

# Discerning the mind of the Deanery

*In what Spirit and in what manner should Christian communities (including deanery synods) take counsel together?*

*Many dioceses are delegating increased responsibilities to their deaneries – and deaneries themselves are discovering new opportunities for mission. Both these developments test the deanery synod’s ability to take effective decisions. John Cole, formerly National Adviser (Unity-in-Mission) for the Church of England, explores the change in culture that may be required.*

**Calling, gifting God,**

We would be whole

We would be holy.

Anoint us

Surprise us

Delight us

Renew us

Release your gifts in us

For one another and for you. Amen<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Deaneries – called and gifted

Deaneries have a unique contribution to make in the service of God’s mission – for three reasons: a) their diversity, b) their flexibility, and c) their constituency.

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer of the Churches Together in England Forum 2003

**a) Diversity - An extended family**

A deanery is self-evidently *diverse*:

- The different parishes, large and small, urban and rural, inner city, outer suburban, sometimes including lively charismatic Evangelical churches, sometimes equally lively congregations in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. And there may be all sorts of other exciting mission initiatives, ‘Fresh Expressions’ etc.
- All the talents and experience of the Deanery Synod members, especially (dare we say it?) amongst the laity – never mind the extraordinary range of talent across the different congregations.

This diversity above all is what gives the deanery its unique potential as a resource – called and gifted – in the service of God’s mission. Too often, however, this self-same diversity leaves the deanery synod paralysed and ineffective – condemned as “nothing more than a talking shop”.

**b) Flexibility - A voluntary association**

Of all the tiers within the governance of the Church of England, the deanery – by its very informality – is uniquely *flexible*. The deanery is a *voluntary* association. The only formal institutional role of the deanery synod is to serve as the electoral college for Diocesan and General Synods.

Some would argue that this is a weakness – and some have presented the case for abolishing deaneries altogether. But this informality could equally well be a strength. Beyond its electoral responsibilities the deanery synod can very nearly do what it likes – or else it can choose to do nothing at all!

**c) Constituency - Serving a complex and inter-dependent society**

The inter-dependent nature of contemporary society is also self-evident. Even within rural areas, people’s daily lives are inter-twined with others

across an area much larger than the village or market town. In urban areas the boundaries of parishes are almost meaningless - the tragic exception being those communities of deprivation, often close to the edge of our towns and cities, that can be almost ghetto-like in their isolation. If practical ways are to be found to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in this complex environment, the most obvious way for local congregations to collaborate is through the deanery.

### ***Counter-balancing hierarchy – a reminder of the history***

Deanery synods emerged in the Church of England as part of a long journey away from undiluted ‘hierarchy’, where the bishop or the incumbent priest took the decisions for the benefit of all, and where the people acquiesced – or else refused to do the minister’s bidding and became ‘non-conformist’.

Before synodical government was put in place in 1970, parish representatives met in ‘Ruri-Decanal Conferences’. These had no executive power whatever, and were almost universally dismissed as ‘talking-shops’ with little purpose or value. The worry might be that, four decades later, some deaneries have failed to notice that anything has changed!

When the synodical system was set up, the model chosen to temper any hierarchical excesses was something very close to parliamentary democracy. As a result, it is still assumed in most deanery synods that the only formal way of taking a decision is by majority vote. Unfortunately this can then easily mean that nothing is ever formally resolved apart from pious platitudes and administrative trivia. Instead, if any initiatives *are* planned at deanery level, guess who plans them:- the ‘hierarchs’!

### ***Delegated responsibilities – but unchanged structures***

In recent years, however, in a number of dioceses, deanery synods have been given more responsibility. Tasks previously tackled at diocesan level

have been delegated to the deaneries – for example, a) apportioning parochial share payments and b) deciding how to deploy a limited number of stipendiary personnel. Handling such potentially divisive discussion requires disciplined and skilled chairmanship. Meanwhile the diocese has neatly side-stepped all the complaints!

More positively, many deaneries are now looking for ways to act corporately in sponsoring mission initiatives and other projects, sometimes involving employing their own staff. Deaneries are discovering that opportunities for creative initiatives are almost endless – but that new corporate structures might help. This development triggered a motion from Coventry Diocese at the July 2010 meeting of the General Synod – which was passed in an amended form as follows:

“This Synod

(a) welcomes the wide measure of discretion that each diocese has to determine the extent of any delegation of functions to deaneries;

(b) notes the increasing range of legal vehicles available to deaneries where it is agreed that a more executive role may help in promoting the mission of the Church; and

(c) invites the Archbishops' Council, in consultation with the House of Bishops, to produce updated guidance on available options, with examples of how recent practice has been developing.”

