

A Future that's Bigger than the Past: Renewal and Reform in the Church of England

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This document seeks to identify the unique character of the Church of England and how it may fulfil its responsibilities and take its opportunities in order to flourish in the 21st century.

Placing Ourselves in a Narrative

First Samuel chapter 17 is a defining moment in perceiving Israel's identity. Goliath epitomises the nations. He's ten foot tall and has so much armour he has to get someone to carry his shield for him. Saul is also tall, and has plenty of armour of his own. But Saul isn't interested. So David steps forth from obscurity. Using wit and wisdom rather than hustle and muscle, David defeats Goliath. The Philistines flee and the Israelite army is rejuvenated. It's a parable of how Israel dwells amidst the nations.

We like this story because it seems to say, stand up for the little guy. We like that idea, sportingly, morally, corporately. We somehow all like to see ourselves as David, with the odds stacked up against us. So why then do we spend so much time trying so hard to be Goliath? We clad our car and our house and our country to look like Goliath, with so many safety and security features we can hardly move around in them.

Why is the Church of England feeling such a sense of panic right now? Because it's facing numerical decline. Why is that a problem? After all, Christianity isn't any less true just because it's less widely believed. The reason it's a problem is that the church has assumed for as long as anyone can remember that it's supposed to be Goliath. It's supposed to be huge, it's supposed to be important, it's supposed to be a player on the national stage, it's supposed to be the acknowledged voice of the people. All the things Goliath was. All the things David wasn't.

There's a painful irony about what becomes of David after he puts down the slingshot. If only David had stuck with the five smooth stones, history might have turned out a little differently. Here he is, full of confidence, full of faith, full of hope, telling Saul he doesn't need the heavy armour and telling Goliath he doesn't need mighty power and bombastic big talk. David defeated Goliath. The people swung behind David. David became king. And gradually the terrible irony began to kick in. David became Goliath. David became the inflated, bullying, beached whale he had begun his career by destroying. Just like Elvis Presley, for whom fame and fortune turned gyrating hips into bloated cheeks. David became Goliath. What a tragedy that was.

But the poignancy doesn't end there. When we read story of David and Goliath, we don't just see the contrast with David's later life. We also think of the one whom the gospels often call the Son of David. When we think of Jesus as Son of David, are we thinking of the David who *became* Goliath? Or are we thinking of the David who *overcame* Goliath? The tragic irony is the same as before. We know that in walking the way of the cross, Jesus was the disarmed young David who walked slowly and calmly without armour to face the Goliath of empire and death. But we constantly fall back into celebrating Jesus as if he were the kingly David of power politics and conquest – the David who became Goliath.

We say we like David but we choose Goliath. David started off with five smooth stones and a sling and ended up becoming Goliath. But Jesus didn't. We may turn Jesus into Goliath in our imaginations, in our politics, in our rhetoric – even sometimes in our worship. But Jesus never did. And Jesus never does.

The task for the Church of England in the twenty-first century is not to become Goliath again. It's to become David – the David who had five smooth stones – but knew exactly how to use them; the

David people instantly called to mind when they encountered the disarmed, disarming figure of Jesus.

Who We Are

The church is a body of people who believe two things

- That their past – the guilt of the mistakes and missteps they have made, and the bitterness and resentment of the wrongs they have received – has been redeemed by the forgiveness of sins; and
- That their future – the unknown of what lies ahead, both before and most especially beyond the grave – has been transformed through the gift of everlasting life. Both of these have been brought about through the ministry of Jesus.

Thus the church discovers the freedom of living in the present, delivered from the prison of the past and the fear of the future. Salvation means being made able to live in the present tense – being with God, with oneself, with one another, and with the renewed creation, now and forever. This is the life to which the church invites all God’s children, thus creating and renewing communities of humility and hope:

- Humility that recognises Christians are not ‘better’ than others – that they have often been perpetrators of or complicit in the sins and ills of history – and have much to learn from the world beyond the church; and
- Hope that nonetheless has confidence in the completeness and ultimate fulfilment of Christ’s ministry and in the work of the Holy Spirit transforming individuals, neighbourhoods and nations.

