Transforming Vestries

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Leadership as Sacramental Vocation

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When a culture loses its authorized version, the body politic fragments, and its spiritual prosperity withers.

—Bruno Bettelheim

Although differences in polity and theology across the Anglican Communion seem irreconcilable at times, what I find constructive in this time of turmoil is that the current conflicts have precipitated a period of reexamination of identity and purpose. The church has been motivated, and in a few instances pushed, to identify what its beliefs are at the core and to create a common understanding from which to engage and reorder relationships with others in the Communion.

The Search for Coherence, the monograph based on the research by William Sachs following the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, describes the church as

being in a state of "creative incoherence." This is the result of old ways no longer working and a lack of the conviction and courage necessary to risk changing. The ensuing modern-day Tower of Babel reveals one of the challenges of being on the margin, of being in between the familiar and the yet-unborn, that of having vocational amnesia. The state of creative incoherence beckons us to return to our foundational sense of who we are and why we exist. It is a call to the vocation so movingly articulated in the Baptismal Covenant.

The Baptismal Covenant conveys our Christian call; it is the contractual agreement addressing the universal questions of identity, our relationship to God, and our obligations to one another. In the reading of, listening to, and practicing of this sacred covenant we enter into the heart of God, a God who promises us community and connection, who holds and cradles us, a God who provides the peace and belonging we crave. We come to know an expectant God who asks us to fulfill our obligations to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to treat them with dignity and respect, and to persevere in resisting evil. When we are sent into the world "in peace, to love and serve the Lord," we are being sent out to live this covenant in some of the most challenging conditions. When asked whether we will seek to meet God's expectations in the covenant, we respond, "We will, with God's help." In this response we are expressing our strong desire to live out our baptismal promises, while knowing that we cannot enter into the gap between reality and the ideal without the help of the Divine.

The Baptismal Covenant calls us all to a common endeavor, and yet unless the deeper meaning of these words is translated into practical day-to-day actions, they lose their power to transform. The loss of meaning results in a state of creative incoherence—a state of hollow ritual and busyness lacking meaning. The church continues to clarify how

the ministry of all the baptized should manifest itself. The working out of these shifting roles and relationships is vital in obtaining a creative, coherent state of leadership in the church.

Implicit in the Baptismal Covenant is a template for the relationship and responsibilities of laity and clergy. It evokes shared leadership and mutual ministry that, when faithfully practiced, reinvigorates the church and expands its mission and impact across the globe. The Baptismal Covenant sees leadership in everyone and at every level. It claims a new paradigm of leadership, the DNA of which is embodied in the covenant.

When the Israelites wailed in the desert, "What is to become of us?" they had forgotten who and whose they were and what they were called to do. The Israelites had lost the signposts that helped them to remember their identity and ultimate destiny, the guides that had provided them with security and direction. Likewise, the church is experiencing a passage of confusion and loss, and in our contemporary desert time the question of what is to become of us still hangs in the air. The story of Exodus reminds us that in the in-between times, historical amnesia and loss of identity is a recipe for prolonged suffering.

We are being called to have the faith and courage to move with grace-filled patience and trust, knowing that we will arrive at the Promised Land with God's help. Remembering our vocation, living out our Baptismal Covenant, will help us to endure and triumph.

The transformation of the church can be accomplished without losing what is precious to it, but it cannot avert change. Whether it is accepting a revised Book of Common Prayer or the service leaflet in its place, the loss of an esteemed lay or clergy leader or the departure of parishes and splitting or consolidation of dioceses, a period of grief and disorientation will

ensue. Any time our understanding of identity, authority, and vocation is called into question, the real work is to live into and through the dissonance that automatically comes with change, emerging with an even stronger faith.

This is work that cannot be done alone; learning to do the work of transformation requires a community of faithful learners and leaders. The church should be the primary institution preparing leaders for this work. If it accepts this vocation the church will enter a "renaissance of mission" that will revitalize the church and plant the seeds of transformation in the world.

