**The Church as Community : The Photo Mosaic**

*Image of a Photo Mosaic*

**Introduction.**

A photo mosaic is made up of computer generated images where each pixel of a large photograph is another whole photograph; hundreds or thousands of small pictures combine to make up a greater picture. You may have seen this being done on TV. I want to use the photo mosaic as an image of the Church.

The mosaic can become blurred in a number of ways.

1. We do not see the image clearly because only parts of it are in focus
2. We cannot see each pixel because it has become an indecipherable dot lost in the overall picture
3. We cannot see some of the pixels because they are overlapped or squeezed out of shape by other pixels

Applying this to the Church I want to explore:

1. How do factions and divisions undermine the mission of the Church
2. How might the individual feel ‘swamped’ by the Church community?
3. How might we maintain healthier relationships between individual church members?

Each of these will have some bearing on how the Church connects with society during the present Covid-19 crisis.

**PART ONE**

**Blurring the full image in favour of certain parts – how division undermines the mission of the Church.**

The Church is called to be a community of reconciliation and healing which can demonstrate through its unity that people who are diverse and different can live together in loving harmony.

Jesus prays for this in John 17 v 22-23:

*‘****I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you (Father) in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’***

Paul makes the same point in Galatians 3 v 28:

***‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’***

Paul points out in the previous verse that this special relationship focusing on the need for unity begins at baptism: ‘***All you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.’*** (cf. 1 Corinthians 12 v 3).

Baptism puts us into a renewed relationship with God through Christ and into a renewed relationship with others who share that same relationship with God. There is a certain interchangeability between the love of God and the love of those who are brothers and sisters in the family of God. This continues an important theme of the Hebrew Scriptures where the qualities of the covenant binding God and God’s people together were essentially family qualities. The steadfast love and faithfulness (*hesed we emet)* so often highlighted as the requirements of the covenant relationship are traditional Jewish family virtues.

The opening words of Vatican II echo this theme of the Church as loving community continuing the reconciling work of Christ when it quotes Paul’s words about ‘the glory of God shining in the face of Christ’ and speaks of the light of Christ ‘shining on the face of the Church.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the second half of the twentieth century some theologians took a new angle on this and argued that in the quality of its community life the Church should reflect the beauty and wholeness of God’s life as Trinity. Just as the Three Persons, Father, Son and Spirit enjoy complete harmony so should the Church. But a major criticism of this approach is that it does not give an adequate account of conflict or creative tension as a feature of human community. Mark Chapman suggests that rather than ‘harmony and balance and mutual reciprocity’ being the way we best express ourselves it may be that ‘tension, conflict and debate’ prove to be ‘at the heart of human society.’ So modelling church life on the Trinity will either set up unrealistic (and unhealthy) expectations for the Church or else be an invitation for the Church to retreat into a falsely conflict-free zone.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This takes us to the heart of what it is to be a Christian community. It is not about the formation of an anodyne organisation but instead one which is able to find the resourcefulness and resilience to maintain harmony in the face of difference and diversity. There may be clashes of outlook and understanding which impact on certain key beliefs and practices, but because we are ‘in Christ’ we are able to go on walking alongside and listening to each other respectfully and lovingly.

In their provocative book ‘For the Parish’ Andrew Davison and Alison Millbank are hesitant about ‘fresh expressions’ of church because they seem to encourage a culture of the like-minded. By contrast, they suggest, the parish church tries to accommodate what at times can be a huge range of people who have incompatible outlooks but who profess the same loyalty to Christ.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What is clear is that if as churches we fail to be communities of reconciliation and healing then we will undermine our credibility. As Colin Morris put it – we will have no more credibility than a bald man selling hair restorer on our doorstep!

Anglicanism has a long history of seeking to hold together wide divergences of opinion. Martyn Percy has an interesting meditation on the design of St Paul’s Cathedral, London by Sir Christopher Wren. Wren grew up in the Civil War (which proportionally wiped out more of the English population than any other war or pandemic in our history). His father was Dean of Windsor and lost his church living; his uncle was Bishop of Ely and spent most of the War in the Tower of London. It left a deep and negative impression on Wren who had a deep distaste for bitter religious conflict and this influenced his design of St Paul’s. Percy writes:

‘Wren’s response…was to produce a capacious space in which all can co-exist…If you look up you see light…It is not filled with many objects that mediate multiple messages, but is a space which invites new possibilities for being and thinking.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

In creating this design Wren represents the ethos of Anglicanism which is about allowing people ‘*room to breathe’* which translates one of the words in the Hebrew Scriptures for *‘healing/salvation’.* It does not encourage the use of ‘strait-jackets’ of belief or practice nor does it show intolerance towards those who will not wear them. ‘The vocation of Anglican theology is to bring people into the presence of God, and then to see what happens’ is the conclusion reached by one recent writer.[[5]](#footnote-5) Mark Oakley bemoans any distortion of this:

‘Nothing saddens me more than the thought of the poetic and radical richness and the imaginative playfulness of Christian tradition being daily simmered down into a self-exonerating interpretation of selected parts, often narrowly focused on who’s supposedly in and who’s out in God’s eyes.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here is an alternative approach from the Episcopal Church in The States:

‘If it is not necessarily the case that we ‘already know’ then …disagreement and debate may turn out to be the vehicles by which the Holy Spirit brings the Church to itself and opens the way to a grasp of the truth which corrects and deepens the initial positions of all parties…’[[7]](#footnote-7)

If we lack openness to and patience with one another and a recognition that our differences might be creative then the fractal mosaic becomes blurred in places and the full impact of its beauty is lost. As a result not only is the life of the Church impoverished but its mission is impaired. Community is key to both.

‘The building of true Christian community goes to the deepest roots of the world’s problems: the alienation, divisions, disintegration of basic human relationships. All this disintegration springs from sin, which separates us from one another through selfishness, greed, manipulation of one another for one’s own profit or pleasure. Through the healing of human relationships and the building of community poverty, hunger and oppression are struck in their very roots, and not simply in their superstructure. Only communities of communities will be powerful enough to change the world’s structures according to the will of Christ.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Questions to Part One.**

1. What do you think the Church, as Christian community, has to offer our society after the impact of Covid 19?
2. What would you identify as the personal benefits of belonging to the Church?
3. What do you consider most hinders the unity of Christian communities and what model do you favour to inspire their healing?
4. How osmotic do you think the edges of the Church should be?

**PART TWO.**

**Blurring individual pixels in favour of the whole picture – how church members can feel ‘swamped’ by the Church community.**

Henry Scott Holland once stood on the hill at Garsington and gazed over the valley to Cuddesdon College and parish church. He noticed a flock of starlings flying past and remarked how like the Anglican Church they were. Nothing it seemed kept the flock together – and yet the birds moved as one, even though they were all apart and retained their individual identity.

Individual identity matters. When Dave Tomlinson, a London Vicar, ran a pub-based group for lapsed Christians the most common reason for leaving the Church was ‘no one took my questions seriously.’ The main teaching method used in most Anglican churches in the UK is still the sermon – a monologue spoken *to* or *at* the congregation which does not invite response or refinement from the congregation through comment or question. 60% of those churches do not hold small study groups where dialogue would be more natural. Yet people are asking questions all the time – and want answers. If those questions are not heard or are handled superficially they often turn to doubt, disillusionment and finally departure. Some people will be looking to see how the Church responds to the many searching questions thrown up by Covid-19.

The Church has a poor record when it comes to hearing the individual. The Medieval Church made a distinction between the *ecclesia docens (the teaching church)* and the *ecclesia discens (the listening church).* Truth flowed in one direction as it passed from the Pope and his Bishops down to church congregations watched over by their priests. What is more the Church developed a very effective apparatus to silence voices of dissent. The opening sentence of Michael Lambert’s book, *Medieval Heresy* states: ‘The history of medieval heresy is the history of failure.’ Not until the sixteenth century did any attempt to challenge the authority of the Western Church succeed. A German monk, Martin Luther, stood up and testified:

‘I am bound by the Scriptures and my conscience is captive to the word of God. It is neither safe nor right to go against my conscience…Here I stand, may God help me. Amen.’

In Luther’s case God did help him through the invention of the printing presses, the political turmoil of the Holy Roman Empire under Charles V, the changing intellectual climate of Europe, and the possession by this young monk of remarkable linguistic skills, enabling him to translate the whole Bible into his native tongue. In addition he wrote popular hymns to articulate his central theme of salvation by faith alone, and through his lively preaching showed just how powerful a platform the church pulpit could be.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The following century of bitter strife between Protestant and Catholic established strongly authoritative and dogmatic stances on both sides of the divide in which church authorities were nervous of dissent and individual voices were not tolerated. To give just one example, when F.D. Maurice questioned not the *existence* of hell but whether hell might be *eternal* he was deposed from his Professorship in King’s College London. That was in 1853.