Deanery synod members are invited to watch this space!

### ***Taking counsel together***

From all of this, the question arises as to what are the best ways of conducting business and taking decisions in the deanery synod:

- Ways that honour and exploit the diversity that makes up a deanery

- Ways that foster an attitude of mutual cherishing among the parishes
- Ways that release the potential of local congregations to collaborate in expressing Gospel through word and deed across the wider area.

In 1997 in a Parish and People Briefing, “Setting the Agenda,” Maurice Vassie<sup>2</sup> challenged deaneries in terms of the *content* of their synod agenda. Today, in many places, synod agenda have now changed dramatically – with new responsibilities, new mission opportunities, all adding up to a new sense of vocation. So the challenge now relates to synod *process* and *procedures*. **In what Spirit and in what manner should Christian communities (including deanery synods) take counsel together?**

What process – supported by what procedures – will increase the responsiveness of the whole deanery to their shared vocation? A whole culture needs to be rediscovered – one that is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. It is about discerning the mind of the deanery and attuning it to the mind of Christ. It’s a culture of shared purposeful commitment leading to action.

## 2. Decision-making – Quaker-style

“Learning to listen to each other and to God” was the sub-title of the Briefing ‘*Studying the Bible Together*’ that was circulated with the Deanery Resource Unit mailing in Spring 2010. It is a discipline that is not limited to Bible study. It is a key element in all faithful decision-making amongst the People of God.

The Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers) has developed this discipline of listening to each other and to God into a unique process, which they use whenever Friends meet – as they describe it - ‘for worship and business’.

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<sup>2</sup> Although some references are now dated, “Setting the Agenda” by Maurice Vassie, then lay chair of Derwent Deanery Synod, speaks of engaging lay people in the deanery’s unique prophetic mission (copies are still available – see back cover)

There seem to be two essential preconditions:

- Firstly, all participants need to accept that the group will always contain within it greater wisdom than they themselves possess individually.
- Secondly, those in the group who share a majority opinion need always to be aware that they could be *wrong*!

With these elements in place, a group can begin to work to discover ‘the sense of the meeting’ without fearing either that it will be forced to move only at the speed of the slowest or that a noisy minority will be able to maintain a permanent veto. What matters is the search for God’s wisdom and God’s truth – in other words, the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Quakers listen for the leading of the Holy Spirit largely in silence and with enormous patience. This can be hard for those who only know what they think when they speak it aloud. Those who are the first to speak in a group discussion can be amongst the most creative; but they are equally likely to inhibit genuine exploration and listening, driving people down a particular line of thought and preventing them from considering other options and other perspectives. It may well be the quiet, reluctant voices, speaking slowly after a long silence, who are the ones most worth heeding. Quaker practice introduces a valuable bias towards these quiet voices.

Quakers are not looking for consensus, still less for decisions based on majority voting. “No vote is taken, as we are not trying to reach consensus or establish the will of the majority, but to work in harmony with the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the aim is to discover the mind or ‘sense’ of the meeting, the critical task is to translate what is emerging as the collective wisdom from the

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations are taken from <http://www.quaker.org.uk/how-quaker-meetings-take-decisions>

discussion into language that can be recorded in the minutes. It may seem odd to be spending time in the meeting drafting and agreeing the wording of the minute of the discussion; but this is in fact the moment when the shape of what has been decided comes clear. The decision is not so final that it cannot be revisited in future, nor does it necessarily carry the full consent of everyone present; but it is likely to be robust enough to allow action to begin.

The article on the Quaker web site acknowledges the delicate balance in this way of doing things: “If you don't agree with the decision reached, try to set aside your disappointment and accept that the decision has nevertheless been reached collectively through the discipline of waiting together in the Light, in a sincere search for love and truth. The right decision is important, but no more so than reaching it by the right process - a process in which you played your full part. Remember that unity is not the same as unanimity.”

Once it has become clear that sufficient common will is emerging in support of a particular course of action, the practical questions of ‘who does what?’ can safely be left to be sorted between individuals outside the meeting.

