyle) the church specifically. Secondly, drawing on the philosopher Katherine Hawley, we consider what factors help promote trust. Thirdly, focussing mostly on our role as clergy in the Church of England, we ask how we might promote trust in the Church. Finally, we examine whether the concepts of trust outlined here can help us talk appealingly about God.

#### *The crisis of trust*

In her 2002 Reith Lectures, Baroness O'Neill was unconvinced we really *were* less trusting: ‘“Loss of trust” has become a cliché of our times.’<sup>1</sup> The central plank of O'Neill's argument was that the crisis of trust was in many ways a shift in perception: not that we have become less trusting or trustworthy, just that we now know more about failures of trust. In particular, O'Neill argued that the growth of inspection or auditing of professions and institutions had the effect of diminishing rather than encouraging trust. Such a culture, she added, damaged trust just because it tended to highlight failures, but also because it set changing and often conflicting targets which consumed much of an organisation's time and energy and drained time for its principal purpose.<sup>2</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup> Onora O'Neill, *A Question of Trust: the BBC Reith Lectures, 2002* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 9.

<sup>2</sup> O'Neill, *Question of Trust*, 18-19, 43-59.

instance, the family doctor who has to fill out slightly different forms for multiple inspecting / auditing bodies will have less time to actually see patients.

There may well be an element of truth in O'Neill's argument, and to be fair to her she might write differently today. To see why she, and we, might think differently we can identify two factors. First, in ways that were not obvious in 2002, there are trends within and outside western societies not just to shape those societies but to fundamentally disrupt them. The external threat of terrorist extremism was only just visible in 2002. And the danger of such a fundamental threat arising *from within* society was practically invisible. But western democracies are increasingly facing those who do not just contest the outcome of particular events but are challenging basic constitutional processes and structures. This erodes trust because it throws out the long-term, fundamental, shared baby of belief in the basic building-blocks of the political system along with the short-term and transient bathwater of the success or failure of my particular party or concern.

Not unconnected with this first problem is a second factor: O'Neill wrote in a pre-social-media world. She did hint at the problem – ‘the new information technologies ... dislocate our ordinary ways of judging one another's claims and deciding where to put our trust.’<sup>3</sup> To take one statistic: in 2022 in the UK, asked about their primary source of news, over ninety percent of over 75s named the television but nearly ninety percent of those 16-24 cited the internet.<sup>4</sup> Even if we disagree about what they mean, we still have broadly a shared set of *facts and sources* when we access traditional media. The reader of the *Daily Mirror* might read a very different *analysis* than the reader of the *Daily Mail*; but both newspapers are at least subject to some constraints, each has a significant numbers of readers who are reading the same content, and there is always the possibility of the reader coming across a novel argument, issue, or statistic. By contrast, the internet is largely unregulated; in some senses I *create* my own diet of news by what I look for (perhaps exacerbated by algorithmic selection of content); and I am not only exposed to more extreme opinions but may end up almost exclusively reading only the same opinions. For example, if I were hesitant about receiving the Covid-19 vaccine and found some information about it, might I end up being shown largely or only content which was similarly suspicious, in a self-reinforcing echo chamber? It is possible, then, that an effect of social media unforeseen by O'Neill is to further diminish trust by limiting and homogenising the content we encounter.

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<sup>3</sup> O'Neill, *Question of Trust*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK Report 2002*, accessed 26th June 2022, [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/241947/News-Consumption-in-the-UK-2022-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/241947/News-Consumption-in-the-UK-2022-report.pdf), 16.

It is hard now, then, to agree with O'Neill's 2002 diagnosis that loss of trust was more cliché than crisis. A first problem for the church, then, is that the wider challenge to institutions and systems risks damaging trust in the church too. As David Hoyle notes, we are struggling with the demand to define ('professional relationships have defined boundaries') when ministry is often at the boundaries (with the bereaved, say, or the homeless) and can feel 'risky and ill-defined.'<sup>5</sup> This is one instance of the tendency to reduce trust through measurement which O'Neill identifies. Note we need considerable caution here – professional boundaries and proper processes are very necessary (not least in financial and safeguarding matters) – but the problem is clear. We struggle to engender trust in the church because we don't agree on what we do or whether and how we can assess it.

A second problem for the church in particular is analogous to the effects of social media in that the experience of clergy is now much more diverse and this leads to tension. We have less in common as they come from different backgrounds, train in different ways, and serve in different contexts. I remember arriving as a university chaplain in 2009 in a city where about thirty people had the same title, and being quite surprised that there was a very wide range of ways the role was understood and exercised. The same thing happened in 2015 when I moved to a town as a parish priest and the twenty or so people with the same title seemed to have a wildly different range of actual daily work. As Hoyle identifies, 'we have lost our common culture'<sup>6</sup> – not so much in our theological outlooks (these have always varied) but in the range of worship we are familiar with, in the shape of our daily work. This means 'our meetings become clumsier', 'conversations are more cautious than they were and misunderstandings surface quickly.'<sup>7</sup> Just as with the self-reinforcing silo tendency of where we get information, this day-to-day diminishing of shared understanding makes trust much harder. It is exacerbated when we consider how church debates as well as political ones often appear to take place online, where a genuine exchange of views and ideas seems less common than an often sterile, predictable, and fruitless exchange of insults.

Reflecting on O'Neill's argument after twenty years, and connecting it with Hoyle's observations on ministry, thus prompts two questions. First, do disagreements about whether and how ministry can be assessed and measured drain energy from our actually ministering? And, secondly, does our increasing *disconnection* from each other, exacerbated by differences in formation, worship, even which 'Anglican Twitter' feeds we follow, help explain why clergy seem to trust each other less?

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<sup>5</sup> D.M. Hoyle, *The Pattern of our Calling: Ministry Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (London: SCM Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Hoyle, *Pattern*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Hoyle, *Pattern*, 7, 14.

### *The conditions for trust*

The philosopher Katharine Hawley analyses the conditions which make trust more possible.

Hawley ‘understand[s] trust in terms of *commitment*: when we trust people, we rely upon them to meet their commitments.’<sup>8</sup> A first key aspect is that this entails *competence*: it is not enough that I promise something meaning to keep it; I am only really trustworthy if I promise something that I can actually do, and then actually do it. Thus, if I know nothing about beer, I should not (Hawley is fond of *Archers* analogies!) promise to buy my partner the best beer in Dorsetshire. I might achieve this because of a helpful bartender, but I’m making a promise I can’t be reasonably sure I can fulfil,<sup>9</sup> and the gap between what I say and what I can do diminishes trust.

A second aspect, though Hawley does not use the particular word, is *connection*. To trust is something more than reliance on a material object, it involves some kind of relationship between persons.<sup>10</sup> This is most likely, says Hawley, in a ‘long-term situation.’<sup>11</sup> And many of her strategies for identifying and developing trust entail patient, sustained attention to ourselves and other persons, trying to discern more of what affects our behaviour and theirs.<sup>12</sup> For example, a manager may not trust an administrator who does not make the coffee (even though it is not in the administrator’s job description) because they presume it is obvious this is the administrator’s job; the problem here is not that the administrator is (on this account) untrustworthy as such, but simply they lack a shared understanding of the role. If the manager and administrator were able to discover this different understanding, it might allow them to build trust. It is through relationships, then, and the way we perceive ourselves and each other, that the conditions for (mis)trust can be shaped.

### *Trust and ministry*

To apply these two aspects of trust to our own ministries, and I’ll draw on some insights from a recent book about Christianity and Generation Y (born after 1982). Hawley’s first aspect, about *competence*, starts with (cautionary tale for clergy here?) only committing to things that we know we can do, not just because we have the skills but because we have the *time*: better to underpromise than over-promise with good intentions and then fail to do it. Not doing something we’ve said we’ll do because we don’t give it the time is, says Hawley, as bad as not doing it because we don’t have the skill.<sup>13</sup> But it also suggests some deeper meanings. In particular, the basic problem of incompetence here arises whenever there is a gap between what say and what I do. And any

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<sup>8</sup> Katharine Hawley, *Trust: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Katharine Hawley, *How to be Trustworthy* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 36-52; see generally 26-47.

<sup>10</sup> Hawley, *Trust*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Hawley, *Trust*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Hawley, *Trustworthy*, 121-36.

<sup>13</sup> Hawley, *Trustworthy*, 65.

perception of such a gap – particularly in a world which (despite O’Neill’s strictures) continues to be marked by constant and intrusive hyper-scrutiny – risks us being perceived as untrustworthy.

The FoGY research concluded, ‘young people are looking for authenticity’.<sup>14</sup> So, as Cocksworth notes, ‘it is not enough simply to *say* that [Christian faith] is deep and real and true without being able to *show* a community that is ... experiencing its reality and living out its values truly’.<sup>15</sup> This is why Cocksworth argues for ‘authentic Church’ – because a church which does not appear to do what it says is unlikely to be considered untrustworthy, particularly for those who are no longer inclined to trust beliefs simply because of trust in the institution which articulates them. So a challenge for us as clergy is how can we be the kind of authentic ministers of the gospel who might be considered trustworthy by others, and how can we shape trustworthy, authentic communities which might encourage others to consider not just us but our faith trustworthy too? How can we show what we say?