Where We’re Going

The church’s aspirations can be broadly grouped under four headings.

1. New creation (2 Cor 5:17). Being ‘in Christ’ is like a new creation – an experience of resurrection brought about by the Holy Spirit. The church longs for all to know this inner and outer transformation.
2. Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). Thriving communities of humility and hope that worship, serve, bear one another’s burdens, and grow, witnessing to what the Spirit can do.
3. Salt and light (Mt 5: 13-16). The service and witness of Christians in every neighbourhood and every walk of life, seeking to be a reconciling presence and a blessing to friend and stranger.
4. Herald of the kingdom (Mk 1: 14-15). In all of the above to anticipate God’s coming reign, model just relationships, and collaborate with everyone who seeks a world of peace and flourishing.

What’s Preventing Us Getting There

This area is without question a matter of perception and debate. We may identify three kinds of challenges: external pressures, public-facing failures, and internal obstacles.

- i. External pressures. Despite the more plural culture, the rise of minority faith traditions, the increase in leisure and lifestyle alternatives, and elements of vocal humanist/scientific hostility, there’s little inherently unpropitious for the church in its ministry and mission in this century. There are only, as ever, sin, ignorance, and the mysteries of God’s providence.

- ii. Public-facing failures. When people reject Christianity, it is perhaps less through arriving at a philosophical conviction of the implausibility of its truth-claims, than through direct experience of its influence as a curse, rather than as a blessing. Among church attitudes and behaviours that simply need to change, include:
 - a. Significant, if not pervasive, profound failures in conduct. The failures, mostly, though not entirely, in previous generations, in regard to safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, have done incalculable harm to individuals and to the church's reputation that will take a long time, a humble heart, and active steps to recover. But they are only the contemporary manifestation of a historic temptation to use power for pernicious purposes and a constant inclination to uphold the powerful rather than heed the powerless.
 - b. A perceived misidentification of key issues, such that the church has given reason to be seen as judgemental and arrogant, particularly by a younger generation for whom a live-and-let-live tolerance, particularly in regard to sexual expression, has become a basic tenet of citizenship. So many people give up on the church (although not always on God) because it seems so narrow-minded in relation to pressing issues in their own lives, or the lives of those close to them.
 - c. Exclusionary attitudes that have malformed ministry and mission, in relation to class, race, and gender, and rejected those who were in many cases willing or eager to be drawn into the company – for example immigrants from the Caribbean in the fifties and sixties.
- iii. Internal obstacles. These are of four kinds, related to one another, but not identical:
 - a. Historic commitments and practices. Every organisation, particularly those that are venerable, spends time, energy and resources on unsustainable patterns of activity or buildings that no longer suit their purpose. Addressing this isn't easy, because each building or practice has advocates that are invested in its retention or see its demise as a symbol of a deeper loss.
 - b. Procedural blocks. The church is seldom nimble: the legal and cultural constraints and the institutional inertias that impede necessary change are extensive.
 - c. Capacity building. There is an urgent need to envision, develop and implement strategies for a more hopeful future. In some places the institutional will is not there; in other places the leadership capacity is not there.
 - d. Lack of consensus. The challenge of leadership in the Church of England is that almost every key concept – salvation, church, faith, mission – is disputed, and almost every notion of purpose – conversion, worship, holiness, prophecy, prayer, eternal life – is subject to multiple interpretations. This is true of many organisations and institutions; but it is particularly so of the church, and, given the cosmic context and eternal horizon of the church's activities, those diverging interpretations are always liable to appear as fundamental, even irreconcilable, differences.