#### *In your church meetings<sup>4</sup>:*

- *Would Quakers find it odd that you spend so much time at meetings getting people to volunteer for jobs?*
- *Could it be that, in our synods, we cannot trust that enough people have fully committed themselves to what we claim to have decided?*

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<sup>4</sup> In deaneries, a good place to study the issues raised in this booklet could well be the Deanery Standing Committee.

## The Sound of Silence

*This true story illustrates how listening in silence to the Holy Spirit can yield remarkable results.*

In 1988 the Lambeth Conference committed the Anglican Communion to a 'Decade of Evangelism' leading up to the millennium. In England the announcement seemed to divide local congregations sharply into two groups. Both seemed confident that they knew what 'evangelism' meant. So one group rushed off to organise expensive evangelistic campaigns - and the other group made it clear that they wouldn't touch such enterprises with a barge-pole!

In one diocese the Board of Mission met to consider its response. Debate, it seemed, between these two groups would be a dialogue of the deaf. So how might they discover the direction the Holy Spirit wanted them to travel?

Someone made the predictable suggestion: Let's pray about it. So they did. Members of the Board of Mission spent twenty minutes in silence, considering what scripture passage(s) came to mind when they prayed about the forthcoming Decade of Evangelism.

The feedback produced a level of consensus that took everyone by surprise. The surprise lay in the totally unexpected scripture passage that came to so many people's minds: "Feed my lambs – feed my sheep" from the final chapter of St John's Gospel.

A Decade of Evangelism, they discovered, was less about making converts and much more about nourishing people on their faith journey – on their way to acknowledging God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who was already relating to them in their hearts. This insight into the deeper processes by which God evangelises only became widely understood after the very limited success of a whole cluster of expensive evangelistic campaigns half way through the Decade.<sup>5</sup>

This particular Board of Mission had taken the risk of breaking with its normal procedures in order to listen to the Holy Spirit. And the outcome surpassed all expectations.

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<sup>5</sup> A press release published by the Evangelical Alliance on 31 October 1994 acknowledged how little these campaigns had achieved. A survey had revealed that the number of new converts was minimal.



### 3. Consensus – in the United Reformed Church

In 2007 the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church agreed new ‘Consensus Procedures’ for the conduct of all its councils and meetings.<sup>6</sup>

In the new procedures, *consensus* is when everyone wholeheartedly accepts a proposed course of action, even though for a minority it might not be their first preference.

When consensus cannot be achieved, the procedures invite people to work towards *agreement*, where a small minority who cannot accept the proposal is willing to stand aside so that the matter can be resolved.

If there is no agreement, various alternative routes are proposed in the hope that in the end a consensus proposal will emerge. Only if all else fails and the decision is urgent, are committees allowed to resolve matters by a majority decision.

The procedures make a helpful distinction between three stages by which any major issue ought to be addressed:

*i. The information stage*

This is the stage when an issue is introduced, and a range of possible options and responses can be set out. The information can come from visiting speakers, in reports, audio-visual presentations etc – and can include the initial presentation of a choice of possible responses. It is a time for questioning and making sure that the members of the meeting have enough evidence and understanding to move to stage two.

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<sup>6</sup> See

[http://www.urc.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/general\\_assembly/docs/assembly\\_record\\_07.pdf](http://www.urc.org.uk/what_we_do/general_assembly/docs/assembly_record_07.pdf)

## ii. *The discussion stage*

At this stage everyone needs to be given the opportunity to express their views about the issue and the possible responses that have been suggested. The procedures recommend whatever it takes to achieve an open discussion and lively debate – e.g. prayer, buzz groups, time for thinking and informal conversation during a break.

The goal of the discussion is to describe a specific proposal which can then be put to the meeting for decision.

## iii. *The decision-making stage*

The text of the proposal from the discussion stage is to be displayed for all to see throughout this session. Minor changes of wording can then be made, but if major new insights emerge, then it will be better to revert to discussion mode.

The person chairing this session (in the language of the United Reformed Church, this is the Moderator) needs to ensure that at this stage the debate about the proposal is about whether this is the right way forward. It is not a time for repeating arguments previously presented at the discussion stage.

When the meeting seems ready, the Moderator's task is to pose a series of questions:

- Do we have a consensus to support this proposal?
- Do we have a consensus not to support this proposal?
- Do we have strong but not unanimous support? If so:
- Are those who do not support the proposal as their first preference content to accept it so that the matter can be deemed to be resolved by *consensus*?