The second condition suggests the importance of *connection* in our work. Unsurprisingly, frequent churchgoers were over twice as likely to feel they could talk to religious leaders or youth workers.<sup>16</sup> By extension, if someone has *never* or rarely seen a cleric or an obvious Christian, they are much less likely to engage with the faith. So how can clergy make sure they come into contact with the widest range of people, including (especially) those on the fringes or even wholly outside the life of local congregations? If connection is vital to trust, how can we make more connections, in the hope that, over time, a person might make sufficient connections with us or with other Christians to consider faith more fully for themselves? This challenge becomes particularly acute when we read that over 70% of participants said they felt they could talk to *friends*. Since clergy are a peculiar and finite species, how are we helping people share with their friends about their faith? And might there be a clue here to trust among clergy: are we trying to make connections with colleagues of other persuasions and opinions, so at least be able to understand each other better and thereby fulfil at least one condition for the building up of trust?

### *Trust and God*

So far we have been thinking about trust in clergy and in the church, bracketing questions about God and faith. But if these lines of thought have something to say to us about our own ministries, they might also have something to say about the fundamentals our faith too. For what O’Neill and Hawley call *trust* is closely connected with *faith*. *Pistis* in the New Testament can connote trust and

<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, and Sally Nash, *The Faith of Generation Y* (London: CHP, 2010), 27.

<sup>15</sup> C.J. Cocksworth, ‘Theological Epilogue,’ in *Faith of Generation Y*, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Mayo, Collins-Mayo, and Nash, *Faith of Generation Y*, 34.

trustworthiness as well as mere belief. (In terms Aquinas borrows from Augustine, there's a difference between *credere Deum*, believing that God exists, and *credere in Deo*, which has the stronger edge of belief entailing some kind of commitment.<sup>17</sup>) This is somewhat lost in the English of the creeds, 'I believe.' But it becomes clearer in the version used in the baptism service, where we say 'I/we *believe and trust*.' In other words, Christian faith is an exercise not just of believing in the propositional truth of God's existence but of shaping one's life around trusting in God. Indeed, most people's journey of Christian faith is based around that shaping of their lives; they may (or may not) spend much time considering the propositional aspect. Twenty years of preaching largely in middle-of-the-road CofE churches suggests that many people's faith involves, for the most part, trying to *behave* in a Christian way and *belonging* to a distinctly Christian community alongside considerable uncertainty or struggle (or even positive doubt) about what Christian *belief* means.

Here, Hawley's conditions of trust might help us – turning finally to the Letter to the Hebrews – understand why we might consider God trustworthy and how we might explain and justify this divine trustworthiness to others. For, first, God is the one who is ultimately *competent*. Our hope rests on God's promise, fulfilled repeatedly in salvation history – through the blessing of children to Abraham (Hebrews 6), in the priesthood of Melchizedek which precedes and foreshadows the new and greatest priest (Hebrews 7), the promise of complete forgiveness of sins through the perfect sacrifice where the ritual sacrifices of the old law do not suffice (Hebrews 10). Hebrews, in other words, tells us a historical story that God always is competent, always does what he promises: culminating in the reminder of God's consistency ('the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow' – Hebrews 13.8, cf. II Corinthians 1.20). God's competence, then, his ability to deliver what he promises, seen in the salvation history related by the scriptures but also witnessed in our own lives as believers, is a key ground for trust.

Secondly, God is the one who makes the ultimate *connection* with us. As Hebrews reminds us, the God who in the past spoke to us through prophets and angels has 'in these last days spoken to us by the Son' (1.1-2, 5) attested by the gifts of the Spirit (2.4). This connection entails commitment to share all human experience, including those aspects – bereavement, suffering, separation from God, death – which God does not in God's own being experience. The cycle of Christian year, from the expectation of Advent to the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, via the Lord's birth, passion, death, and resurrection, demonstrates God's commitment to connect with us, generating the second key condition in which trust becomes more possible.

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<sup>17</sup> See Simon Oliver, 'The Parallel Journey of Faith and Reason: Another Look at Aquinas's *De Veritate*,' in *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology in Honour of Fergus Kerr*, eds. Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby and Tom O'Loughlin (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 136–7.



Adapting Hawley's account in biblical and theological language, then, we can explain why God really is trustworthy, even if we so often let God and each other down; and perhaps if we can get better at telling the story of why God is worth trusting we may make some headway in a culture which is afraid to trust yet at the same time is searching to find something, anything, to trust in.

### *Conclusion*

Twenty years after O'Neill's Reith Lectures, it is hard to share her resistance to the notion of a 'crisis of trust.' The threats to our physical security (from terrorist extremism and from the pandemic), environmental security (from the climate crisis), and our economic security (from the 2008 financial crash and now the effects of a major European war) conspire to make western cultures, perhaps especially Generation Y, feel much less secure. Exacerbated by increasingly shrill and narrow public discourse, fanned by inflammatory language by some western leaders, we are collectively less trusting of political and economic systems which seem unable to guarantee the kind of basic security, still less prosperity, offered to the immediate post-World War Two generations. This general suspicion of historic systems and institutions, which in the case of the Church of England is exacerbated by the way we articulate our internal divisions and our woeful failures of safeguarding, makes believing in God harder for many, too.

But Hawley's analysis offers some hope. To generations searching for depth of relationships and authenticity of experience to lend identity, meaning, and purpose to life, we are called to offer competence and make connections: what, in more familiarly spiritual terms, we might call practising what we preach and witnessing to the world. This inevitably places huge burdens of those of us who are called to be public representative figures of an institution which so often fails to live up to its own standards, and diminishes trust with every failing (of us as individual clerics as well as of the organisation nationally). Yet the twin aspects of trust Hawley identifies can help. In our relations with each other in ministry, how can we better demonstrate competence and commitment to each other, and might this ease some of the discomfort and strain in our relationships, helping us to trust and learn from those who are different from us? In our witness to others, how might we develop greater competence and commitment which might encourage others to find the church and the faith more authentic and appealing? And Hebrews, in Hawley's terms grounds assurance that, for all our failings, our ultimate trust is placed in the competent God who connects with us through his personal presence in his Son who lived among us and his Spirit who dwells in us.

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27th June 2023

**Erik Khoobyarian**

***Putting Love into Practice***

**The Rev. Erik P. Khoobyarian**

16 June 2023

***St. George's House Consultation (3-13 July 2023 – How do you speak about God?)***

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***Putting Love into Practice***

Love consists in sharing  
what one has  
and what one is  
with those one loves.

Love ought to show itself in deeds  
more than in words.

—ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA<sup>i</sup>

**I. PRELUDE**

Jesuit theologian Anthony de Mello writes: “Wisdom occurs when you drop barriers you have erected through your concepts and conditioning. Wisdom is not something acquired; wisdom is not experience; wisdom is not applying yesterday’s illusions to today’s problems.”<sup>ii</sup>

At the outset of the pandemic, America was in the midst of several pandemics beyond the COVID 19 coronavirus. Specifically, racial unrest in the Summer of 2020 brought about significant tension. This was also in the midst of an already-nasty presidential campaign season and a difficult set of years of the Donald Trump presidency. The alignment of all of these things led to a new set of challenges for the church and for the pastor. How do we look at the most difficult challenges of our day through the lens of scripture, prayer, and our faith? In this paper I intend to reflect on an approach to addressing political disagreements that focuses on the individual and their own faith before engaging in discourse with others. In a sense, this is about seeking wisdom in the way that Anthony de Mello describes it above.

**II. A VIGNETTE**

We were spreading mulch during the pandemic. It was one of the first in-person activities to which we invited our members to come to the church property and the turnout was large. We

had truckloads of mulch to spread around the gardens of the church. This was in late summer 2020. In the weeks prior, in the aftermath of several race-related events that brought rise to further exposure of systemic racism in America, we had encouraged our members to engage in some form of self-education regarding race. They were provided the opportunity to read a book from a curated list or even watch a film. The ask was quite simple: give one of these a try. The suburban, white congregation was very mixed politically. There were intellectual liberals, blue collar conservatives, and everywhere in between. So, on this day, I, the pastor, was spreading mulch beside a man I knew to be a very Republican conservative. He had previously told me that white supremacy and systemic racism did not exist. He was resistant to everything I had tried to encourage by way of discussion. In fact, during some of our early discussions he bordered on disruptive. And so we spread mulch. We were alone in a corner of the garden and he says to me: “You know, I learned something this week.” I was curious as to where this was going. “A black man born in this country will have it more difficult than a white man – and I never thought that before.” He went on to tell me that he had watched the documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* about the criminalization of African Americans, particularly since the passage of the thirteenth amendment which ended slavery.

I could hardly believe what I heard from this man, and I could also hardly believe that he actually heeded the invitation and watched the documentary. This man then found himself in a difficult spot because he had held so firm on the political issues that he was unsure how to re-engage the people with whom he had so vociferously argued.

### III. THESIS

After further reflection on this individual’s experience, I concluded that something must be done within the faith community, and individually within the lives of the faithful, to help better prepare them for political discourse through the lens of their faith. For this specific paper, I

will look at how individuals can be guided through the use of Ignatian spiritual practices to connect more deeply with their own faith and with God as they seek to consider their positions on issues which they might otherwise separate from their faith. This paper will not address, however, the next step, that is, how to develop the space for discussions on the difficult issues among those who are engaging in their personal, individual spiritual introspection.

#### **IV. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM**

In churches, many feel as though there should be no discussion about politics or difficult issues. The problem with this, of course, is that it is impossible to live a life of faith without our faith as a part of all of who we are. Interestingly, though, it has in many ways been the church that has furthered the separation or at least been unwilling to show a path where individuals might see their faith as fully-integrated with all aspects of their lives (from the boardroom to the classroom to the playground and the golf course).

If we are to truly engage with God, there's a need for us to find without our faith relationship an authenticity, and in doing so, perhaps we also find the things that distract us from that authenticity. The more we explore the significant distraction from authenticity, the more we realize the complexity of the implications of living a partitioned life.