We will need a set of skills and resources designed to bring about such transformation. The resources described on the following pages will enable leaders to read differing historical and cultural realities deftly, to develop competence in group dynamics and development, and to gain expertise in facilitating adaptive work. Additional skills in managing change and resolving conflict, translating facts into a meaningful narrative, creating communities of learning, engendering cultures of trust, and manifesting courage, integrity, and authenticity will be essential.

Understanding Organizational Culture

In addition to the larger societal, global, and historical contexts in which your parish sits, obtaining a broader and deeper understanding and knowledge of organizational culture is critical to the work of transformation. Culture is a complex concept, and its creation and ongoing development is one of the key responsibilities of the new leadership. The ability to read culture and to manage the complexity of human and organizational experiences and perspectives that exist within it is the sine qua non of leadership.

Terry Deal, coauthor of *Corporate Cultures* and an expert observer of systems, describes culture as "the way we do things around here." This pithy aphorism captures the behavioral aspects of culture, without highlighting the deeper underlying structures and unconscious assumptions that frequently evolve into unquestioned beliefs and unexamined behaviors. Both aspects of culture compose a hologram through which we can view how a parish perceives, believes, and thinks about itself, how it is perceived by the larger public, and the impact of these perceptions on mission. The following typology might assist in exploring the depth and breadth of culture that the most effective leaders learn to master. The levels indicate the degree of visibility.

A TOOL FOR READING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

	LEVELS	FOCUS	LEADERSHIP ROLE
EXTERNAL	ARTIFACTUAL	Literature, image, attire, rituals, public materials	Public face of the organization's mission and message; myth maker
EXTERNAL	STRUCTURAL	Organization, structure, distribution of resources, space utilization, markets, production	Enabler of competence, manager, administrator
INTERNAL	BEHAVIORAL	Management of people, trust, relationships, communication	Creator of community, skill-builder, educator
INTERNAL	PHILOSOPHICAL	Management of values, beliefs, vocation, mission, philanthropic interests, community	Creator of culture, storyteller, connector of ideas and actions, interpreter, translator
INTERNAL	FOUNDATIONAL	Basic assumptions about existence, purposes, relationship to larger world, spirituality	Meaning-maker, creator of spiritual model for authenticity and integrity, integration, groundedness

The Artifactual Level of Culture

The artifactual level showcases the obvious and visible aspects of culture most easily associated with an organization. For a church these include the physical location, architecture, worship space, placement of the altar, furnishings, and art, as well as tangible aspects of church life such as the service bulletins, website, nametags, bulletin boards, and newsletters. We can gain some understanding of a parish culture through observing such phenomena.

At this level of culture, status and authority are equated with formal position, title, and institutional name. The leader can easily become the personification of the parish and the bearer of its institutional myth. The identity of the leader and that of the parish can merge into a blended image of projections from past experiences and unspoken expectations of parish members. Differentiating between projection and reality is important in the work of transformational leadership. Differentiation means that the leader will be able to clearly know the difference between who they are and whom others believe them to be. One of the hallmarks of transformational leadership is the ability to differentiate self from institutional *persona* while still accepting the role of institutional narrator, a responsibility that paradoxically requires more than the ability to tell the institution's story; it involves knowing and telling the leader's own story. The *deeper* knowledge of self prevents the seduction of a leader to believe automatically either the accolades or criticisms.

The Structural and Behavioral Levels of Culture

Both the structural and behavioral levels of culture unearth tangible forms of the organization of people and worship and how congregants participate in ministry inside the parish and out in the world. The weekly and annual calendars of parish

activities, the worship bulletins, and an organizational chart are all indicators of how the leadership and life of a parish are ordered. If these artifacts do not exist, this is also important information about parish culture.

Vestry and committee meetings are other venues that help a leader to decipher communication dynamics and patterns, mission, and the distribution and exercise of power. Questions that can be asked of such gatherings include:

- How are members oriented? Prepared to lead?
- Who convenes the meeting?
- Who attends?
- Who plans the agenda?
- How often and where do they meet?
- When and how do the meetings begin?
- How is leadership experienced?
- What opportunities are there for Bible study and/or theological reflection?
- What frameworks and norms exist for discussion and decision-making?
- How is mission integrated?

The answers to questions such as these are revealing of the culture of a parish.