The factors above are among those that have led to symptoms of decline. Those attending worship are fewer in number and older; disproportionate numbers of clergy are due to retire over the next ten years; while fewer parishes are able to sustain the cost of training, paying, and ensuring healthy retirement provision for their clergy.

What We Need to Do

As at any kairos moment, there are three things we need to address: what is good, and needs keeping and fostering; what is no longer helpful (and in some cases never was); and what we don't currently have, or have regard for, but we need.

- i. Build on assets. Thomas Aquinas maintains that grace perfects nature; it doesn't destroy it. God's pattern in scripture, from the Flood onwards, is to find ways to redeem creation, not to look for wholesale change. We understand heaven as the redemption of our bodies, not their replacement. Renewal is thus first and foremost about building on assets.

This is crucial for three further reasons:

- it embodies the conviction that God gives us everything we need
- it affirms those in place that they have genuinely been called to good work
- it ensures that the institution remains recognisable to insider and outsider alike.

When confidence is low and good outcomes are hard to perceive, voices will always say 'We should be like industry... do it like the Americans... use the Alexander technique.' But the church isn't looking for a solution to a problem – one which can be imported, adapted, implanted, adopted; it's looking to grow more true to its calling in the face of challenges – and thus enter a mystery. Importing a solution rests on envy and anxiety – the desire to be like others and the loss of confidence in one's own validity.

The assets of the church include, but are far from limited to:

- Tradition: A continuity of ministry with and among the English people over 1500 years
- Mission: A parish system and stock of buildings with a hold on and resonance with the imagination of a great swathe of the population
- Leaders: An educated and able clergy and network of lay ministries, and established patterns of education, formation, training and accreditation
- Culture: A significant embedding of respect for the church within key institutions of government and civil society
- Education: A remarkable network of church schools, many of which are outstanding in education and formation
- Forum: An ability to draw together diverse opinion, conviction and practice within one body, locally and nationally
- Followers: A host of dedicated and faithful disciples found in every community in the country.

Starting with assets doesn't mean sitting on assets. To those to whom much has been given, much is expected. In its use of buildings, education, lay training, and invitations to participate in and partner with other organisations the church needs to model exemplary practice. Simply by using the advantages it has, untold good can be done.

- ii. Recognise where we need to change. If the philosophy of building on assets is understood as primary and genuine, the principle that some things need to be significantly altered or jettisoned becomes easier for people to acknowledge. As outlined in more detail in the previous section, what needs to change, more briefly, includes:

- Addressing, altering, and making amends for areas where the church has been not so much out of touch or irrelevant, but an obstacle to the kingdom, to justice, or to respectful coexistence. Jesus founded the church on Peter; but there's no question Peter sometimes got things terribly wrong.
- Ensuring the structure, procedures and decision-making processes of the church are nimble. The institutional church is too much like Goliath, weighed down by size and armour. It needs to become more like David, agile, skilled, adaptable, improvisatory, in tune with its environment. Jesus is the Son of David, not the Son of Goliath.
- Equipping those in positions of local, regional and national leadership with the skills and capacities to build on the church's assets and release its neglected gifts. The church discovered unexpected power at Pentecost: it needs to be ready to be clothed with power in similar ways today.

This is where leadership is significant. The word 'saint' appears 64 times in the New Testament, always in the plural. The word 'hero' doesn't appear. Leaders don't need to be

heroes, who make decisive interventions and are the subject of the story; leaders need to be saints – peripheral figures who ensure the story is always about God. Leadership is about

- agreeing, communicating and implementing strategy (Acts 15:19)
- establishing, embodying and commending culture (Mark 10:43)
- ensuring and practising scrutiny and accountability (Acts 5:3)

This is where a change of culture is needed. Most training in the church has been about helping people, especially clergy, think and perform duties well. This is good – indeed, indispensable – but it isn't the same as leadership. Leadership is less about doing things well oneself, and more about bringing a team to a point of deciding what they're going to do, promoting good ways of behaving and interacting while doing it, and ensuring it is being done and done well.

