

Organizational change in a community of faith

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- *This paper reports on a research project undertaken within an organization facing potentially radical restructuring of the way in which it operates. The project is unusual because it is based in a community of faith with a volunteer workforce.*
- *The paper explores the project, the issues confronted and some of the developments arising from the process of change. Conclusions relating to organizational change and restructuring in voluntary organizations are drawn.*

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Introduction

The research that informs this paper was undertaken within a thriving suburban Catholic parish in the UK. It was initiated by the Archbishop and the stimulus for the reform is both straightforward and intractable. The priest in the parish had retired and the Catholic Church is short of replacement priests. This failure to recruit priests is an endemic problem within the church: only 18 priests were ordained in England and Wales in 2004 and it is estimated that nearly a third of all parishes were without resident priests by 2005 (Walsh, 2004).

Some months after this parish lost its priest, the Archbishop proposed that a priest resident in a nearby parish should continue to provide pastoral duties, officiate at the mass and the consecration of the Eucharist, but that members of the laity undertake many of the spiritual and secular duties that a resident

priest would have previously undertaken for them. It was apparent that the Archbishop's thinking was heavily influenced by the nature of this parish — it is mainly affluent, middle class, its parishioners are widely experienced in both business and public service, and they have the reputation for being organized and motivated.

Two theoretical frames are useful in understanding the reform process described in this paper. First, the historic background of the Catholic Church, including its nature and structure, and second, the literature relating to organizational change.

Context

The Catholic Church has its own traditions and norms, in particular, it is hierarchically structured and it does not embody democracy in any fundamental sense. The lack of democracy is a source of considerable debate in the church. Some commentators observe that Catholics accept the inherent lack of democracy when they accede to their faith and, according to Jonas (1995), should 'become

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Protestants' if they are not willing to continue acceding. Other commentators (*America*, 1990; Maguire, 2003) highlight that the church has changed over the last two millennia and now has some tenets of democracy that could be developed further to reflect wider social changes:

The church throughout its history... has employed a variety of political structures and then discarded them when they no longer served the purposes of the community. (*America*, 1990, p. 1)

In respect to these debates, the 1965 Vatican II did acknowledge some need for democratization, through the establishment of consultative bodies, such as parish councils and diocesan synods but:

According to canon law, final decision-making authority still rests exclusively with the pastor on the parish level, exclusively with the Archbishop on the diocesan level and exclusively with the Pope and his administrative bureaucracy on the international level. (Appleby, 1996, p. 1)

The Catholic Church is therefore currently best characterized as a clerocracy, i.e. democracy only exists in the election of priests by priests.

Organizational change

This project can also be considered in relation to the academic 'organizational change' literature. The change literature relating to 'not-for-profit' organizations usually utilizes Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependency theory in which organizations are conceived of as coalitions of interests wherein individuals attempt to obtain something from the collectivity and most importantly, change is posited as a direct adaptation to contingencies in the environment. However, in the case of the Catholic Church, an organizational ecology approach might be better applied to theorize the nature of change. Organizational ecologists observe that:

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An organization's current behavior is determined more by its own past than by rational analysis and decision making, and that successful (in surviving) organizations have developed time and environment tested competencies, or routines, that makes for predictable behaviour. (Salipante and Golden-Biddle, 1995, pp. 7-8)

Both the age of the Catholic Church and fact that one of its 'core products' is the provision of purpose and meaning through voluntary normative compliance, would seem to strengthen the case for conceiving of the church using the organizational ecology theoretical framework. However, it is clear that the Catholic Church has not existed as a monolith experiencing only evolutionary change for the last two millennia: there have been periods of revolutionary change as well. While the organizational ecology approach has a degree of 'goodness of fit', it does not fully capture the history of the church, i.e. that organizational ecology is a sufficient theoretical descriptor to describe the bulk of the Catholic Church's development but that occasional periods of revolutionary change occur. This augmented approach is similar to the 'punctuated equilibrium' approach proposed by Gould and Eldredge (1977) in the field of ecology.

Method

The initial stage of the project began at an open meeting in June 2003 in the parish hall. The meeting had been organized by a steering group who had invited the researchers to act as facilitators. The meeting (called a 'Parish in Council') had the guiding authority of the Archbishop expressed in the form of a letter

from him to the parishioners, which included the following statement:

If we pool our resources and have the generosity to take an appropriate responsibility for building and developing our parishes then we will, with the Grace of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit, continue to thrive and grow. Inevitably it will mean that we have to change the way that we do things. I believe that you can do what is needed — and to that extent become a model for other parishes in the Archdiocese.

