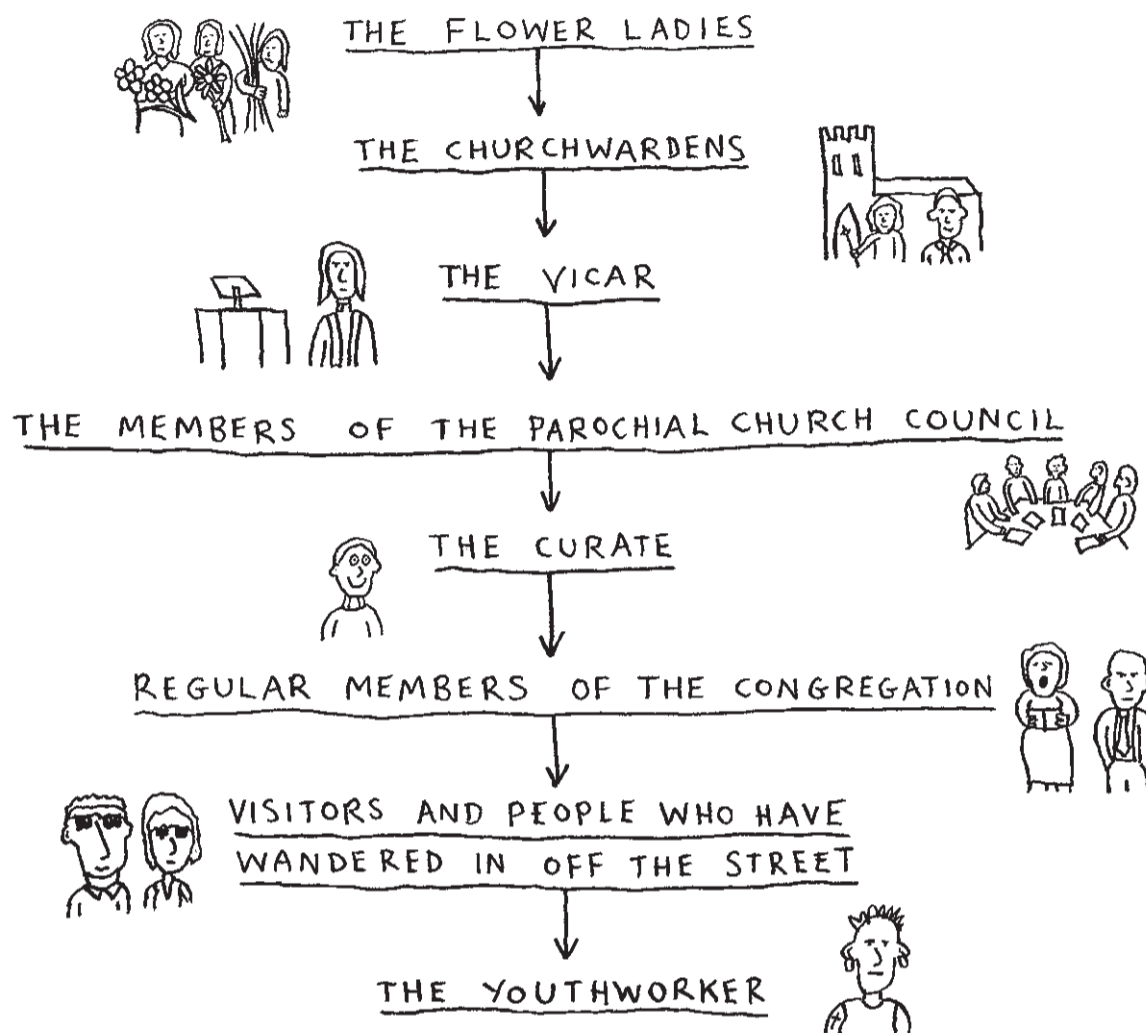


A slightly disorganised religion

The Church has a great deal to learn from organisational theories, says Margaret Harris. Currently, there is a tendency to muddle through

THE CHAIN OF COMMAND WITHIN A CHURCH



MOST people have some instinctive grasp of the working of “bureaucratic hierarchy” — one of the oldest of OB theories, which has its intellectual roots in advice given by Jethro to his son-in-law Moses, when the Israelite leader was trying to do too much alone.

Moses was reluctant to delegate his responsibilities, and Jethro told him how to construct a hierarchy that would spread the workload, but also ensure that final accountability for work done rested with Moses himself.

For a long time, bureaucratic hierarchy was pretty much the only organisational structural model around — adopted by firms, corporations, and armies, as a matter of course. Many religions, including the C of E, also adopted a form of hierarchy to administer themselves.

But more recent contributions from OB have suggested several alternative ways of structuring organisations — without hierarchy, or by using variations on the basic model: team-working between people with equal organisational authority; collective ownership structures; “flat” relationships between roles; leaders answerable to the members who elected them; and alliances between complementary organisations.