It is also important to acknowledge that when people separate their faith from their approach to these other aspects of their lives, especially consideration of political issues, they are more inclined to see the political issue from a "winners and losers" point of view. Part of this, then, becomes a desire to win the discussions regardless of whether their true self (the self guided by their faith) would be on that winning side. This is part of why self-reflection and acceptance of our true self has the potential to impact how we approach the issues.

David Bosch writes: "Our inability to accept ourselves as we are reveals itself in many ways."<sup>iii</sup> Bosch describes a scenario that results from this inability to be authentic with others.

“Most of us have become so accustomed to our masks that we are not even aware of them anymore. They fit so comfortably! We slip them on mechanically when we go out to attend to our various responsibilities. More or less automatically we switch to what we have been trained to do, concentrating on the shortcomings and needs of others, be these spiritual or physical. We are the ones who know, who have the answers and the remedies. People look to us to show the way—at least this is what we believe. And then we are surprised when we begin to realize that we have not been able to get through to them. Is it not, perhaps, because of the masks we wear?”<sup>iv</sup> While I would not say that all political discourse, especially among people of faith, is rendered difficult because of the lack of authenticity, the inauthenticity is part of what has led to hiding behind political views which are easier to defend when they become the identity, rather than one’s identity (in Christ) guiding their views. The irony, as Bosch points out, is that when an inauthentic self is presented, the masks that we think are wearing so well prevent us from reaching those with whom we are engaging.

James Smith writes: “The end of worship is bound up with the end of being human. In other words, the point of worship is bound up with the point of creation. The goal of Christian worship is a renewal of the mandate in creation: to be (re)made in God’s image and then sent as his image bearers to and for the world.”<sup>v</sup> We cannot take seriously our call to be God’s image to others if we are not first authentic in who we bring before God and who we present to others. So the challenge, and problem, are multifaceted and both are intimately and inextricably connected to the individual faith life.

## V. INTEGRATED APPROACH

If we are to look at the world through the lens of our faith, the prayer at the top of this paper may hold the key and it comes from a writing entitled *Putting Love into Practice* written by St. Ignatius of Loyola. At its heart, authentic representation of the self, is going to shape the

way that we consider how we will approach political discourse. Ignatius says that love is sharing what one has and what one is with others. In order to do this, we must first begin a process of prayerfully understanding more about who we are. Next, we need to bring all of who we are before God in prayer. Finally, confident in our self-awareness and in our candor before God, we can live out the love that God has created us to be in this world by sharing what we have and what we are with those whom we love.

Accordingly, our approach is broken into the following three interrelated and interdependent categories: our relationship with ourselves, with God, and with others.

## **VI. THE EXAMEN**

My original focus of this paper has evolved somewhat. Initially my focus was on the spiritual practice known as the “examination of consciousness” (also known as the “examen”) as a means to consider how we would see and face political issues through our lens of faith. This approach is how I have personally sought to live my own life and where my faith has been the most nurtured and cultivated. The examen, which comes from the spiritual practices of St. Ignatius, helps us to be more attuned to how God is working in our lives and the ways that we can express gratitude for God’s movement and seek God’s guidance from God for how we will live in, and love, God’s world. Even more importantly, the examen becomes a way of thinking through life – or feeling life – as a conversation with God. It is inviting God into a place where God already dwells – our heart, our mind, our very being – and being intentional about asking ourselves what God might be seeing, saying, or doing in our midst. The evolution here is not an evolution away from the examen as a tool to prepare individuals to consider their own political positions or how they will engage others. I remain convinced that the examen is a helpful ingredient, but now I assert that it is part of the spiritual engagement that would be effective for



the individual coupled with a modified version of another practice called contemplative prayer or imaginative prayer.

## **VII. MODIFIED IMAGINATIVE PRAYER**

Ignatian contemplation, or imaginative prayer, is a prayer practice in which we are invited to place ourselves into a biblical text and engage with the text. We use our imagination to seek to draw more from the experience. One way this process is guided is to use our senses to consider the sights, the smells, the sensations of touch. In each of these, we then ask how those observations might impact our understanding of the text. We then enter into a dialogue with Jesus, whom we encounter in the text. We might allow Jesus to ask us questions or we might ask questions of Jesus. In contemplation, we are engaging with God in a way to seek to better connect with God but also to better understand how we might connect with God's world. Importantly, we are not yet engaging with others. With our masks removed before God, this very personal experience of prayer becomes a connection to God that needs no pretense and no inhibitions. We can be vulnerable and allow ourselves to be impacted, nurtured, held by the God who loves us without fear of winning or losing.

Applying imaginative prayer to how we look at political issues, whether it is the way we will individually engage with someone of a different political position, or how we will facilitate a discussion about a political issue, might involve this process of colloquy with Jesus. The colloquy is an approach to contemplative prayer that involves a conversation with Jesus. We allow ourselves to imagine asking questions of Jesus and also allowing Jesus to ask us questions.

Recently, in preparing for a conversation with someone in my church who I know is a strong supporter of Donald Trump, I used imaginative prayer to consider how Jesus would interact with this individual. In this case, I imagined Jesus and the individual sitting on a porch and talking with one another. I was an unseen observer. I had preconceived notions of where the

conversation would go. I realized that the preconceived notions were actually preconceptions based on how I thought my conversation would go! However, once my imaginative prayer process began, I saw in Jesus a compassion and love that I was not originally feeling toward this man. It should come as no surprise to me that Jesus would have eyes of compassion on this man, but it did. In fact, I even found myself frustrated with Jesus. *Why are you being so kind to him? Shouldn't you be more direct in telling him he's wrong?* I struggled, but then Jesus asked the man, "what do you love?" And the man talked about his family, about nature, about beauty. The man talked about things that mattered to him. Jesus smiled. "I love those things, too." They went back and forth. They laughed and they smiled and at some point Jesus started talking about his love for immigrants, for black people who were suffering under oppressive policies, and also for police and his love for those who were enforcing unjust policies. The man was confused. "Then who don't you love." Jesus smiled.

My time of prayer ended there. In contemplation, I was more prepared to have the conversation with the individual and, more importantly for me in the moment, I experienced a transformation of my approach to my conversation. Our conversation did not track with the conversation I imagined between Jesus and the man. Contemplation is not meant to be a rehearsal. Rather, through contemplation I was able to experience God in a new way that would help me look at my own judgments and biases.

This form of prayer has another strength when encouraging individuals to engage their faith with their positions on a specific issue. The prayer does not need to be limited to the colloquy based on our imagination. In imaginative prayer we are certainly using our imagination, but our imagination is influenced by our study of scripture and our understanding of who God is. This is important because our understanding of God is then shaped by our experiences and scripture as well.

In applying this process to a planned, guided discussion about a specific sensitive political topic (for instance, reproductive rights, immigration, systemic racism), it would be helpful to provide advance prompts to help people prepare for the discussion. While this paper deviated from the examen as the primary prayer practice, it would be helpful for individuals to commit to a daily prayer practice leading up to the discussion, including, for example, the examen. Second, individuals could be provided with some specific scripture to prepare them. It would not necessarily have to be informative of the topic, but rather something to guide them as they prepare. Third, introducing them to imaginative prayer, and specifically the colloquy approach to prayer. Specific questions could be provided, or simply a prompt to sit with Jesus and ask Jesus questions about the topic and allow Jesus to ask them questions. Alternatively, individuals could be invited to imagine a conversation between Jesus and someone with whom they disagree (or with whom they agree). In each of these, the goal is to center ourselves on Jesus, so that our faith guides how we see and engage those around us.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

My prayer is that the words of St. Ignatius' prayer would be a reality for all of us as we engage with others around the issues of the day. Through spiritual development, some of which can happen in a group setting, and some of which needs to happen over time with individuals in their own personal faith development, we might be able to bring God into our conversations in a more meaningful way.

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<sup>i</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Putting Love into Practice," in *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, ed. Michael Harter (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 141.

<sup>ii</sup> Anthony de Mello, *Awareness* (New York: Image, 1990), 160.

<sup>iii</sup> David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 52.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>v</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2016), 88.

**Malcolm Rogers**

***Language and the War in Ukraine***

## LANGUAGE AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Western, and certainly European politicians, usually avoid God language. They speak of the war in Ukraine in moral terms but not religious terms. It is immoral and unjustifiable, an invasion of an independent sovereign nation, and they describe Putin as evil. Piers Morgan described him in the Sun as 'a vile, snivelling, ruthless, heartless, narcissistic bully'.

In an online article ([Ukraine's wartime humor: where it came from. \(slate.com\)](https://www.slate.com/articles/culture/ukraine/2022/04/ukraine-war-time-humor-where-it-came-from.html)) Professor Charles Shaw shows how Ukraine is using the language of savage humour to mock their enemy. He writes,

"Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself." These words, uttered by a Ukrainian serviceman on Snake Island, defined the first day and much of the first phase of Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion. Whether it was the expletives addressed to Russian soldiers on Ukrainian road signs or the memes of farmers towing Russian tanks, a bitter humor [sic] has characterized Ukrainian soldier and civilian responses to the war.'

He goes on to say that the enemy are described as katsaps (a non-flattering term to describe bearded billy goats), as Raschists (a combination of Russian, racist and fascist), or as orcs. One official ministry of defence communique stated that 'A squad of orcs has been repelled'. Ironically, and somewhat tragically, it echoes the savage humour which Russians used against the invading Germans in 1941.

Shaw speaks of how humour can be one of the ways that the victim manages to cope with their oppressor. He argues that it is often used by people who are deeply convinced that their cause is 'right'.