Prior to the meeting, the facilitators had been provided with a briefing document by the steering committee, this included a contextualization of the issue, including:

In essence the Parish is now looking at how people and priest can work more closely together (more collaboratively), with the people of the parish coming to take more responsibility for the management and development of the parish.

From this information, the facilitators constructed three themes to be addressed at the meeting:

1. What is the parish doing now and how well is it doing it?
2. What more do you want to do and what do you want to do differently?
3. What is the way forward, how can you do what it is you want to achieve?

These three themes were the basis of a focus group-style intervention, which included 49 participants (10% of the regular attendees at mass) in three groups at the open meeting. The facilitators undertook the roles of moderators in the focus groups and utilized a number of minimally interventionist techniques to encourage discussion. Each focus group worked with a designated facilitator to address each of the themes in three consecutive group discussions. Discussions lasted 40–45 minutes and were summarized by

scribes. At the end of the discussions on each theme, the three groups came together in plenary sessions where the scribes shared the outcomes of their group's discussion with the whole group who then collectively debated the issues raised and the key points were recorded by the scribes. To aid later analysis all the discussions were also tape-recorded and later transcribed: the contents of the tapes were confidential and the transcripts rendered anonymous.

The facilitators had pre-agreed on a two-option strategy for the intervention day, if the responses to the initial theme indicated openness to the kinds of change proposed by the steering group and the Archbishop then the rest of the meeting would involve action research wherein groups were guided towards enacted solutions. However, if there was any reticence towards the change, the facilitators had agreed to simply guide the groups towards articulating their concerns. At the conclusion of the time allocated to the first theme, the facilitators agreed that there was a widespread acceptance of the need for change. On this basis, the remainder of the meeting was action research-oriented.

A second phase of the intervention consisted of the facilitators summarizing and reporting the findings of the day back to the parish through a written report to the steering committee. At this point the researchers withdrew from direct involvement in the process for some months before undertaking the follow-up discussed below. The executive summary of the report was disseminated to the parish by the steering committee and discussed at a later Parish in Council meeting, which resolved to undertake a number of actions to further the process of change. The third phase of the research involved key informant follow-up interviews to evaluate the impact of the earlier interventions.

Findings

The initial theme of the intervention was aimed at determining the nature of the problem from the parishioners' perspectives.

It was immediately evident that the parish's lack of a resident priest was 'the problem' and that the parishioners' preferred solution was the appointment of a new priest. As discussion progressed it became evident that there were two levels of acceptance — a minority of the groups had realized from the outset that they were unlikely to receive a new priest, but the majority only slowly realized that the meeting itself was a signal that there was unlikely to be a new appointment. It was also apparent that the initial level of acceptance was covariant with the level of involvement of the parishioners. The most highly active members of the parish had already resigned themselves to the fact that a new priest's appointment was unlikely.

Discussion quickly shifted from the parish's lack of a resident priest to the Catholic Church's shortage of priests. In all three groups the shortage of priests in the Catholic Church had been a well-recognized phenomenon, and it was also acknowledged that if a priest was ever appointed to the parish, the shortages would mean that he may be called upon to increasingly undertake work outside of the parish. The acceptance of the problem led to an acknowledgement among all groups that there would be a greater requirement for the laity to participate in the running of the parish, both administratively and spiritually. However, there were concerns among all groups that the loss of the priest might restrict the opportunities for spiritual involvement and a lesser concern that the good works undertaken by groups within the parish might suffer as a result. In addition, operational concerns were expressed — although it was widely accepted that an appointed paid staff member could take over the day-to-day administration of the activities of the parish, there were still concerns that the greeting, directing, contacting and organizing functions previously undertaken by the priest could suffer. However, the groups were also open to suggesting members of the parish who had the core competencies suitable to undertake these activities. For example, a member of Group B suggested:

So you could say that the managing director is the priest, then you have your board of directors, financial director, marketing director . . . then with those, you have team and they have their own structure.

Discussions about how to increase lay involvement ranged from such things as youth and young family outreach, prayer groups and the use of Eucharist ministers to take both the main services and taking the Eucharist out to those unable to attend services. There was, however, an acknowledgement that in a structure hinged on lay involvement, the active members of the parish who had been engaged in running the parish's charity groups (an estimated 50 in total) would need to relinquish these roles in order to have the capacity to fulfil the roles previously undertaken by the priest. There was an accompanying acceptance that if the more passive members of the parish did not take a more active role then many of the activity and charity groups' good works would need to be curtailed.