- Are there still those who cannot accept the proposal? If so, are these ready to allow the proposal to be carried forward by *agreement*?
- Are there still those who cannot accept the proposal even by agreement?

In this last case, a variety of options is open to the meeting under the guidance of the Moderator, e.g. adjourn to allow for reconsideration later, ask individuals to do further work on the issue, find a way of by-passing the issue so that it does not need to be resolved, or even agree that there are diverse views that Christians may hold with equal integrity.

Clearly these consensus procedures are time-consuming, but they at least offer a model for dealing with bigger issues that should lead to a committed outcome. In many ways they attempt to codify the more implicit process followed by the Quakers.

To make the whole procedure work, participants need to come in the same frame of mind that Quakers bring to their decision-making. Decision-making within a Christian community – least of all in the loose voluntary grouping that is a deanery – should never be a virility contest between competing points of view!

*In your church meetings:*

- *Are you stuck at the information stage?*
- *Is yours the still all too typical synod agenda of news from the diocese, news from the parishes and (hopefully) an interesting visiting speaker?*

- *If so, how will you respond when people say this is all they expect from a synod meeting?*
  - *Members representing their local interests don't want to do more?*
  - *They don't feel they have authority to do more?*
  - *In four evening meetings per year, there's no time to do more?*
- *What use can you make of the 'three stages' distinction in planning your synod agenda?*

## Three Practical Steps

The United Reformed Church procedures hint at three practical steps that are likely to improve the chances of effective discussion and confident decision-making:

### **1. The room layout**

When people are seated in rows, theatre-style, a balanced and informed discussion drawing on all the wisdom in the room is well nigh impossible. Individuals in the 'audience' can do little more than listen dutifully to the voices from the platform (and cheer and boo as appropriate!). Alternatively they can heckle!

The URC procedures recommend table groups. These seem to work best when there are not more than six people at a table, set in a horseshoe around the room. The horseshoe (rather than a complete circle) then allows the use of a screen for presentations when necessary.

For balanced discussion in deanery synods – even in table groups – bitter experience suggests a) that the clergy should be kept together in their own table groups and b) that representatives from the same parish should be encouraged **not** to sit together!

## **2. *Using coloured cards to assess mood***

For discussion in plenary sessions and when moving to a decision, the URC procedures recommend that all those present are issued with two cards in different colours – orange and blue.

As points are raised in discussion, participants can be asked to show their reaction – orange to indicate a degree of warmth towards the views being expressed, blue to show a degree of coolness. The person chairing (or ‘moderating’) the discussion can then spot people who could give reasons for their different responses.

It is a considerably more civilised way of discerning the mood of the meeting than by judging the loudness of the cheers and boos!

## **3. *Timed Speeches***

Setting a time limit on what individuals may say (perhaps, as suggested in the URC procedures, five minutes in discussion and three minutes when it comes to decision-making) forces the speaker to concentrate on his or her key points. Even these time limits may be too generous if the reluctant speakers are to be heard. A useful discipline might be to agree that no individual should speak more than once.

Time limits can prevent rambling and curtail mini-lectures. They can, however, reduce debate to a series of disconnected statements, especially if people start to ‘play the system’ by writing three minute monologues in advance!

## **4. “But where shall wisdom be found?”<sup>7</sup>**

For centuries tribes and communities across the world have developed their strategies for purposeful discussion and group decision-making. Over the generations the processes have been refined and stylised – gaining huge symbolic meaning. How the tribe takes its decisions is frequently what now gives it its identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Job 28, v12

## ***a) A universal quest***

A common thread, however, seems to be that, underlying the desire to find a shared commitment leading to action, there is also a deeper search for ‘wisdom’. It is one of the main strands in the Old Testament; it is the pivotal issue within the Book of Job; it is also the driving concern behind ancient Greek philosophy. The danger is that, as debate within the Churches has become increasingly politicised, we have forgotten to keep asking where wisdom is to be heard – and heeded.

Folk wisdom can teach important lessons that might shape more effective decision-making. For example, archetypal stories are told in almost every culture that relate to discerning where *power* lies. The constant message in many of the stories is that the unlikeliest and the weakest are the ones who win out in the end.

### ***Questioning power and status***

Well-known fables like the Hare and the Tortoise or the Lion and the Mouse challenge people’s assumptions about size, strength and speed.<sup>8</sup>

In the traditional pantomime, the glass slipper fits lowly Cinderella’s foot and she gets her prince. The archetypal message is that she ‘wins’ not because she is down-trodden or exploited, but because she has the right *character* and *attitude* even though she has not been accorded the right *status*.