In Russia however, there is very little humour. It is a 'special operation' against Nazis, nationalists and especially NATOists (the three words are similar in Russian: *натовец, националист, нацист*). A Russian friend spoke of how Russia today has regressed to the days of early Brezhnev and the Soviet Union. The difference is that today there is no death penalty (for the time being), (most) people can still leave the country, and – most significant of all - there are no jokes. In Brezhnev's era people joked about the president. It is even said that he would ask his secretary each morning whether there were any new jokes about him. Today nobody jokes about Putin or the current situation.

There is nothing humorous about the conflict, nor about challenging the conflict. It is a non-existent war (hence the language of special military operations) against, in the eyes of the authorities, a non-existent country. Bill Clinton states that in 2011 Putin told him that he did not recognise the 1994 Budapest memorandum which, in return for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons, recognised the borders established with the Ukrainian state. In his 2023 Victory Day speech on 9 May, Putin made it crystal clear that he has never believed that the Donbas or Crimea should have been part of Ukraine. So, it cannot be an 'invasion'. How do you 'invade' what is not your own? If it is to be described as a war, then in Russian eyes, it is a civil war. Eastern Russian-speaking Ukrainians who, prior to February 2022, spoke Russian, identified themselves as Russian and had an emotional allegiance to Moscow, have accused Moscow of fratricide.

Moscow attempts to justify the special military operations by stating that this is a defensive conflict, even an anti-terrorist operation. The narrative goes that Ukraine was about to launch an offensive into the Donbas, and Russia's action was a pre-emptive strike. But the enemy are not really the Ukrainian people but the US and the collective West, who orchestrated the 2014 Maidan 'revolution' and who seek global hegemony. As one taxi driver put it to me, imagine you are sitting peacefully on a bench. Someone comes and sits next to you and starts to shove you to the end. At some point you are either going to have to push back or be pushed off. The claim is that Ukraine was going to join NATO and that nuclear weapons would be (or another version states that they had already been) placed on its territory; meanwhile Russian speakers in Ukraine (who numbered about one third of the population) were not only discriminated against but also subjected to acts of violence by right wing Ukrainian Nazi groups.

It would also be unwise to discount the religious dimension in the conflict.

For the last 300 years the Ukrainian territory has been under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. However, in 1917 a break away Orthodox Church which was part of an independence movement, was established, and became the Ukrainian Orthodox autocephalous church. It was fiercely persecuted and only re-emerged in 1990 after the breakup of the Soviet Union, but it remained very small.

In 1992 a second more significant break away Orthodox Church was established: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kyiv Patriarchate. It was founded by Metropolitan Philaret who broke from Moscow after not being elected Russian Orthodox Patriarch following the death of Patriarch Pimen. It was not recognised by any other Orthodox Church. In 2018, the Ukrainian Orthodox autocephalous church and Philaret's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kyiv Patriarchate merged to form the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (as opposed to the majority Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate), under the Ecumenical Patriarch. Moscow, with some justification, claimed that the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine was a political creation, established to reduce Moscow's soft power in Ukraine, and as a sop to the nationalists. They argue that Poroshenko, then president of Ukraine, backed by the US, persuaded the Ecumenical Patriarch to issue a Tomos, a decree, establishing the breakaway church, but that in fact, the ecumenical Patriarch has no jurisdictional authority to intervene in another Patriarch's territory. They claim that the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is therefore uncanonical, has broken with Holy Tradition and the Body of the Church, and is schismatic and heretical.

This is far more complex than a simple inter-Orthodox dispute over territory. Russian narratives tell of how Kyiv was the mother of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was brought to the Rus lands when Prince Vladimir converted to Orthodoxy in 988. The monastery (Pecherskaya Lavra) in Kyiv is one of the earliest monasteries in Kyivan Rus and is looked to as a mother monastery to all Russian Orthodox monasteries. It is possibly the most sacred place, outside of the Holy Land, for the Russian Orthodox Church. To lose it, is for Russian Orthodox believers, the deepest of tragedies. The same tensions are, incidentally, being felt by the Serbian Orthodox Church, who have many sacred places in Kosovo, and it is one of the reasons that Serbia finds it so difficult to cede Kosovo. Given that modern Russia has identified itself with Russian Orthodoxy – outside the main entrance into the Kremlin

there is a huge statue of Prince Vladimir – the formation of an independent rival Orthodox Church in Ukraine was not only seen as uncanonical and schismatic, but also a direct threat to Russian identity.

Equally, the new Church in Ukraine (the Orthodox Church of Ukraine) is identified to Ukrainian nationalism. In 2014, after Maidan, Metropolitan Philaret backed the Ukrainian authorities' offensive against the Donbas which refused to accept Kyiv's authority, by saying that the local population "must pay for their guilt [in rejecting Kiev's authority] through suffering and blood". (Quoted in an article in FT, Max Seddon, 22 Aug 2019). So it is not surprising that when, on 11 October 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarch declared his intention to establish the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Putin summoning a meeting of his security committee. It may well have been one of the reasons that provoked him to think of commencing 'special military operations' in Ukraine.

Given the religious factor, it is not surprising that religious language is overtly used in Russia to describe the conflict. It is a conflict against the 'satanic forces' of western liberalism and Nazism. It is a war against the forces of darkness. It has not been described yet as a holy war, partly because it is not called a war, and partly because 'sacred' or 'holy' is only currently being used of the Church or of the nation and people of Russia. This is about defending the motherland and it is part of your 'sacred' task. [Having written this, a colleague at the Nunciature in Moscow has told me that they have heard the war itself described as a 'holy war']

On 9<sup>th</sup> April 2023, the Moscow Patriarch spoke clearly about his understanding of the conflict:

"The moment of truth is coming and, probably, it has already come, because everything has fallen into place – the masks have been torn off, the false diplomacy of the détente era has gone. Because the task was to take us with their bare hands, without any war, to fool us, to draw us into their world, to instil their values in us. But our people and our leadership have realized that these values contradict ours, because Holy Russia, thank God, preserves Christian values, which were included in the system of national values.

When it became clear that there was nothing in common, all this led to a military confrontation. And we must remember that *our current struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spirits of malice of the heavens* (see Eph. 6:12). I say this boldly, with full confidence that Russia is on the side of the world/peace [мир].

... Russia is simply striving to preserve its identity, its faith, its system of values. And isn't that what the Holy Prince Alexander Nevsky fought for? Isn't this what our great predecessors fought for at Kulikovo Field?

This is not the first time that Russia has entered into such a confrontation, and it is very important that we are not driven by either the desire for power, especially world power, or the desire for easy prey. We do not associate anything material with this confrontation, and this is evidence of the correctness of our position. We defend our faith, our moral system of values. We don't want parents to be number 1 and number 2. We don't want the distinction between the sexes to be lost. We don't want debauchery to become the norm."

That religiously rooted 'morality' language is echoed by political leaders. President Putin, on 21 February 2023, stated in his Presidential address to the nation,

"Look what they [the West] are doing to their own people. It is all about the destruction of the family, of cultural and national identity, perversion and abuse of children, including paedophilia, all of which are declared normal in their life. They are forcing priests to bless same-sex marriages. Bless their hearts, let them do as they please. Here is what I would like to say in this regard. Adult people can do as they please. We in Russia have always seen it that way and always will: no one is going to intrude into other people's private lives, and we are not going to do it, either.

But here is what I would like to tell them: look at the holy scripture and the main books of other world religions. They say it all, including that family is the union of a man and a woman, but these sacred texts are now being questioned. Reportedly, the Anglican Church is planning, just planning, to explore the idea of a gender-neutral god. What is there to say? Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Millions of people in the West realise that they are being led to a spiritual disaster. Frankly, the elite appear to have gone crazy, and it looks like there is no cure for that. But like I said, these are their problems, while we must protect our children, which we will do. We will protect our children from degradation and degeneration."

Meanwhile in church circles increasingly apocalyptic language has been used, as people speak about the conflict between Russia and the West as pre-Armageddon or even as Armageddon.

Alexander Dugin, whose philosophy included elements of paganism, nationalism and orthodoxy, was probably not as influential with Putin as commentators suggested. However, on 20 August 2022 his daughter Darya was blown up. It is not known if she, or her father, were the intended target. As a result, he has become far more influential. Putin has begun to use his phrase 'Anglo-Saxon world' to describe the West and their allies. We personally have been accused of being 'Anglo-Saxon vampires'! Two months after his daughter's death, he spoke at the XXIV Russian People's World Council, organised by the Patriarchate:

"But there is another dimension to this war - the vertical. It is a war of Heaven against Hell. It is a war of the angelic armies. It is a war of the army of the Archangel Michael against the devil. ... In this respect, it is very important that we are confronted with an idea. The West is an ideology. Liberalism, globalism, secularism, and posthumanism are ideology. This is the realm of ideas, not the realm of matter, bodies and technology. Above all, it is an absolute lie: it is the overturning of the true proportions of the mind, of ideas, of religious foundations. That is why two ideas, two armies (because angels are spirits and minds) are colliding today: angels and demons. The battlefield is just Ukraine. On the one hand, we are Holy Russia, as His Holiness the Patriarch says, and we are confronted by forces of absolute global historical evil. Hence, more and more often we are talking about Armageddon, the end times, and the Apocalypse. This is all taking place before our eyes. We are taking part in the final (maybe the penultimate - no one knows) and very important battle. Without a spiritual, ideological, intellectual dimension, we cannot win."