The opportunities for lay involvement also did not assuage many of the spiritual concerns and there was a perception that the stability of membership in the parish would suffer. There was a serious concern that many of the current parishioners (notably the older members) would decamp to parishes with priests in residence. In relation to these matters, there was an implicit agreement among all the groups that the spiritual leadership role performed by the priests in the Catholic Church could not be adequately fulfilled by a lay member of the parish. While there was an acknowledgement that in undertaking these activities the priest has traditionally been assisted by lay members, there was also a strong sense that the ultimate prerogatives and authority in a Catholic parish were with the priest.

In terms of their emotional reactions, some participants, notably the elders, expressed feelings of anxiety at the loss of their priest and at the thought that there may be no replacement in the future. However, the majority also saw the situation as an opportu-

nity for rejuvenation and growth in their spiritual lives. It was of particular note that each group accepted the problem in terms of it being their 'cross to bear' and that their collective decisions would be guided by the 'Holy Spirit'. A common thread throughout the discussions was an acknowledgement that the focal point of communication in the parish has traditionally focused around the priest. A new structure for communication captured much attention in the discussions, for example, Group B observed:

You have to keep the managing director [visiting priest] informed; maybe not all of the little details but sufficient so that anytime he is asked what is going on, he is aware enough to be able to say: 'yes I know about that'.

In the second phase of the research, the focus group sessions were summarized by the facilitators and a report was provided to the steering committee. The report's findings were of a similar nature to those reported in this section, with the inclusion of a number of observations about possible ways forward. These included:

1. A reconstructed, democratically elected parish council to manage the affairs of the parish via a portfolios approach.
2. A status quo parish advisory council to act in an advisory capacity to the visiting priest.
3. The parish in council in which the whole parish meets regularly and makes decisions about the management of the parish in negotiation with the priest and diocese.

The steering committee accepted the report as a basis for the parish deliberations and initial indications were that there would be a substantive change to the structure and organization of the parish. To facilitate the change process a summary of the report was distributed and another open meeting of the parish was called by the steering committee (this time without the presence of the facilitators to

progress the matter). Phase three of the research occurred three months after this meeting and involved key informant interviews summarized below.

At the meeting it was proposed and people agreed that we would seek to appoint a number of individuals to be empowered to try to develop different areas of parish work. . . . We called them 'Consulters' because the Archbishop had used the word at an earlier meeting. . . .

There was a great commitment among the members of the parish to make the change process a success:

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So to me what I was doing was trying to move forward essentially away from the Priest as the only form of authority, to the community as a form of authority, which fits the post-Vatican II philosophy of the church — the official philosophy of the church, not the practiced philosophy.

However, the key informant interviews all indicate that the change process was not successful:

The consulters started in a sort of fired-up way . . . and wanted to get going and do things, but we had absolutely no support from the visiting priest. Indeed we had one meeting where the purpose of the meeting was for the consulters to report back to the parish. Half way through this meeting, which the visiting priest was chairing, he said he had something to say, he proposed a new Parish Council structure and he had to say then — in the middle of the

parish's meeting, in the middle of the consultants presenting their report. He behaved like a two year old who had to have his way at that minute . . . I thought that was absolutely appalling.

Another interviewee commenting on the same meeting observed:

The meeting was hijacked and very aggressive. . . . It was the kind of behaviour that in most work situations I can imagine if somebody had stood up like that, other people would have walked out. . . .

When the key informants were asked to identify why the change that had achieved such high levels of commitment from the laity, had failed to gain acceptance from the visiting priest, they identified a number of reasons. First, there was a strong acknowledgement that the nature of the Catholic Church had not fundamentally changed and that the power resides with the priests.

Some people believe that those Priests have a divinely given position.

And:

The problem in the Catholic Church is that authority is from the top and the people with least authority to take any actions are the majority, the ordinary people.

The second major reason was a lack of support and communication from the Archdiocese for a change the Archbishop had initiated:

The Archbishop was very quick to say there were no Priests, he said there would be support but we've had very little support and very little communication.