A classic example of this archetypal tale is the story in the Old Testament of the prophet Samuel lining up the seven eldest sons of Jesse the Bethlehemite (1 Samuel 16) to see which should be king in place of Saul. After he has rejected all seven, Samuel asks plaintively, “Is there anyone else?” And the answer, of course, is that there is also the youngster, David

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<sup>8</sup> Read simple versions of Aesop’s fables on [www.aesopfables.com](http://www.aesopfables.com)

– but “he’s looking after the sheep” - David, the youngest, the one without expectations, the one who actually had the ability, the one just getting on with the job.

If there was ever any lingering doubt about David’s ability, it was soon removed – when he used his shepherd-boy’s sling to kill the Philistine warrior hero Goliath.

If wise and effective decision-making is to happen in the deanery – if this loose association of gifted individuals and Christian communities is to realise its potential in the service of God’s mission – our untested assumptions about power and status will constantly need to be questioned.

No-one need be ashamed to admit this. Even the ‘wise men from the east’ assumed they would find their new king at the royal palace in Jerusalem – rather than in an anonymous house down the road in Bethlehem. (Matthew 2.1-12)

### ***Questioning who is inside and who is outside***

But there is also a wider perspective: Wise Christians will listen not just in the quiet corners of their own communities. They will also listen outside their own circle.

The Israelites, nursing their self-pity in exile in Babylon, would surely have been shocked to hear the poet (whom we know as ‘the second Isaiah’) celebrating God’s choice of Cyrus, the infidel tyrant of Persia, to bring about their return home to Jerusalem. (Isaiah 45 1-6 and 48 14-15) Yet this theological interpretation of the power politics of the time highlights an important truth:

It is very easy for institutions such as Churches to get trapped in their own cultures and concerns and to forget to look outside themselves for

wisdom, inspiration and solutions to problems. The Church of England, despite wanting to be a means through which the whole nation can grow in Christian discipleship, is in practice as sectarian as everyone else!

Members of other Churches and those involved in secular not-for-profit and voluntary organisations could all offer fresh perspectives – as could key people in other faith groups. Wise and humble disciples of Jesus Christ will never pre-judge that anyone is unlikely to be the voice through whom the Holy Spirit may speak – or be the agent through whom God may act.

*In your deanery:<sup>9</sup>*

- *Who in fact has power and/or is accorded the highest status?*
  - *The Area Dean?*
  - *The clergy?*
  - *The largest and apparently most 'successful' parish?*
- *Where are effective decisions mostly taken and by whom?*
- *If the archetypal stories are pointing to a universal truth, where should you be looking*
  - *for those who, from a perceived position of weakness, are just getting on with the job?*
  - *For those who, despite being outside the circle, are in fact 'God's servants'?*

*And how will you listen to them?*

- *What will persuade your local congregations to invest in the mission potential of the deanery, and thus empower its synod?*

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<sup>9</sup> Substitute as appropriate for other kinds of church meeting!



## ***b) An issue of competence***

The underlying search for wisdom will always be put at risk if synods are asked to decide on matters that are beyond their competence. Too often synods are asked to express an opinion on matters where truth and wisdom ultimately reside only with God and where – as yet – mere mortals only see “puzzling reflections as in a mirror”. (1 Corinthians 13.12)

Decision-making within Christian communities will always take for granted the provisionality of our decisions. It will accept, as the Quakers and the United Reformed Church do, two key propositions:

1. Whatever we decide, it is enough to act on for now, provided we have listened hard enough and widely enough
2. Our differences of opinion arise inevitably because we do not and cannot have – even with the leading of the Holy Spirit – a final and complete ‘God’s eye view’ of the matter.

When it comes to expressing our opinions, or even asserting our principles, we can take ourselves too seriously – as even righteous Job discovered:

The LORD said to Job:

“Can a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?  
He who argues with God, let him answer it.”