Another way to access the various levels of culture is to attend the ubiquitous coffee hour following a parish worship service, and consider the following questions:

- How do people hear about it?
- Where is it located? How accessible is it?
- What time is it scheduled?
- Who attends?
- What are people given to eat and drink?
- Do the clergy attend? With whom do they talk?
- Are name tags available, and are they worn?
- How are visitors greeted, and then treated?
- How are members treated?

When my husband and I first moved to the diocese of Indianapolis, we visited every parish in the deanery searching for a home. One Sunday we visited a parish that to our surprise had the bishop visiting them. When we walked into the church, no one looked at or greeted us. We found our seats and sat in observant silence. We were barely greeted during the Peace and, after a beautiful service, we processed out to attend the reception. Members joyfully greeted one another and gathered in clusters of familiar friends. The bishop spotted us and came over to hug us. His huge smile and embrace of us was food for our souls and a gesture of our friendship. No one in this congregation knew he was a friend of ours until that moment. After this, a number of people came up to say hello and to welcome us. As we left to go home, we looked at each other and knew that we would not return to this parish. The structural elements of the culture were exactly what we expected—everything was identifiably Episcopalian—but the behavior of the congregants was the antithesis of an inclusive, hospitable, loving community. We immediately learned that in this parish status mattered more than the Baptismal Covenant.

These levels of culture require leadership with excellent organizational and planning skills. They need leaders with strong administrative skills and the ability to match people and resources in ways that maximize the parish's ability to accomplish its mission. Even when there is staff designated to do this work, the rector must be capable of supervising the work. The clergy leader is responsible for the workings of the whole system and its parts and serves as the "creator of community." Creating an environment in which people feel purpose, belonging, a shared identity, security, and trust is a responsibility that sets the transforming leader apart from others.

An example of this kind of leadership can be seen in a healthy and growing parish that is part of a diocese

experiencing budgetary problems and chronic leadership lethargy. The rector recognized the need to attract younger individuals and families and began by first educating the vestry about the need to do this. Although this highly successful congregation seemed an unlikely candidate for major change, this rector was able to show the congregation its future through a study of demographics in the Episcopal Church. He engaged the vestry in analyzing the research data and its implications for the parish. Once the vestry members understood the urgency, and realized that the initiative was not about "fixing a failure" but about ensuring the future, they supported the change and the hiring of a staff person to develop programs and services for this demographic.

The message was clear: "We are serious about our ministry to young individuals and families." The parish is seeing a revitalization of youth programs, and more activities for young parents and children are planned. This particular leader framed this initiative in ways that helped all of the parish feel included in this process of forming a culture of lifelong learning so that everyone, from cradle to maturity, could see that their formation is always important, even as more resources and attention were being provided to a younger demographic.

The Philosophical Level of Culture

The fourth level of culture is not so easily or directly ascertained as that of the structural and behavioral levels. This is the place of unquestioned assumptions and unchallenged core beliefs and values. Most of the behaviors at the philosophical level are unconscious, yet they have an enormous effect on the community of a parish. This level is deeper than what we can see, and it goes to the heart of *why* a congregation gathers to worship. It is where the meaning of the more visible and outward signs of life in a faith community exists.

An example of this level is the way in which a congregation "passes the Peace." This act reveals deeply held values and beliefs about the ecclesial responsibility for creating relationships and a community of belonging. It is a manifestation of a congregation's beliefs about physical touch and connection, the role of worship, the importance of community, and the meaning of the Eucharist. During the passing of the Peace in one parish, nearly all of the people move fluidly across and up and down the aisles, erupting into quiet but brief exchanges, hugging, smiling, and greeting warmly all whom they encounter. In another parish the parishioners pass the Peace only to those who are in their immediate proximity. In still another congregation a number of people remain kneeling in prayer during the passing of the Peace. These practices reflect the cultural differences that lie at the deeper levels of parish life.

An examination of why a parish engages in certain practices is a way to ensure that there will not be a disconnect between the activities of a parish and the beliefs they espouse as precious or unchanging. Without congruence between their values and actions, parishes can lose a sense of integrity and can easily become overextended and frenzied in their program offerings. Actions and activities that are not tethered to core values can easily lead to forms of institutional narcissism, meaningless group activity, and mission silos. They may possess the trappings of community but lack the substance and meaning of what makes a community.

