
Introduction

At the outset, can I say how privileged we were as a team to be invited into Christ Church and to hear the stories of those who personally, and by letter and by phone felt able to share their journey with us. We remain humbled by the honesty of those who opened their heart to us, and also the level of trust they placed in us. I gave an undertaking that any feedback from the team would not include names or identifiable situations or key words which could easily be attributed to particular individuals. I trust that we have kept to that undertaking, but in doing so I would ask that those who shared their stories with us bear in mind that our feedback deals with key issues and not individual incidents. However, their stories were not told in vain.

In seeking to draw this situation to some closure, it would be sad and inappropriate to 'bury' the good that the church has experienced. There are moments that have given rise to celebration through growth, teaching and ministry, as well as those that have brought sorrow. I would not wish to diminish the good that has occurred within the church, whilst still reflecting some honest perspectives on the journey that was taken by the church community, both in terms of leadership and also congregation. Not everything was bad; but not everything was good.

Although what follows, naturally focuses on the issues which do require due consideration for Christ Church to grow as a healthy community, it is done keeping in mind the 'good' that was also achieved. Inevitably, reference will be drawn to the role of the recent incumbent, but it is the culture that was created with him that it is more essential to address. It is worth noting that the issues of the incumbent's mental and emotional health were in general, understood with compassion and grace, even by those who had suffered because of them.

In total the Acorn team received 46 submissions, from a wide range of members, past and present, and it is from these that I have drawn out themes which both describe the journey the church has taken, and those that are relevant to the journey that lies ahead of the church. As a pastor myself, I would encourage the church to seek out the way forward for the issues I raise, rather than opt for a 'risk free' way of being church. It is possible to have freedom with safety, courage with wisdom, faith with understanding, and hope without fear.

Observations

Leadership

In reflecting on the stories we heard it is clear that for some a 'stronghold in leadership' (*my phrase*) had been created whereby no other voices could be heard. Biblically, a stronghold is a 'place of power' which exercises dominion over us - individual or corporate. It establishes a control of others to the point that no other options or opinions are tolerated, indeed, they are resisted and ultimately quashed.

Those who hold alternative views either have to come in to line or are themselves vilified and rejected. Some choose to leave voluntarily out of fear for their own safety.

Allied to this was a palpable sense of fear for some of any encounter with the incumbent. This fear was at times accompanied with the physical symptoms associated with fear, and this was not an isolated event. People had experienced both publicly and privately an anger, even uncontrolled anger, that is unacceptable and inappropriate for a leader of Christ's church.

This state of control bred with it a culture of secrecy. People were left feeling that they were the only ones who had fallen foul of the system or felt as they did, or felt that it was in some way 'their fault'. I would commend the church for its strong stance on not entertaining gossip. (Eph 4:29/James1:26 & 4:11) This is a biblical injunction and one our culture and media would do well to adopt. However, whether by intent or by inference, it reinforced a tacit message that inappropriate behaviour, and non-transparent decision making, could not be challenged, as this was akin to gossip. Disagreement was regarded disloyalty, yet a church's ability to entertain and embrace difference is an indicator of its spiritual and emotional health. It should be noted that there is now a strong request for a more accessible and earlier system of whistleblowing, where it is deemed necessary.

This in itself raises questions around the need for transparency and openness on behalf of the leadership, particularly in decision making and appointments, and the need for an effective mechanism of accountability with within the local church and within appropriate diocesan structures. The fact that some of the church's difficulties were known well before they were acted upon, has left some feeling vulnerable within the system itself. Other have felt betrayed, and let down, and as a result, to some degree, angry. Incidents of clear bullying and manipulation were both witnessed and experienced by members in the congregation. It is not a healthy stance to say 'that is the way so and so is', and the church has a duty of care to all, clergy and laity. Much of the bullying and controlling behaviour would be deemed worthy of disciplinary procedures within secular work life.

Whilst an apology from the appropriate quarter would go some way to healing the suffering some endured, this was not an expected outcome. It would be appropriate that an apology for even unintended hurt would be better than nothing. The question, however, that has come to mind was to what degree, at the end, the congregation were genuinely loved and appreciated, or to whether the church was simply a developmental tool for an individual ministry.

It is important for the church, and its leaders, to remember that 'shepherds are still sheep'; leaders are still disciples. The 'rules' of God's kingdom apply equally to us all whoever we may be and whatever role we fulfil. Words are not enough, the essence of a leader's ministry is example, and people lose faith and trust when the message from the pulpit and the manner of the priest are no longer congruent. It is also important to realise that leaders are not equally gifted in every area of

leadership. A great preacher may not make a good counsellor, or a gifted administrator may not make a good strategist. Sadly, as leaders we often assume that we are able to be the final word on everything in church life. This is simply not so. Charisma has been described as influence without logic, therefore, it is essential that in seeking to lead others in the Body of Christ we do not expect a blind allegiance, nor manipulate others to the end.

Spiritual ministry

There was common reference to the manner and power behind the use of spiritual gifts; mainly prophecy and the word of knowledge. To lay my own cards on the table, I sit in the prophetic and apostolic end of the spectrum and spiritual gifts are a familiar place for me. It seems that the stories we heard reveal there is a wisdom in embracing a number of issues in order to not only aid ministry to others but to also grow in our own ministry with integrity.

Firstly, the gifts of the Spirit and the way in which He uses us, say nothing about us. They do not say we are mature, holy, honest, stable, or theologically correct, although we often believe that if someone 'hears' God in one area of church life, they must have equal revelation in everything else. The gifts of the Spirit simply say that a gracious God is using people, in grace, that technically he shouldn't, because we are all flawed and frail. We should focus on the Giver and not elevate the person with the gift.

Secondly, it seems that there is a great need for the gift of the discerning of spirits. This gift first and foremost should work in our own lives, that we may discern our own hearts before focusing on the attitudes and actions of others, yet it is often the last place we apply this gift. The church needs to be released to a healthy use of the gifts God gives, but to also rightly weigh what is happening, by their fruit and by the framework in Scripture, and to be invited to do so.

Thirdly, the prophetic word and the word of knowledge are particularly powerful gifts. When employed with gentleness and humility they bring great release, but when part of a construct of power and control they bring a degree of bondage, fear and in some case act like the pronouncing of a curse. The myth centring around a particular individual's gift of hearing God or knowing about people, is a dangerous condition to have in a church community or in the life of a leader. It is essential that our practice is Christological and not based on the personality, gifting or preferences of a particular leader. There was some feeling that these gifts had been abused on occasions.

Finally, leaders need to allow people to distinguish between 'God says' and 'I say' (1 Cor 7). Even when we are certain God is speaking through us, we must trust the Holy Spirit to confirm the word and not employ the forces of personality and human persuasion to control or manipulate others. To do so is an implicit mistrust in the Holy Spirit's ability to lead the church, and an exaltation of our gift and status above His presence and ministry.

In the light of all this there is a residue of fear and mistrust over the use of certain giftings, but our feeling was that in the main the seeds of the prophetic remain unsullied by some of the negative experiences. The answer to any abuse is correct use, not non-use. The invitation for the congregation to weigh what they are being presented with, in the light of Scripture by a secure leadership, will aid recovery.

Conclusion

As a team we felt a great sense of hope for the future. People expressed confidence in, and support for, the current leadership, particularly in Keith and his leadership and management of the church throughout this difficult period. All those we spoke to, who remain part of the church community, are seeking to 'move on', even if this occurs at different speeds for different individuals. The church is in our brief experience marked by a sense of authenticity and a genuine care for one another. We commend you all to God's grace.

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