- iii. Realise and release gifts. Here is the central, prophetic conviction: God gives the church everything it needs, and if the church experiences its existence as scarcity, that's largely because it has neglected the gifts God has sent it. (John 6:9) Some of that neglect has been culpable perpetration of or participation in oppression, as we have noted. But much more has been idle or wilful inattention to where the kingdom is growing. (Lk 9: 49-50)

When Peter stands before the Sanhedrin, called to account for how he has enabled a crippled beggar to walk, he looks back into Israel's story, in which God had founded the kingdom not on any of Jesse's tall and powerful sons, but on David, the youngest and weakest. Peter quotes Psalm 118, which describes the choosing of David with the words, 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' Peter identifies that rejected stone as Jesus. (Acts 4:11) In his crucifixion he was rejected by the builders – yet in his resurrection he became the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life. The moment of Israel's renewal was in Babylonian exile – when it too felt like the stone the builders had rejected.

Prophetic ministry is not about condescendingly making welcome alienated strangers. It means seeking out the rejected precisely because they are the energy and the life-force that will transform us all. If we're looking for where the future church is coming from, we need to look at what the church and society has so blithely rejected. The life of the church is about constantly recognising the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating the grace that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives. The church is founded on and comprised of stones that the builders rejected. The challenge for the church is to see Jesus in the face of the one we have rejected. And to let the Jesus we discover in them become our cornerstone.

What Support Do We Need?

Just as there are three broad things the church needs to do, there are three languages in which the church needs to remain or become fluent, to support these three respective tasks.

1. Covenant. The first, which corresponds to building on assets, is the language of covenant. Genesis 9 is the covenant of life, which declares that never again will God cut off all flesh by the waters of a flood. Genesis 12 is the covenant of the land: God makes a covenant with Abraham that through Abraham's line, all nations will find a blessing, and God will give them Canaan as their possession. In Exodus God makes with Moses the covenant of the law that sets the bounds within which Israel must live and keep the land. Finally in 2 Samuel God makes a covenant of the lineage with David to bless him and his descendants with kingly authority.

How will God restore Israel when the covenant is in tatters? That's the question on which the whole Bible rests. In the end, Jesus is God's answer to this question. Jesus is the new Noah, the new Abraham, the new Moses, the new David, the embodiment of Israel, with whom God makes a covenant that won't ever be broken. And Jesus is at the same time the God who won't ever break the covenant. Jesus is the Lamb of God who in his body suffers the pain of all the

broken covenants. But at the same time Jesus is the shepherd who goes and fetches the lost sheep to bring them into the fold of the new, unbreakable covenant.

If you ask people why they belong to the church, or why they were ordained, it's all about covenant. The most precious things in our lives are run by covenants. Who will be holding your hand when you die? That's all about a covenant. Who do you turn to when you're at a crossroads in your life and you've searched your soul and you don't know what to do for the best? What gives you a sense of community and belonging and of being understood and at home? A group of people and a place with whom you share a covenant.

This is the church's characteristic language. This is what shapes its place in the nation's heart and soul. It's what people of no settled faith turn to the church at times of birth, marriage and death. It's what brings people to the church on Mothering Sunday and Harvest Festival. It's what underpins the stipendiary structure, where clergy have a level of freedom of operation and amount of discretionary time almost unknown in other walks of life. It's the spirit in which the establishment of the church – not entitlement to privilege, but the vocation to be present and receptive and a blessing in every community in the country – makes sense. This is the asset that needs to be built upon and deepened.

But it cannot be the church's only language. It needs two further languages, and it may need to do some learning to acquire them.

2. **Contract.** A contract is a voluntary agreement between two free agents that creates an obligation that can be enforced. If a contract is broken, compensation can be expected. Most contracts are built out of previous contracts, with language and stipulations derived from experience over generations. They're a residue of accumulated wisdom. Someone has thought in advance about all the things that could go wrong and worked out a fair way of naming responsibilities and anticipating solutions.