The Foundational Level of Culture

The last level of culture is what I call the foundational level, and is very close to the philosophical level, but it is even less visible. Core values and faith identity reside here; this is the level of spiritual depth in which something greater and more powerful than anyone or anything is encountered. This level houses the basic assumptions about why we exist, our purpose

and reason for being, and our relationship to the Divine. It is the place of connection to a larger reality and a transcendent circle of belonging, a place of deep knowing in which we understand and feel that we are all part of the same Divine Source of all life.

This deeply spiritual and transcendent place has no easy or direct route to it. It can't be commanded or demanded to appear but is most accessible through attention to the other levels of culture and through a disciplined practice of reflection, prayer, meditation, and the study of Scripture.

Many of us have experienced the gift of grace and congruence in which we feel connected to the Divine. I recall a beautiful homily at the ordination of a priest that left the congregation breathless and in awe, or the experience of my parish when our building was undergoing renovation and we were invited to worship on a glorious Easter Sunday in a Jewish synagogue. The ability to cross such divides and be in relationship and unity with those whom we may usually see as only different was a taste of the transcendent, of what heaven is. These experiences not only leave us speechless, but inspired and full of hope that we might be able to live out God's love after all.

We have also likely experienced times when actions are not synchronous with what is said or believed:

- a parish perceives itself as warm and friendly but does not greet newcomers at coffee hour;
- church members express discomfort when a homeless, disheveled person wanders into the Sunday service;
- volunteers are not given adequate meeting space or the resources necessary to carry out an assignment;
- lay leaders are engaged in diocesan and national mission but are offered no parish support;
- members serve in positions of responsibility indefinitely without being given an honorable out;
- lay employees are offered pay and benefits that are close to or below the poverty level.

If disconnects such as these are not recognized and resolved over time, the incongruence between actions and the foundational beliefs and values deepens and widens, leaving a groove of undifferentiated and chronic dis-ease, a pernicious form of cynicism, and a significant erosion of trust in the authenticity of the clergy and the congregation.

In one urban parish with which we worked, there was a large network of guilds and ad hoc program groups, each with its own distinctive history, agenda, and fundraising activities. Each group felt it was contributing to the mission of the parish and serving legitimate needs. There was poor communication and little or no collaboration between them. The larger purpose of the church and its mission of unity in Christ had become buried in a thicket of competitive activities and endless meetings.

Understandably, the newly called rector wanted to disband these traditional and often competitive groups. He felt they were "a drag on the mission," even though there appeared to be a strong allegiance to them in the parish. Our counsel was to start with first understanding the history and the existence of guilds as a way to obtain valuable data about the culture. The rector and the vestry could then better determine what should be retained and what should not.

The rector visited the guilds and groups, observed their activities, talked with the members, and learned a lot about them and the parish itself. Because he took the time to understand the history and more accurately read the culture, he was able to understand how the guilds and groups had come into being, how they had veered away from the larger purpose, and how they had become disconnected from the deeper roots of the parish's mission.

The adaptive work of this rector was to realign the beliefs and actions. He invited the groups' leaders to weekly Bible study and created opportunities to bring them together on projects that served the whole parish. He also started a new

group for professional working women that met in the evenings rather than during the day. This opened up the membership, and the groups began to become less resistant to change. In doing so, they began to collaborate, and eliminated the duplication of projects and constant fundraising efforts.

Fredrica Harris Thompsett's observation in *We Are Theologians* bears repeating here: "With so much going on in our society and world, *what* we choose to notice reveals *who* we are." Traditionally, Episcopalians are called to understand a wider reality and be able to fully engage in a panoply of differing opinions and positions. This practiced discipline means that our leaders must have the capacity to hold the "tension of the opposites" together. They are to help the congregation pay attention to what is relevant and essential, and to remember that what is paid attention to affects identity and calling. Can the church minister to the world with authenticity and integrity when it denies these tensions and refuses to contribute to understanding?