These are just a number of models, and they merit further exploration in the face of proliferating layers of bureaucracy and dwindling numbers of volunteer workers.

AS FOR the members and volunteers, who are the lifeblood of our churches, there is now a substantial body of research that offers sound principles for recruiting and supporting volunteers.

One of the primary principles is to work hard to find a match between the motives of an individual volunteer and the organisation’s own needs. My own research suggests that clergy can be very good at discerning the varied and multiple motivations that people bring to church involvement, and at matching those motivations with church roles and tasks. They are also generally good at following another principle of volunteer management — thanking and recognising.

My final thought is about the very concept of “leadership”. The Church seems to work on the assumption that its leaders are primarily clergy. The OB literature encourages us to step back, and ask what leadership actually means.

One answer is that a leader is someone who can nurture, inspire, and realise a vision. Visionary leadership, and the varied characteristics that encourage loyalty and inspire people to embrace change, is as vital for a religious organisation as any other.

So it is worth asking an open question about who may be able to exercise such leadership in the many and varied areas of church life. We need to cast the net as wide as possible — to catch laity as well as clergy, and fringe members as well as the most committed people who attend church.

Dr Margaret Harris is the Emeritus Professor of Voluntary Sector Organisation at Aston University, and Visiting Professor at Birkbeck, University of London.

DURING more than 30 years of researching with churches and charities, I have often seen clergy exhaust themselves trying to tackle practical challenges of organisation — challenges with which they are ill equipped to deal because they lack even rudimentary knowledge about the principles of organisational behaviour (OB).

Yet OB has heaps of intellectual tools to offer those running our churches. It could be usable knowledge, if more OB academics would take the time to adapt generic organisational knowledge to the special challenges that arise in faith organisations.

Meanwhile, clergy are left to muddle along as best they can, perhaps picking up bits and pieces of ideas from those books you find in airports that promise quick management fixes for businesses, or self-help secrets for ambitious careerists. It does not have to be like this.

There are ways in which individuals can draw useful insights from organisational disciplines without abandoning their theological grounding.

Let me outline some organisational insights that clergy and laity with whom I have worked have found useful. These are research findings from the OB field which can help to explain why things happen the way they do in churches, and so help leaders to devise sensitive and workable responses.

Implementation of change can be particularly intractable in association-like groupings such as parish churches. Since church

adherence is essentially a voluntary commitment in modern Britain, authoritarian and prescriptive approaches to organisational change simply will not wash — irrespective of theological principles that give clergy the right to say how things should happen.

Anything — from changing the layout of chairs for meetings to implementing liturgy prescribed by bishops — can give rise to eruptions of protest from congregation members, and worse.

THE literature suggests ways in which such eruptions might be mitigated. They include developing a strategic plan over months, or even years, for staged or incremental change; informally involving key opinion-leaders in planning processes; and positively encouraging “pew-up” suggestions for changes, and their implementation.

More recently, church leaders have also found the so-called “theory of change” approach to be helpful. It suggests prior thinking about the precise nature of any prospective change; what the evidence of its implementation will be; and the rationale for taking a specific approach to achieving the desired endpoint.

In adopting or adapting these kinds of ideas, church leaders might also take into account the special nature of goal-setting in a church context. Businesses, social enterprises, and even charities are free to take a broad scan of possibilities when making strategic decisions about their future aims.

But leaders in a faith organisation need to be constantly aware of what I call “low-goal ceilings”. Clergy and lay people work with certain fixed institutional goals that — because they are part of the faith tradition — cannot be changed, or even debated.

Clergy leaders are guardians of these fixed principles, and therefore have to hold a delicate balance between maintaining the distinctive faith “core”, and having open and empathetic discussions with lay adherents.

The latter are demanded if change is ever to be achieved, but clergy have always to be aware of

when a goal ceiling is being reached, and there is a threat to the very mission of the organisation.

A similar point can apply to the enthusiasm of visionary lay people who have new ideas for activities, projects, and fund-raising. It falls to clergy to ensure that innovation is encouraged while core religious principles are not infringed.

ANOTHER area of practical challenge for church leaders, where theology needs to be borne in mind, is organisational structure. Questions arise:

- Who has the authority to direct whom?
- Who is to be held to account when things go wrong?
- What should be delegated to committees, and working groups?
- Who can speak for the Church to the media? What roles can be shared between people, or across local churches?
- What is the appropriate relationship between local churches and their diocesan and national leaders?

It is often tempting to think that these kinds of questions can be settled by reference to religious prescription.

Yet apparent prescription may simply be “custom and practice” with a sacred aura. Even where there is clear religious guidance, there is often scope for adaptation to contemporary circumstances. All successful religious traditions have proved adaptable.

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