Both President Putin and Medvedev, former President and currently deputy head of the Security Council, have used his apocalyptic language, declaring that Russia is engaged in a war against satanic forces. Of the two, Putin is the more measured, while at times Medvedev has ranted, regularly threatening the use of nuclear weapons.



Meanwhile the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has given its full support to the 'special military operations'. Those in senior leadership who did not positively support the conflict were summarily dismissed. A prayer has been introduced into the Liturgy praying for the victory of Holy Rus. I have heard of at least two priests who were dismissed for changing the word 'victory' to 'peace'. There are, of course, many priests, who like many in the general population, do not support the operation, but the only instrument of resistance available to them is silence.

With such extreme language on both sides, and especially with the Russian authorities invoking God and the language associated with a sacred cause, it is very hard to know how this war will end. There is always the possibility, especially when power is so concentrated in one person and those immediately around him, that if it appeared that Russia was losing the military battle seriously, and if it looked as if Crimea was about to be re-taken by Ukraine, then the final resort would be to use tactical nuclear weapons. Putin has said, 'What is the point of the world if Russia does not exist?', and it seems that he cannot contemplate Russia without Crimea. Then we could indeed be in an Armageddon game. Most commentators, however, feel that is unlikely. Alternatively, the Russian Federation could begin to disintegrate, probably leading to a coup in Moscow. It would probably not help: a more nationalistic and totalitarian ruler could emerge with nuclear weapons in the hands of local war leaders. Humanly speaking the most likely outcome is a grinding stalemate on the battlefield, with hundreds of thousands dead, eventually leading to negotiations.

How we speak about the conflict is important: the name that we give it: 'military operation', 'war', 'invasion' shapes our understanding of what it is; and the way that we speak about it and the enemy is important. Nobody could condemn Ukrainians for using savage humour to speak of their enemy. But perhaps those more distanced from the conflict might wish to look again at the rootless moral language that we use and consider how helpful it really is.

Given the fact that the Russian leaders partly speak of the conflict using religious language, we need to engage with them by using the same language. Perhaps as Christians we need to rediscover the word 'sacred' or 'holy'; words that have currently dropped out of our non-liturgical religious vocabulary in the West. But if we do rediscover the idea of the sacred, we need to disassociate it from a 'nation' or a 'cause', however worthy we might think it is (even the defence of democracy). Russian leaders, for many historical reasons, have fallen for the deception of exceptionalism, that Russia has been given a messianic purpose. That has been dressed up in 'sacred' language. But exceptionalism is not unknown in the UK and US and other nations, and we need to be very careful before we apply the word 'sacred' to any cause. Our Christian witness is that holiness, sanctity, supremely belongs to God, to Jesus Christ and to the Holy Spirit who forms and shapes God's people, uniting us across nations as His people, the Church, and filling us with the fruits of the Spirit. And it belongs to the cross, where the Son of God did not use force to conquer his enemies and those who hated him, but instead reached out in love to them and gave his life for them.

## A POSTSCRIPT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Georgy Vladimirovich Stepanov (1919-1986) was a Soviet linguist and novelist. He wrote, "The vocabulary of a people bear witness to what a people think about; the grammar bears witness to how they think about it". («Словарь языка свидетельствует, о чём думают люди, а грамматика — как они думают»).

God talk is embedded in the Russian language, both in its vocabulary and grammar.

The word for Sunday is 'resurrection', Saturday is 'sabbath'. For 10 years, from 1929, the Soviets experimented with a five day and then a six day week, naming the days simply as first, second, third etc and trying to abolish the awkward 'resurrection' day.

And whereas in English the 'mind' is at the heart of reason and rationality, in Russian it is the 'soul' that is more important, where soul includes the mind but so much more. In English we speak of peace of mind, or a load off one's mind or a mentally ill person. In Russian you speak of soul peace, of taking a load from the soul and of a soul-hurting person.

Grammatically, in English the 'I' is all important. It is about the acting subject. In Russian grammar, the 'I' is less important. There is an awareness of something that is bigger than me, that is outside of me. Even the simple question, 'What is your name' is usually answered in English by 'My name is N'. In Russian you do not ask 'What is your name', but 'What do they call you' and the answer is, 'They call me N'.

In a similar way, in English we say, 'I managed ..', 'I want ...', 'I was successful'. In Russian you often say those things in the passive dative, 'it happened to me that ...', 'it came to me that ...', 'it was wanting to me to ..' or 'it was successful to me that ...'. There is a force, a set of circumstances, an event which happened to me, drove me, compelled me to do or not to do something. In other words, there is a reality of something that is beyond me, outside me. It can lead to a greater humility, a greater awareness of our need for 'God', but it can also lead to people not taking responsibility for their actions, and resigning themselves to fate.

Of course, we should not draw too large a conclusion from this. In Russian you can also say, 'I love' or 'I desire' or 'I want'. And even if words have a folk spiritual or Greek-Christian origin, that does not mean that people will always notice it. I wonder how many people are aware that 'goodbye' is a contraction of 'God be with ye', just as I wonder how many Russians notice that the word for thank you, 'spasibo' comes from 'spasi Bog' (God saves). Nevertheless, we can say that there is a sense that awareness of God, or at least of something which is bigger and beyond the subject, is built into the vocabulary and grammar of the Russian language, in a way that it is not in our much more contemporary subject-centred English language.

**Nick Rowan**

***An Exploration of How We Can Speak About God While  
Ministering to Those Who Are Close to Death***

# **An Exploration Of How We Can Speak About God While Ministering To Those Who Are Close to Death**

## **Introduction**

My interest in the question, 'How we speak about God while ministering to those who are close to death?', is as a consequence of a recent pastoral experience.

Y was terminally ill with cancer. She was a long term member of one of the churches where I am Rector. For the final weeks of her life she was admitted to our local hospice. During a visit Y shared with me that the thing she was finding most helpful, in what she knew were her last days, were the words of another church member K.

K was an authorised preacher in our parish. She died of cancer at the same hospice in September 2020. When I visited K in very similar circumstance, she shared that she had been encouraged and comforted while reflecting on a Bible reading she had heard in an online service. It was the account of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew Chapter 14. K was particularly struck by Peter's response.

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' <sup>31</sup> Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him<sup>1</sup>*

K shared with me that although she had a strong faith, and had complete confidence that she would be with Jesus after death; she had been afraid of the actual process of dying. Reflecting on this passage, she now felt that at the right time, Jesus would call to her, reach out his hand, and catch her. K asked me to share this thought with our church family, and I did so in a service following K's death.

Over two years later, Y remembered K's words when she found herself in the same position, and they gave her peace and comfort.

In the light of this pastoral encounter I found myself reflecting on my own practice. Did this encounter point to a possibility that being more intention in speaking about God, would be beneficial to those I was ministering to who are close to death? Would speaking more openly about faith, and in more specific terms about the hope we have in and through Jesus, bring peace and comfort to others close to death, as it did Y?

While preparing to write this paper I have taken the opportunity to do some further reading in the area of pastoral theology and models of pastoral care. . I have interviewed two experience priests, who have both served as hospital chaplains. I also reflected on this encounter in informal conversations with other clergy colleagues.

## **My Current Pastoral Practice**

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:29-31

Over Seventeen years of ordained ministry I have visited a number of church members who are close to death. Some like Y or K, had terminal illness. The majority have been elderly church members drawing to the end of their life. In many cases I make a number of visits to their home, care home or hospital bed over weeks or months.

I have also been called a number of times to visit people previously unknown to me who are close to death. These have usually involved one off visits to a local care home.

In my experience, while there is some overlap of practice, these are two distinct categories of pastoral encounter.

#### i. Pastoral Visits to Church Members

My usual approach when visiting church members is to initially spend time talking with the person, and any family members present. Conversations often focus on family, significant news events, the church family and our local community. My instinct is that for many having a friendly, even humorous conversation is of comfort. For this reason, my usual practice is not to bring up faith specifically myself. My starting point is to be in listening mode, but if there is a need for me to take a lead in initiating conversation I will ask more general questions; such as 'how they are feeling today' or 'have they heard about X or Y' or share with them stories from the church or my own family. Often past memories will be shared. This can feel like preparing me to take their funeral (although this is usually unacknowledged).

For most visits I offer to bring Home Communion. I usually prepare for Communion by asking if they would like prayer for anything in particular during the Intercessions. Although a number of things relating to family, friends, or their own condition, will have already been mentioned; my experience is that people will often struggle to think of specific prayer requests when asked.

During the liturgy<sup>2</sup>, I include a Bible Reading from the previous Sunday and a short thought from the Sunday Sermon. For the Prayers of Intercession, I pray extempore prayers drawing in situations or people that we have previously talked about, and anything that they have specifically asked me to pray for. Once we have shared Communion, where appropriate I use the 'Laying on of Hands and Anointing' prayer, from the Common Worship 'Ministry at Time of Death' material<sup>3</sup>. If there is a sense that I might not be able to visit them again, I use the prayer that starts 'N, go forth from this world'<sup>4</sup>.

Occasionally I am called by family members to visit a church member who is unconscious and close to death. I will usually spend some time talking with the family, and then use a selection of bible readings and prayers from the 'Ministry at Time of Death' material<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> using the liturgy from 'The Celebration of Holy Communion at Home or in Hospital' Order One.

<sup>3</sup> Common Worship: Pastoral Services (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) p226

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 229

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, P217-233 including the Laying on of Hands and Anointing, The Lord's Prayer, The Commendation and The Blessing.

ii. Pastoral visits to those previously unknown to me

I am occasionally asked to visit someone close to death who is previously unknown to me. These pastoral encounters feel very different to those with members of our congregations. Often the person is unresponsive. There are usually a number of family members present. It can feel as though I am intruding as it is often clear that not all the family want a minister present.