The church is being called to pay attention to the current state of "creative incoherence" that William Sachs discovered in his research. The mind-numbing busyness in some parishes and the beautiful trappings and symbols that are treasured in others will not in the long run be a substitute for the search for answers to the ancient, universal, and profound vocational and mission questions we all experience: Who are we? For what purpose do we exist? What are we called to do? They are profoundly and deeply religious in nature. Those in positions of leadership in the church are charged with the primary responsibility to create opportunity and spaces in which to wrestle with these questions.

A Tool for Understanding Philanthropy

Every parish includes some form of outreach in its definition of identity and mission, but these efforts can become imprisoned

in unquestioned assumptions and unexamined mission activities. Understanding the different traditions of philanthropy and making a conscious decision about which one the parish must practice is a first step in making what is implicit explicit. A schema developed by D. Susan Wisely, former director of evaluation at the Lilly Endowment, defines three major philanthropic traditions: charity, improvement, and social reform.

Transforming leaders examine the foundational level of parish culture to determine which tradition is embedded and influences practices in the parish. For example, if charity is the tradition of giving in a parish, the primary intent is to alleviate suffering. The compassion for someone in immediate need recognizes the state of crisis and guides the desire to give *now*. If the tradition is improvement of the lives of those in need, then the strategy changes to one of equipping the individual or group with the capacity to improve their lives through education and opportunities. The initiative can begin in the now, but it will take time for change to happen. The third tradition of giving is social reform, the intent to change the system that creates and perpetuates the problem. In this instance, the primary strategy is a long-term effort requiring focused investment of time, money, and people resources.

Each of these strategies has an impact, but not all of them will be transformative in nature. Each one progressively requires more of the involvement of the donor; each one requires increasing levels of adaptive skills, those skills required when the problem is complex and unclear and the leader must engage those with the problem in resolving it. The questions with which parish leaders will need to wrestle include:

- What are our guiding principles?
- What are the implicit assumptions in our actions?
- What is our mission and vocation?

- What is the ultimate impact that we want our giving to have?
- Who is it that we are intending to serve?
- Are our actions congruent with our values?

These classifications of philanthropic practice provide a framework within which parishes can address these questions, evaluate their philosophy and mission of giving, and determine the desired impact. This is a responsible way the church can determine if it is engaged in transformational work and whether it has the right leadership in place to accomplish it.

Leadership is the fundamental process by which culture is formed and transformed, and the leader is the chief architect of culture. This means also having an understanding of the dynamics of change and how to manage it. Transformational leadership requires an understanding of how individuals, organizations, and communities respond to change.

Leading Change

The gap between ending the current reality and moving others into a future that looks different is the most challenging task for a leader who desires transformation. We know that the leader of transformational change must know the institutional story, the organization's historical trajectory over time, and the mega-narrative in which the organization's capacity for managing change resides. This capacity emerges from the key changes the organization has experienced, how it responded to these changes, and what organizational learning occurred as a result. Determining the parish's ability to manage change

reveals the strengths upon which to build as well as the weaknesses.

The most effective leaders of change are not only historians; they are analysts and prophets too. Once they understand the past and have read the larger reality in which they live, they can use their assessment to find the best way to proceed to the preferred future. This plan needs to be inspired by vision and translated into a blueprint for change that clearly explicates the urgency for change, the purpose and goals, and the strategies for achieving success. A thorough assessment and analysis can also reveal the degree of change being proposed and how to anticipate and deal with the ways the changes will affect particular individuals or groups of people.

The leader of transformational change is aware of both the type of change induced and level of culture that will be most affected. This awareness will help determine the most effective strategies for launching and managing successful change. The leader's assessment of the organization's capacity, readiness, and skill level is essential. It may be prudent to begin with lower risk, technical, or structural interventions as preparation for more transformative change if the congregation has had little experience with managing change successfully.

The deeper levels of organizational culture demand a higher level of skills. Clergy are not omnipotent, and expecting them to do and be everything is a setup for failure. Acknowledging their limitations and their gifts can liberate them to learn to appreciate and use the gifts and skills already present in the parish community. Acknowledging both gifts and limitations reduces a leader's blind spot and provides a broader, more comprehensive picture of what the leadership in the parish needs in order to bring about transformational change.