Overall, the key informants identified that there was a breakdown in trust in the parish that arises from the fact that they had 'bought into' the Archbishop's request for a change and

then, despite their commitment, nothing happened:

I think they feel really let down too because everything seems to have fizzled.

Discussion

It is clear from the intervention and change process described above that there are clear contingencies in the operational environment of the Catholic Church that have dictated a need for change. Using resource dependency theory it could be identified that the change initiated by the Archbishop arose from three related contingencies. First, there is an absolute shortage of priests within the Catholic Church (Walsh, 2004). Second, the Catholic Church's hierarchy has identified that parishes in areas of high social deprivation would benefit more greatly from the location of a priest than those in affluent areas. Third, the parish in question is affluent and was therefore identified as an appropriate location for change. These contingencies clearly identify the Archbishop's motivations for the strategy of initiating change within the parish and further indicate why he thought this parish would provide an exemplar for further change.

However, approaching the change process from the frame of organizational ecology allows different insights to those from the resource dependency approach. Organizational ecology explains that organizations are (in many ways) prisoners of their own history and residual cultures. Certainly the explanation for how this change process faltered, despite high levels of commitment, willingness and ability, seems to be because the Church is bound by its history and the reforms of Vatican II, including the notions of some form of participative democracy involving the laity have not fully filtered down through the organization and therefore its culture is still reflective of a unitary command structure. This insight from the organizational ecology approach indicates that rational planning is sometimes not a sufficient driver of a radical change process.

The punctuated equilibrium approach might therefore offer a synthesis of explanation of the resource dependency and the organizational ecology approaches to understanding what happened within this case. Specifically, Vatican II was an illustration of tensions between the traditionalist and reformist values. The reformist values representative of Vatican II are illustrated by the coalition for change the Archbishop tried to instigate — using the rhetoric of a need to respond to contingencies that threatened the survival of the Church, the Archbishop formed a coalition around a rationalist agenda for radical reform. However, the momentum for changing the equilibrium was not sufficient to surmount the traditionalist values embedded into the core of being that is the Catholic belief system. However, it could be postulated that the failure of the change at this juncture is just a matter of timing and that the crisis of the Catholic Church's system caused by not having sufficient incumbent priests is not yet of sufficient magnitude to shock the system out of equilibrium and until the perception of the crisis increases, homeostasis exists.

Similarly, while the proposed changes to structure largely mirror changes in societal values in the Western world in terms of democracy, these changes do not reflect the micro-societal values embedded within the Church. Acceptance of the proposed changes in structure required a literal 'leap of faith' — a leap that was apparently accepted by the laity but was deemed a step too far by the visiting priests involved.

Conclusions

The process of change described here highlights both the problems which confront the modern Catholic Church and also the challenges of application of the received wisdom of organizational change literature to non-profit organizations. One significant aspect that was identified in this analysis was tension created by the duality of spiritual and hierarchical power within the organization. Even when invited to participate in change, the laity

struggled with the legitimacy of their involvement and right to comment. Indeed, despite widespread acceptance of the need to change and motivation to involve themselves in the change, the wave of changes begun by the laity was halted.

Utilizing an understanding based upon standard organizational change literature, after the motivation for change catalysed in the focus group interventions, the researchers did not anticipate that the change would fail. The denouement of the process was somewhat of a surprise as we had not fully taken into account the impact of the belief systems on the logic and decision-making processes within the organization. The value system held by parishioners meant that there was a fear of criticism of the organization and the priest and it was seen as iconoclastic given the divine nature of the Church. So it eventuated that one person could bring the whole process to an end simply because of his legitimate and spiritual position, even though he was not the ranking authority.

For the researchers this project highlights a principal key lesson (other than those discussed above) and a number of suggestions for further investigation. The key lesson is that processes of organizational reform might not actually result in the resolution of the problem but might instead result in deepening of it. In this case, the researchers fear that the very aspects of 'community' that made this parish ripe to be used as an experiment for this reform have now been undermined as a result of a breakdown in trust caused by the premature halting of the process of change.

For future researchers, it is clear that the involvement of independent facilitators was noted as useful for this organization during this process. The parishioners specifically noted that having facilitators who were independent of the parish and of its members' beliefs allowed them to look at the issues more dispassionately. A second recommendation for researchers in any future project similar to this is the need to ensure that they pay due attention to ensuring that the legitimate and spiritual powerbases within the organization are

understood, and that all the people in the positions of power condone the project and this is communicated explicitly to the participants as a whole.

Biographical notes

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