After asking the family why they have called me, I use a selection of bible readings and prayers from the 'Ministry at Time of Death' material. Often The Lord's Prayer can feel like a breakthrough moment with the family. It seems that these words continue to be recognised and of spiritual significance to those who would not normally attend church. I sometimes stay and talk with the family, but often feel it is more appropriate to withdraw once the prayers are concluded.

### **Conversations with Clergy Colleagues: The role of liturgy and a Suggested Conversation Starter**

Many of the clergy colleagues I spoke with highlighted their belief that the liturgy we use with those who are close to death has a role in 'speaking about God'. Our liturgy affirms the Christian faith, and offers hope and comfort.

This point is underlined by R.A.Horton who writes 'In its liturgical ministry, through words and symbolic actions, the Church's worship ministers God's healing grace to his people, enabling them to affirm and be affirmed by their resurrection faith despite their deep feeling of inadequacy and pain in the face of death'.<sup>6</sup>

There is some diversity in how the Common Worship liturgy 'Ministry at Time of Death' is used by those I spoke with. A minority use the entirety of the material included. Some used a selection of the prayers and readings. Others used a mixture of extempore prayer and formal prayers from the liturgy. Most spoke about adapting to the needs of the person/family they were ministering to, and being sensitive to the context.

R.A.Horton, appears to commend following the structure of the Ministry at the Time of Death Material (Preparation, Reconciliation, Opening Prayer, Word of God, Prayers, Laying on of Hands and Anointing, Holy Communion, Commendation, Blessing). However, some adaptability appears to be accepted: 'The minister will probably base the choice of prayer style on what they perceive to be the feelings and spiritual needs of the person who is dying..... People's spiritual needs do vary and ministers will want to honour them'.<sup>7</sup>

In one conversation I was reminded of Robin Gamble's comment that most people expect a Vicar to talk about God. He encourages use of the question 'where are you with God'. Colleagues shared that It is possible to engage with this conversation starter in most contexts, situations or positions on faith<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Horton, R.A. (2000) Using Common Worship: Funerals - A Practical Guide to the New Services p 17

<sup>7</sup> Horton, R.A. *ibid*, p 73-74

<sup>8</sup> Revd Canon Robin Gamble is the Team Leader of 'Leading Your Church into Growth' (LYCIG)

## **Interviews with Two Former Hospital Chaplains.**

I interviewed two experienced clergy (W and R) who have both served as Hospital Chaplains. Both spoke about the need to be adaptable, and conscious of the needs and background of those they were ministering to (and their families).

W believes going to a hospital bed is the equivalent of visiting someone in their bedroom. Ministers should respect their space and not impose their preferences while ministering to vulnerable people.

Both commented on the length of 'Ministry at Time of Death'. They found that it was rare to use the material in its entirety in one visit. Often there is a need to be succinct when someone is very close to death.

In R's opinion the 'Ministry at Time of Death' liturgy assumed too much. She often uses 'Alternative Pastoral Prayers' instead, as it has 'less God' and uses 'more accessible language'<sup>9</sup>. W uses a mixture of extempore prayers and formal prayers from 'Ministry at Time of Death' or the earlier ASB equivalent.

R shared about a number of conversations with patients who had asked to speak to a Chaplain. These were usually non-church goers who had questions about God. Some had come to believe that there might be a maker as they approached death, others wanted 'insurance' 'just in case'. R said that these conversations often involved direct questions and answers about faith and Christian belief, but were always conducted on the patients own terms.

W saw the chaplain's role as incarnational and representative. She believes that something of God and his love is shared through her presence, conversations and prayers.

Talking about God, or even offering prayer isn't always appropriate. R described an encounter with a patient who had asked for a conversation with a chaplain. This person didn't have faith, and didn't want to talk about faith; they just wanted someone to talk to. When R offered to pray at the conclusion of their conversation, the response of the patient was to say 'now you have spoilt it'.

## **Reading on Pastoral Care**

In my reading I found there was some debate as to who pastoral care should be offered to (just church members or anyone who we encounter). This distinction seemed to speak into the difference I noted between pastoral encounters with church members, and those with people I had never met before.

Alistair Campbell contrasts the approaches of Eduard Thurneysen and Seaward Hiltner<sup>10</sup>.

Thurneysen states that 'pastoral care occurs within the realm of the church.... it presupposes membership in the body of Christ, or has this membership as its purpose'.<sup>11</sup> For Thurneysen Pastoral Care is 'church centred' and 'its ultimate definition derives from

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<sup>9</sup> Ward, T (2012) *Alternative Pastoral Prayers: Liturgies and Blessings for Health and Healing, Beginnings and Endings*

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, A. 'The Nature of Practical Theology' from Woodward, J. and Pattison, S (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* p 80-83

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, A *ibid*, p80

a theology of the Word of God..... The message to be proclaimed is that of the forgiveness which is at the heart of the Gospel'<sup>12</sup>.

Hiltner has a more open approach. There is not the same assumption of the need of those receiving pastoral care to be members of a church, or the need for pastoral care to be defined by biblical tradition. Instead, he is 'very concerned to earth theology in human sciences and to allow the insights of contemporary experience in general, and of the counselling situation in particular, to revitalise the church's understanding of its task'.<sup>13</sup>

In some ways I am attracted to the simplicity of Thurneysen's approach. I do agree, though with Campbell's criticism that it leads to an 'undesirable narrowing down of the understanding of the church'; and also that it 'rules out the possibility that God may be at work outside the church as well as within it'.<sup>14</sup>

Campbell's observation that Hiltner's theology 'seems to have no place for the category of revelation', seems relevant when considering my question; how we should talk about God?.<sup>15</sup>

McCarthy in her article 'Spirituality in a Post-Modern Era'<sup>16</sup> appears to recognise this need for revelation. She asserts that people from all backgrounds are 'searching for depth, meaning and direction - for a reality and purpose greater than themselves, which is worthy of their commitment and their life energy'<sup>17</sup>. She reminds readers that this 'restlessness' is not new, quoting Augustine of Hippo as saying 'Our hearts are restless'. I found myself questioning the shortness of the quote, which removes the object and fulfilment of this searching restlessness. A fuller quote reveals that Augustine is addressing God; 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'.<sup>18</sup>

Farley in his article 'Interpreting Situations' bemoans the 'gulf between churchly and praxis approaches' of what he calls practical theology. One approach 'finds a way to focus theology on church... but praxis is not in view'. The other focuses 'theology on praxis but a theology of church situationality and ministry seems to be absent'<sup>19</sup>. The middle way that Farley appears to be pointing to is to theologically reflect directly on situations in a way that values both praxis and a traditional Christian understanding of pastoral care.

Chris Schlauch in his article 'Suffering, Healing and Reconstructing Experience'<sup>20</sup> makes a connection between healing and the formation of faith. Those who receive pastoral care can experience a change in nature which is experienced as changes in seeing, hearing

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<sup>12</sup> Campbell, A. *ibid*, p80

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, A. *ibid*, p81-82

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, A. *ibid*, p81

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, A. *ibid*, p82

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, M. 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era' from Woodward, J. and Pattison, S (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* p192-206

<sup>17</sup> McCarthy, M. *ibid* p194

<sup>18</sup> St Augustine, *The Confessions*

<sup>19</sup> Farley, E. *Interpreting Situations* from Woodward, J. and Pattison, S (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* p 124

<sup>20</sup> Schlauch, C. *Sketching the Contours of a Pastoral Perspective: Suffering, Healing, and Reconstructing Experience* from Woodward, J. and Pattison, S (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* p207-222



and understanding. This is a gradual process. Therefore this model must assume ongoing contact. However, with a more open understanding of who pastoral care is for, this could be someone in a church congregation or a known person in the local community. Schlauch sees 'formation in faith -that is healing - potentially unfolds according to movement on a trajectory marked by degrees of blindness and sight, deafness and hearing, incomprehension and understanding.'<sup>21</sup> He discerns movement through a trajectory of faith; from agnostic to searcher; from searcher to believe; or a believer to a 'religious virtuoso'. Schlauch talks about the need for 'reconstructing experiencing', seeing this as a twofold task: Introducing the person more fully and deeply to her or himself while (re-)Introducing her or him to the faith tradition.<sup>22</sup>

Brynolf Lyon's article 'Relevance of Congregation Studies'<sup>23</sup> argues for the significance of the dynamic of care within congregations. Lyon points out that Congregational Studies 'enable us to see that the care of the church is constituted not only by the counselling and visitation of the pastor, but also by the manner and content of its hymn singing, its preaching, its Bible study, its prayer, its outreach, its fellowship.....'<sup>24</sup> Lyon also recognises that individual congregations will have their own convictions, understandings and history which will have an impact on pastoral care.

This resonates with the Pastoral encounter I shared at the beginning of this paper. Pastoral Care was received from the history of another church member, reflecting on scripture, that was shared in a sermon.

Robert Dykstra's book *Images of Pastoral Care*<sup>25</sup> shares a number of different metaphors to explore the practice of pastoral care. These include the Solicitous Shepherd<sup>26</sup>, The Wounded Healer<sup>27</sup>, the Circus Clown<sup>28</sup>, and the Wise Fool<sup>29</sup>.

Dykstra reflects on the role of Christian Ministers suggesting 'our identity is somehow found in not usually knowing who we are, in not always knowing what we are doing'.<sup>30</sup> The reason he gives for this; 'since every person and every problematic situation is different, it stands to reason that in pastoral theology and ministry... one never finally arrives at some fixed body of knowledge for understanding or action.'<sup>31</sup>

Dykstra advocates drawing on a number of diverse metaphors and images of pastoral care, and to have a tolerance for the untidy, and a keen eye for the individual, the singular, the unprecedented<sup>32</sup>. I recognise this approach in the hospital chaplains that I spoke with.