Seeking to govern our whole lives by contracts undermines the quality of our covenants. It's a profound mistake that is beginning to pervade much of society. For example contractual language has no way of talking about forgiveness and redemption; transgression leads to a broken contract, compensation, failure, often bad feeling. By contrast forgiveness is at the centre of the notion of a covenant, and of Christianity.

But this should not blind us to the vital and indispensable work that contracts can and must do. Christians often blithely assume a covenant and don't take the time and care to get the contract right; too frequently our desire to keep the covenant inhibits us from facing the truth about the breaking of the contract. It can render Christians silent when they find another party isn't even keeping to the terms of the contract; and it can make their actions seem arbitrary when it comes to exercising internal discipline.

In the case of major personal or institutional failures, the church has found it hard to see that it and its representatives have broken basic contractual obligations in regard to safeguarding the vulnerable. The general public gets very angry if it sees Christians talking piously about covenants if they're meanwhile not even keeping their contracts. The critical point is this: we should always aspire for every relationship to become a covenant, but we should never let any relationship fall below the level of a contract.

The following four principles may guide the church's understanding of the language of contract and covenant.

- Take contracts seriously: they are a way of holding one another to honesty and honour in the face of temptation and distraction.
- Never assume we can run our whole lives by contracts. If we do, we'll find ourselves unprepared for the deepest and most beautiful things God has to give us.
- Try to turn contracts slowly but surely into covenants. Contracts can give us security and trust, but only covenants can bring joy and delight.
- Never treat our relationship with God as a contract. What we have with God is a covenant of grace that we did nothing to earn or deserve.

If the church is to agree which things need to be significantly altered or jettisoned, it needs to become more conversant with the language of contract. Not uncritically – not as its first language; but to be fluent nonetheless, not least to reassure those it has badly let down that it is listening and learning and can be trusted. The language of covenant is no longer enough to ensure those vital things.

But if the church is to receive the abundant gifts of God that it has too often, in too many places, and for too long neglected or rejected, it must be renewed in or learn a third language.

3. Charism. This rests in a conviction that ministry is primarily about creating the right environment – circumstances in which God is known to have worked in myriad ways – and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. It combines the confidence of the covenant with a sense of anticipation and expectation of the new things God continues to do. It truly believes that, with the healing of the past through the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the future through everlasting life, the church can live in the freedom of the present tense, and the imagination of a future that's bigger than the past.

Renewal invariably comes out of adversity. It was in exile that Israel compiled the scriptures, and realised God was closer in troubled times than ever in the Promised Land. It was this experience upon which the early disciples looked back in discovering that God was closer to them in the cross of Christ than ever before or since. As necessity is the mother of invention, as hitting bottom is the precursor to a route out of addiction, so the blessed are those who know their need of God – who find a stone that the builders rejected and use it to overcome the daunting Goliath.

David only needed five smooth stones; stones that Goliath couldn't see because he had armour, weapons, respect, acclaim. But the stones Goliath rejected proved his downfall. And David, because he knew he depended on God alone, saw what the stones were for – a gift to him to fulfil his calling. The language of charism invites the church to see the world through God's eyes, and receive the angels, and gifts, God sends.

Conclusion

Dr Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby, in a letter to a member of SPCK, wrote, 'The Church as it now stands no human power can save.' That was in 1832. There was no time when the Church of England 'got it right.' There is no challenge today that is different in kind from what has gone before. At the same time there is no complacency in the kingdom of God.

What the church needs is a renewal of the covenant in the things it does best and knows most truly and loves most deeply; a conscientious engagement with contract, by which it keeps appropriate standards and implements wise procedures; and a joyful embrace of charism, by which, in the face of apparent scarcity, it perceives gifts and releases long-pent-up energy. For Christians, even ones prone to lament, in God, the future is always bigger than the past.