Then Job answered the LORD:

“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?  
I lay my hand on my mouth.  
I have spoken once, and I will not answer;  
twice, but I will proceed no further.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Job 40, 1-5 (Revised Standard Version)

## ***Even those in hierarchies must listen!***

*It is true that the abbot of the monastery is given the last word in all decision-making. However, Benedictine community life also values the views and opinions of each of its members. The Rule of St Benedict – written 16 centuries ago – instructs the abbot as follows:*

*"As often as any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the abbot call together the whole community and himself set forth the matter. . . All should be called for counsel, for God often reveals what is better to the younger."*

*(Rule of St Benedict 3:3)*

### ***c) How relevant is 'Indaba'?***

The Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in 2008 first brought the African tribal process of Indaba to the notice of Churches across the Anglican Communion. The process was used in a deliberate attempt to depoliticise the discussions in the Conference, where strong disagreements were likely to be expressed about very sensitive issues.

Since then many have wondered, perhaps with a touch of romanticism, to what extent Indaba could be adapted for wider use in the Communion, both nationally and locally.

In an introductory paper<sup>11</sup> for the Lambeth bishops, the Most Rev Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town, explained the essence of Indaba in these terms:

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<sup>11</sup> "The Essence of Indaba" – the full text, along with a number of other resource papers, is now on the Continuing Indaba web site  
<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/continuingindaba>

*Indaba* is a Zulu word for a gathering for purposeful discussion. An Indaba first and foremost acknowledges that there are issues that need to be addressed effectively to foster on-going communal living.

The purpose of the discussion is to find out the deeper convergences that might hold people together in difference and come to a deeper understanding of the topic or issues discussed. This will be achieved by seeking to understand exactly the thinking behind positions other than my own.

Indaba works best when participants do not go into the discussion with a hidden agenda nor prior solution. When you bring the issues, others add with their own voice and a greater truth is revealed – and in the process people grow, learn and understand not only the issue, but each other.”

Formal conversations in Indaba style are part of the tribal culture across Africa and in many other parts of the world. As a discipline for purposeful discussion in community, there are obvious similarities with the Quaker process. The main difference between the two reflects our less tribal Western culture: The powerful shared memory of the tribe is of necessity replaced by the written text of the minutes of the Quaker meeting.

The bishops of the Anglican Communion used Indaba at the 2008 Lambeth Conference to address a series of themes in the context of Bible study. It proved to be a valuable process which enabled them to listen to each other at a deep level, even when (perhaps especially when) they were discussing the sensitive issues that so painfully divide the Anglican Communion at the moment.

However, a review of the process at the Lambeth Conference by Stephen Lyon<sup>12</sup>, a member of the organising group, reveals how much effort had to be put into making it work – and into convincing the bishops that it was

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<sup>12</sup> Presented as a paper to the Anglican Consultative Council in 2009

worth trying. Teams of skilled facilitators, ‘animateurs’ and ‘rapporteurs’ shaped the themes for the Indaba-style group discussion. They controlled how the themes were presented and were responsible for how the subsequent discussion was reported.

Indaba required an enormous effort – as well as the authoritative backing of the Archbishop of Canterbury – to make it work at the Lambeth Conference. It was hard work, even though it was in a setting where the participants already had a strong sense of their own collegiality.

The Indaba process differs from other open-ended discussion groups in two ways – the manner in which the issues for discussion are presented and the manner in which the conversation is recorded. Considerable skill and sensitivity is needed for both tasks. Similar skills are needed from the United Reformed Church Moderator if their consensus procedures are to operate effectively. Just putting people into small groups and hoping that seemingly endless discussion will eventually bear fruit is clearly not enough.

Nonetheless, insights from Indaba have considerable value. In line with other folk traditions and with the ‘up-ending of values’ that is a recurring theme in both Old and New Testaments, the essence of Indaba is *an attitude of mind*. Even the loosest of open-ended discussion groups will achieve results if the participants are sufficiently deeply committed to each other and to addressing the issue.

The attitude of mind highlighted by Indaba is one that combines humility, generosity, trust and expectancy. Seeking this attitude of mind in our dealings with one another and in our decision-making may be a key lesson to be learned by all Christian communities, and a key motivator for a shift in culture within our churches.

We perhaps just need to read a familiar passage from the New Testament with greater awareness:

*"I, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

(Ephesians 4. 1-3)

### **3. Nurturing a culture-shift**

The move away from 'hierarchy' that led to the introduction of synodical government is part of a culture shift that still has a long way to run. A culture-shift is essentially a change in attitude of mind. Synodical government is one stage en route to an attitude of mind amongst Christ's disciples that no longer expresses dependency on hierarchy, but looks instead towards inter-dependency according to the diversity of gifts given to each.