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<sup>21</sup> Schlauch, C *ibid*, p212

<sup>22</sup> Schlauch, C. *ibid*, p213

<sup>23</sup> Lyon, B. 'What is the Relevance of Congregational Studies for Pastoral Theology' from Woodward, J. and Pattison, S (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* p257-271

<sup>24</sup> Lyon, B. *ibid*, p 262

<sup>25</sup> Dykstra, R.C. (2005) *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings*

<sup>26</sup> a classic image of the pastor as shepherd drawing on the parable of the lost sheep

<sup>27</sup> Henri Nouwen's suggestion that even as Jesus' broken body became a source of consolation and healing, so to a minister's innermost wounds may become means by which others find comfort and hope

<sup>28</sup> Faber's argument that a minister in a hospital functions much as a clown does in the modern circus.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell sees the fool of folklore's inherent simplicity, loyalty and capacity for prophecy as qualities essential to contemporary pastoral care.

<sup>30</sup> Dykstra, R.C. *ibid*, p6

<sup>31</sup> Dykstra, R.C. *ibid* p8

<sup>32</sup> Dykstra comes to this conclusion after reflection on a pastoral encounter of his own with a lady who had made suicide attempts. 'My affinity for Henri Nouwen's image of the wounded healer with its rich emphasis on empathy and depth in pastoral care, seemed to do more harm than good. The more empathic I tried to be with her, the more her despair seemed to increase. At such moments I found welcome respite and practical

## Conclusion

My conversations, interviews and reading have helped me to understand why I wanted to explore the question 'how we can speak about God?', I recognise that those I minister to, both inside and outside the church, are often searching for hope and comfort. I believe that Augustine's words affirming God as the goal of human searching, remain true today; 'Our heart is restless until it rests in you'.

Schlauch's discussion on the relationship between healing and formation of faith has underlined for me that those in different places on a faith journey, have different questions and different needs. This is borne out in the interviews I had with two former hospital chaplains, who practiced in different ways with different people. One key factor in how they ministered was the patient's openness to, and understanding of, the Christian faith.

Dykstra's comments about ministers 'not always knowing what they are doing' gives me confidence that it is not unusual to be questioning my practice after so long in ordained ministry. I intend to further consider his encouragement to utilise a number of the different models shared in his book, according to the needs and situation of the person we are ministering to. I believe I can naturally build this into my own practice of conversation and prayer (extempore and formal) when visiting those who are close to death.

I will also consider using Robin Gamble's suggested conversation starter 'where are you with God' as a way of initiating conversation about God, which starts at the other persons point of need and understanding.

Lyon's finding on the impact of the whole congregation and its worship has opened new thinking for me. This seems to speak directly into the pastoral encounter I shared in the introduction. Following COVID, our worship is now more accessible to those who are close to death, as we now livestream our services. I believe it could be beneficial to have this in mind when planning worship and preparing sermons. I intend to explore sensitive ways to speak more openly in our worship (and house groups?) about death, God's promise of his presence with us, and our future hope in and through Jesus.

**Nick Watson**

***Focal, vocal and local***

***Can we save the parish without saving the Vicar?***

# Focal, vocal and local

## Can we save the parish without saving the Vicar?

*The Rev'd Nick Watson*

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It is unfortunate that major changes to complex societal structures tend to be undertaken only when the need for change has become urgent. It too often follows that reforms which are intended to make a structure more effective and efficient in delivering its core work are compromised by having to deliver a pressing but (at least in principle) secondary result of saving money. Examples often cited include the NHS reforms of the early 2010s. These came from a long-nurtured and developed plan of Jeremy Hunt when in opposition, which were implemented at the same time that austerity was enforced by the coalition government. Perhaps even more acutely, the introduction of Universal Credit had a declared aim of streamlining an overly-complex benefits system which had developed piecemeal over decades, so that those in need could be sure of receiving all the benefits to which they were entitled, with less of a costly administrative overhead. In practice, an under-resourced transition was compounded with a desire to save money by reducing overall benefits, so that the system has been widely experienced as punitive and inefficient. Costs escalated, deadlines kept being missed and cases of extreme hardship have been highlighted within a wider sense of dissatisfaction among those receiving benefit. In both cases, it is arguable that the stated original aims have not been fully met, without commensurate savings to fulfil the demands of efficiency.

The Church of England might be seen to find itself in a parallel situation. A long decline in active membership (at least as a proportion of the population) and a recognition that structures of diocesan and parochial ministry based on an established-church, 'Christendom' model are no longer fit for purpose has led to a desire for a 'mixed economy' of models of mission and ministry, and for a reform of how local ministry is resourced and supported. Unfortunately a missionally-driven desire to reform structures and practices to be more effective is being explored and implemented at a time when the church is increasingly pressured financially and in its ability to deploy stipendiary clergy as was once expected. The primary aim of renewing our mission and ministry to be fitted to our context is having to be delivered alongside planning for sustainable congregational and church life with fewer stipendiary clergy.

Until recently, my experience was that the constraint on the number of parochial posts which could be filled was the number of available clergy, at least in forward planning (we are currently part-way through a 'bubble' of retirements, which is reducing the available number of clergy despite high levels of ordinations). My tack in explaining to deanery parishes why we needed to plan for church closures and multi-parish benefices was to explain that under existing staffing levels 'there aren't enough vicars to go round, and if there *were* enough, we couldn't afford to pay them.' This situation has changed, in that (at least in my own diocese) the primary constraint is now financial. There isn't enough money in diocesan coffers to keep paying the clergy we have, let alone to recruit more; so staffing levels at diocesan or deanery level have to be set at a level which is sustainable – which is to say, affordable.

Given these two potentially competing aims in reforming how we resource local churches, where one could be said to be aspirational and one constraining, various strands of restructuring and reform are being attempted, and they in turn can seem to take us in different directions.

## *'From Anecdote to Evidence'*

In the late 1990s, Durham Diocese and Canon Robert Warren undertook a review of those parish churches which had shown numerical growth over five years. The characteristics which emerged, and which were developed in other studies, led to the *Growing Healthy Churches* series of books and material. This work (with which I was involved at the time) was indicative and instructive, but not statistically rigorous in the selection of parishes and other settings studied.

Other strands in mission thinking and resourcing were of course developing. There was an apparent assumption in some of the thinking behind 'Mission-shaped church'<sup>1</sup> and related material that geographical communities were becoming less significant, and that the society and so the church of the future would relate more to 'networks' than to places. This was not my experience in northern and midlands working-class communities, though it was doubtless true in some parts of society.

In 2010, the Church of England's *Spending Plans Task Group* commissioned research on church growth and decline, as a step 'towards evidence-based decision making in the Church of England'. Research was undertaken over 18 months from 2011-2013, and the findings were reported in an accessible form as 'From Anecdote to Evidence' (2014), as well as in more detailed reports available at [www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk). Ten reasons for the research were cited;

1. *To find practical evidence to support mission*
2. *To understand better the identity and context of the Church of England in the 21st Century*
3. *To bring clarity to issues around church growth*
4. *To identify what is effective and why*
5. *To identify what is not effective and why*
6. *To support and share good practice*
7. *Because an understanding of how to effectively share the Good News of the Kingdom is important*
8. *Because church attendance is declining in the Church of England*
9. *To inform good stewardship and ensure that funds are spent effectively*
10. *To identify areas where further research is needed*<sup>2</sup>

The authors of the public-facing report acknowledge that healthy growth is multi-faceted – growth in numbers without linked growth in depth of discipleship and in outworking of discipleship for the growth of the Kingdom of God is not a healthy aspiration.

The research was carried out by three groups. Two worked on data analysis (with the aim of making better use of the data already collected by the church) and on church profiling, in a more robust version of the 'Healthy Churches' work cited above. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the third strand, in which,

*Different researchers looked at:*

- a. *Growth amongst cathedrals and compared cathedral growth with other city centre or greater churches*
- b. *The impact of church planting/fresh expressions of Church on growth*
- c. *The effect of Team Ministry and Grouped Benefice structures*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CHP, 2004

<sup>2</sup> *From Anecdote to Evidence* (CHP 2014) p.5

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.6

The evidence gathered on Fresh Expressions of church – contextually-shaped communities of worship and faith recognised by the wider church and often emerging among a particular group – was positive, but at this stage the movement was still quite small. The evidence-base on church planting was even smaller (27 plants, following a range of very different models) but was examined in some depth. The conclusion was that church planting should be an important part of the response and mission planning of the Church of England.

The last strand examined the effects of the prevailing response to reducing numbers of congregations and of clergy – that of the growth of multi-church ministries, whether in teams, in united benefices or multi-parish benefices – solutions the balance of which varies between dioceses, and which rely on varying levels of integration of parochial structure, hence varying levels of independence for each church. Some team ministries do still work with as many incumbent-level priests as there are churches, but this was not the focus of the research, and so the evidence relates to situations where an incumbent is responsible for more than one church, under any governance structure. In 2011 the report states that 71% of the Church of England’s parishes were in multi-parish teams or benefices, (‘amalgamations’ in the language of the report) in comparison to 1960 when the comparable figure was 17%.<sup>4</sup> The exception had already become the norm – and this trend has continued. Broadly speaking, multi-parish benefices used to be a characteristic primarily of rural contexts, but they are now a familiar part of the urban church landscape too.