Beren Hartless in the Parish & People booklet 'Sharing Local Ministry' (Spring 2009) gives it a practical focus when she states (p18) "Instead of viewing the church being gathered around a priest, people need to understand that the church itself is the priestly people of God, and that priestly functions can be shared throughout the congregation".

Shifts in culture, however, cannot be engineered. At the 2010 conference of Diocesan Adult Educationalists, a participant commented shrewdly, "We should be suspicious of non-organic metaphors, because they imply control."

In fact, it is questionable whether culture-change can be managed at all. With the advances in communications technology – mobile phones, text-

messaging, Facebook, Twitter etc - an older generation may recognise a culture-shift only because they discover they are no longer part of it!

Maybe what really makes 'Fresh Expressions of Church' *fresh* is the new and much more inter-active way in which participants choose to express their sense of community. They probably don't need the reminder; but if participants don't receive a text message each time to invite them to join the worship event, they feel they have been *excluded*.

### **Attitude, process, and procedures**

Whenever people meet in groups, their *attitude* to each other and to the task of their meeting is fundamental.

Their group *process* reflects and expresses this attitude of mind.

Good *procedures* can affirm a healthy group process - by codifying it (but not if people then forget that the process is what matters – and merely 'follow the rules'). Operating within good procedures can then also contribute over time to refining the process and changing the underlying attitudes. But there is no quick fix.

By contrast, inappropriate procedures frustrate people, inhibit relationships and reinforce negative attitudes. The damage is done quickly, but can take a long time to repair

All three elements inter-act in what can be either a virtuous or a vicious circle. Which way is the circle turning in your experience?

The changed attitude of mind that now seems to be required when representatives of Christian communities do business together (in the deanery or elsewhere) can perhaps be *nurtured*. Things can perhaps be done that will allow new and healthier patterns of behaviour to *grow* – like crops in the garden!

There seem to be several contributing factors:

- Developing healthy patterns of *decision-making*, as explored in this booklet – patterns and procedures that enable discernment of the mind of the Christian community *and* of the mind of Christ – and the humble quest for God’s wisdom through the Holy Spirit
- Providing the right environment within a Christian community that will enable individual adults to *learn* – to grow wiser and more discerning, rather than just to be fed with more information. For this we need to understand how the right kind of learning is most likely to take place.
- Adopting appropriate styles of *leadership* within the Christian community – especially, as in the deanery, where it is an association of several relatively autonomous communities each with their own vocation and sense of direction.

It is hoped that the issues of *learning* and of *leadership* can both be the subject of future Parish & People publications.

The real challenge, however, may lie here: Deaneries will only become serviceable in God’s mission when there is sufficient commitment from the parishes and mission initiatives in those deaneries to engage in whatever God is calling them to do together. This will not happen if they choose only to appoint as deanery synod members those who will guard their local vested interests. A clearly recognised and understood prophetic and missionary *agenda* is essential.

But before anything can happen, a corporate act of faith is required – an act of trust *firstly* that God has got significant things to be done for the sake of God’s Kingdom in the area of the deanery, and *secondly* that within the deanery and beyond God is giving all the resources needed for the work to be done – resources that are all the richer because of the diverse communities within which they may be found.

## Moving forward - Turning resolve into action

Some valuable clues into what is involved in turning a purposeful commitment into action were provided last year by Martin Cavender at a ReSource<sup>13</sup> evening for a Deanery in Oxford Diocese (as noted in Deanery Exchange – Autumn 2009). They include:

- 1 ) Don't rush important decisions – ideally raise the issue at one meeting, discuss it at the next, and only decide at the third (as recommended in the URC procedures):
- 2 ) Seven emotional responses are likely to be experienced at some stage or other in the development of any new enterprise - Enthusiasm; Panic; Despair; Search for the Guilty; Punishment of the Innocent; Praise; and Honour for all participants. Be prepared to handle them as they occur. People's *feelings* can usually be expected to trump their appreciation of the *facts* of the case. Above all, make sure people don't miss the last two on the list!
- 3 ) Every local congregation will have people who have gifts to contribute on each of six rungs on the 'Decision-Making Ladder' – as follows:
  - Identifying the issue
  - Determining the action needed
  - Evaluating the capabilities required and available ( recognising different gifts )
  - Decision-making (often the impatient!)
  - Implementation (sometimes the quiet ones!)
  - Monitoring (making sure ideas are followed up)

Try to use the right people for the right tasks!

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<sup>13</sup> Visit [www.resource-arm.net](http://www.resource-arm.net)