A key finding of the research is that,

*...single church units under one leader are more likely to grow than when churches are grouped together. Analysing data across a range of congregation size categories shows that amalgamations of churches are more likely to decline. Moreover, the larger the number of churches in the amalgamation the more likely they are to decline. This is exacerbated when amalgamations have more churches.*

*For Team Ministries there is no evidence that there is more numerical growth than for amalgamations. Team ministries are less likely to grow than non-teams and perform markedly worse than churches with their own incumbent.*<sup>5</sup>

Another finding was perhaps surprising – between 2006-2011, growth was most likely to take place in churches of over 300 members or in those with fewer than 30 – with decline most marked in churches starting with 50-300 members. The negative growth effects of amalgamation apply across small and medium churches (this tends not to be an issue in larger congregations).

This seems to pose an intractable problem – smaller churches can grow more easily, but (with limited strategic exceptions) cannot be allocated a dedicated stipendiary priest, despite evidence that sharing a leader impedes growth.<sup>6</sup>

### ‘Resourcing the Future’

In 2016, responding to the research and seeking to use the church’s central resources most effectively, General Synod accepted the recommendations of the *Resourcing the Future Task Force*, that inherited ways of distributing central funds were not effective in addressing decline, and that in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.28

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.27

<sup>6</sup> There is a risk that correlation may be mistaken for causation here – but that is recognised in the full report.

future all distribution to dioceses should be targeted to support mission and growth.<sup>7</sup> Half of the total fund was to be allocated to support ministry in parishes with the highest levels of deprivation (Lower Income Community, or LInC funding). The higher-profile element of the fund was allocated as the Strategic Development Fund, or SDF, giving often substantial grants to support new models of church. While the projects supported since have been varied, the popular perception is of the funding of new charismatic evangelical churches or the revitalisation of 'failing' churches by the introduction of a well-funded team from 'outside' and sometimes with limited engagement with local parishes. This is undoubtedly a caricature, but it is a widespread perception among churches (and clergy) who are struggling with their own resources and facing amalgamation with other parishes. My experience is that even those parishes who are heavily supported through LInC funding may not be aware of that fact, and so feel 'neglected' in comparison with a nearby SDF-funded plant. LInC funding spreads money quietly, often to support existing patterns of ministry – SDF tends to concentrate funds very visibly in something 'new' and with high levels of profile, resourcing and affirmation from diocesan media and structures.

### 'Us' and 'Them'

This perception, of reducing resources to traditional church set against generous funding for a select few projects, has contributed to a growing sense among some that not only the resourcing but the very nature of the Church of England – as a geographically-ordered, reformed catholic church for the nation, present in every community for all who turn to it – is being disregarded and is under threat. For some, that was exacerbated by the response of bishops and archbishops to the Covid-19 pandemic. Local churches came to the fore in finding new ways to continue worship and pastoral care during lockdown, and often in taking key missional roles in care to those around them. Meanwhile there was in some places a perception that senior clergy were remote, and that initial restrictions were imposed without reference to local knowledge and priorities.

The most vocal fruit of this frustration was the rise of the 'Save the Parish' movement. Its most prominent voices have been associated with churches not themselves likely to face amalgamations or loss of clergy and parsonage; but it has articulated a widespread frustration and sense that the balance is wrong, and that something essential to the Church of England is in danger of being diminished to the point of being lost, eclipsed by the preferential treatment of innovation which may or may not produce 'results' of growth which some members of parish churches are not, in any case, convinced are the right results for which to aim.

It could, of course, be pointed out that the existing system has had a long time to prove itself, and over the last 70 years or more has not led us to an obvious growth of the Kingdom of God; rather, we have a system which is in danger of collapsing under its own weight, and little evidence to suggest that allocating more resources to preserve the system will lead to the kind of turnaround that is needed to make it sustainable.

### Another strand – Strategic Transformation Fund

In July 2019, a third strand of strategic funding from the centre was announced, funding efforts to restructure ministry within dioceses. This comes from recognition that short-term investment is needed to resource long-term savings and sustainability.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See 'Use central funds to subsidise growth, not decline, says task group' in *Church Times*, 16 January 2015, and 'Funding decision sharpens debate about the vision' in *Church Times*, 21 October 2016

<sup>8</sup> See 'Focal'. 'Oversight'. The C of E of the future' in *Church Times* 10 September 2021

Most of this funding has gone to three urban dioceses; Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester. All three have undertaken major restructuring, and introduced transformation-leading roles (In Birmingham and Manchester, a reduction in the number of deaneries, with full-time Area Deans<sup>9</sup>; in Sheffield, with a new role of Associate Archdeacon Mission Enabler). To varying degrees, these projects are seeking to move the focus of mission and ministry from the individual parish and church to wider units. Broadly speaking, Birmingham is structurally the most conservative, Sheffield the most radical. Crucially all three have undertaken programmes of restructuring which have been criticised locally as 'top down', but this has enabled rapid structural change, and the allocation of resources to support the process over a limited period. What remains as yet unproven is how the 'bottom up' life and mission of the church will respond by enlivening the structure now in place.

### Focal Ministry – squaring the circle?

Returning to the observation that growth is more likely in situations where one leader is responsible for one church, there is a need to provide for local leadership, which will not always be clerical, and for clarity on how that leadership will relate to clergy oversight.

The three dioceses receiving STF funding are working towards this situation, with Sheffield and Manchester using the terminology of 'Focal leadership' for their local leaders.

So far as I am aware, this term first began to be used in the early 2000s, when Bishop Graham Dow of Carlisle, chair of the Central Readers' Council, developed a potential model for Reader ministry based on Biblical exegesis and the needs of his highly rural diocese with many multi-church benefices. His key observation was that such information as we have about the ministry of the New Testament church shows a variety of peripatetic ministries (apostle, prophet, etc.) but that the pastoral role was one that was necessarily settled and rooted in a specific community. He advocated that each church community should have a focal leader, ideally resident but at the very least a consistent minister in a given church and known locally within and outside the congregation as the church's leader. This focal leader would work as part of a team with a stipendiary incumbent who would provide oversight and strategic leadership as well as sacramental ministry, typically across several parishes.

In practice this model, arising from a rural context with large amalgamations the norm, has developed in many places since, but it has not generally been set out as part of a formal structure for ministry.

In 2018 Bob Jackson published *Leading One Church at a Time*<sup>10</sup>. Responding to the findings of the 2014 church growth research, he calls for a rigorous model of single-church, single-minister leadership, with stipendiary clergy deployed either in strategic oversight across larger areas or freed to concentrate on 'leading the growth of one or two key churches'.

In my own setting (south Manchester) Jackson's material has been distributed as a key resource, but the diocesan strategy does not envisage the full independence of churches with focal leaders to the same extent. Instead, the aim is for local churches to work together in Mission communities of 4-10 parishes with a Mission Community Leader (who is also an incumbent in the team) and a team of focal leaders for each church or other worshipping and ministering community (chaplaincies, church plants, fresh expressions, perhaps church schools<sup>11</sup>) working to a shared vision for outreach and

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<sup>9</sup> Of which I am one, in Manchester diocese

<sup>10</sup> Grove leadership series L34

<sup>11</sup> In some larger or more complex churches, particularly those with congregations serving particular language-based groups, there will be more than one focal leader.



sharing ministry as needed for the health of each church and the best work in mission outwards. Some of those focal leaders will be incumbents, others curates (stipendiary or otherwise), Readers or other authorised lay ministers 'or any suitable lay person'.

An initial launch of this aspect of the Manchester programme exposed the reality that the role of focal minister was not yet adequately defined. Work since has tried to recognise that the core of this role is about three key factors – alongside which many people will be exercising other roles and ministries:

- Within a team, to be a recognised leader and point of contact for the congregation and beyond;
- To be consistently present and part of a particular congregation, week by week, in touch with its character as well as with its people;
- To represent and speak for that particular congregation within the wider team, and to represent and speak for the wider team within the congregation; the intent being to avoid either assimilation or isolation of the congregation as part of a larger whole.

This initiative is still in its infancy in Manchester – response so far has been patchy. It will take some years to establish beyond a few early-adopting parishes and teams.

### Save the parish? Or save the vicar?

Returning to the 'Save the Parish' movement, it is easy for those who advocate reform of structures to caricature the concerns raised just as much as for others to caricature SDF-funded plants as clones of Holy Trinity Brompton. The movement can be seen to be driven by defensiveness of a golden age of parish ministry, perhaps more imagined than real; as having no proposals for how the existing model of ministry can be made sustainable; as driven by an antipathy to change rather than by a vision of the future.

But the reality is that the movement expresses a real and valid concern that the local life of the parish church might be lost – through closure or through operation as a 'branch' of a larger organisation rather than as a church community with its own identity.

Focal leadership of individual churches as part of a wider network seems to offer a possible way forward to safeguard the parish church as a key element of our mission and ministry. This, though, will require the kind of resourcing in the short term from which the three STF-funded dioceses are now benefitting. Apart from structural changes, we will need additional resources to support some clergy into more 'oversight' roles, and other clergy and lay leaders into a locally-focussed ministry, dedicated to a single community.

The resulting church will not look the same as we have been used to, and the role of the stipendiary clergy in particular will look quite different. But it will be local, parochial (hopefully in the best sense) and rooted in its community.

We may be able to save the parish but not, at the same time, to save the vicar – if by that we mean to preserve traditional models of clerical ministry across the country.

### From here to there

I am aware that I have sketched out the situation and not proposed a clear resolution. I hope to discuss with colleagues their perceptions of this change, and insights into how wider oversight can best resource and protect the local church.