But in the century and a half which has followed a new nervousness has emerged. With the Church dwindling in numbers and influence it has become increasingly anxious about losing its identity and specially its distinctiveness in the wider society around it. The pressure for all its members to ‘toe the line’ has increased. We have seen this for example in doctrinal debates associated with David Jenkins the Bishop of Durham and in the protracted debates around what patterns of sexual behaviour are compatible with a Christian lifestyle. Such approaches encourage a ‘them and us’ mentality which whilst it might focus in the first instance on those ‘outside’ the Church can also very quickly turn towards those ‘inside’ the Church who are seen to be betraying its cause. The individual voice of dissent is not warmly welcomed in such an edgy Church. Richard Holloway describes just that experience as he gradually found his way out of the Church.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Bishop Stephen Pickard suggests that the New Testament does not support this closely guarded and rather inward-looking model of church life in which freedom of speech is largely repressed. He points out that the *logos* though whom everything came into being is the same *logos* who became flesh as human being in Jesus Christ.(see John 1 v 1-14). It is a theme which is repeated by Paul in Colossians where Christ is both ‘image of the invisible God’ (v 15) and ‘head of the church’. He comments:

‘All things in heaven and earth, at whatever level of life …are related *in some way* to the living God incarnate in Christ and alive in the Spirit’. God is a Being who is ‘infinitely expansive’ and God’s Spirit who rested on God’s Messiah now also rests on God’s people. This means that the Church’s life is

‘constantly propelled outwards, crossing boundaries, reconstituting persons, place and society in the process. It means who is ‘of the Church’ is an open matter. It can never be a question of ‘who is in’ and ‘who is out’ but it always remains an open question; the Church is an unfinished eschatological mystery.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rooting the identity of the Church in *creation* rather than *redemption* means that the life of the Church emerges from within the wider life of humanity and never becomes disconnected from it. It means that the Church can hear the questions being asked beyond its bounds as well as within it. Rather than seeing its role as primarily the protector of God’s truth it could begin to relax and enjoy being a humble purveyor of that truth.

The Church needs to learn openness to other voices by discovering how to be both **host** and **guest** of others.

In his book, *Hospitality as Holiness* Luke Bretherton writes about Church as **host:**

‘Inherent in the Christocentric performance of hospitality is the call to welcome the stranger. This includes welcoming those with least status – the weak and vulnerable, those members of society who are most easily marginalised, oppressed and rendered invisible. Among them are the suffering-dying but also the homeless, the severely disabled and the refugee.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

Ann Morisey has a superb example of this when she describes how a number of ‘down-town’ churches were transformed when they opened up their church halls to the homeless and provided food and clothing for them. It led to an experience of ‘cascades of grace’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

But among those who will be seeking spiritual shelter and restoration are the many who in recent months will have been disturbed or bereaved or disabled by Covid-19. What kind of hospitality and receptiveness can the Church show towards them?

The Church will also need to learn what it means to be the **guest** of others. Jesus did not shy away from such a possibility in the way the Church often has. In sending out the Seventy (Luke 10 v 1-7) he talked of being guests and in another place encouraged partnership with others. (Mark 9 v 38-41). When the Church learns to accept this possibility and to acknowledge its weakness and inadequacy it comes to be attentive to new voices and perspectives. New vistas of relationship and conversation are opened up. Ken Leech saw this thirty years ago:

‘Today, as the Constantine era grinds to its close…the essential minority character of the Church is again exposed to view. The danger is that the Church leaders and Church members may run away from what they mistakenly see as their nakedness and seek the emperor’s clothing…..Perhaps it is only as the Church is pushed to the margins of society that it will be forced to take up the agenda of the marginalised communities in society.’

**Questions for Part Two.**

1. What questions do you have that you want the Church to answer?
2. What steps could be taken to ensure the voice of the individual is heard in your church?
3. Why do you think the Church is more comfortable playing host than being guest?
4. What agendas do you think the Church is failing to hear today?
5. Do you believe some voices are so destructive of Christian community that they must be silenced?

**PART THREE.**

**Losing the proper balance between pixels so that some are partly hidden or distorted – how to develop healthy relationships between individual church members.**

A simple definition of Church might be this: to love God in the presence of others; to love others in the presence of God.

In John 15 v 12 Jesus says: ‘**Love one another as I have loved you.’ The fulfilment of this command gives each of us space to flourish and become fully who we are meant to be.**

Very often we think of our relationship in terms of actions rather than attitudes. Yet when all the actions have been performed there remains the question of what our underlying attitude is towards the other person.

‘The last act is the greatest treason

To do the right thing for the wrong reason.’

If there is anger, jealousy, resentment, contempt or other negative attitudes at work in our relationship with another person they will slowly poison the relationship and make it unhealthy. The pixels will begin to drift apart or else squeeze each other out of shape and the fractal mosaic will be spoilt. I once worked under a Suffragan Bishop and Archdeacon who would not speak to each other which made for a very difficult atmosphere in the vestry if they were both robing there before a service. When Gene Robinson was made Bishop of New Hampshire in 2004 he wore a bullet-proof vest knowing how much some church people despised him as a partnered gay person.

A church member in my York congregation was in his nineties. He was a short man with a deeply resonant voice who had lived alone all his life. His opening greeting was always the same: ‘How marvellous to see you!’ These words reflected a heartfelt delight in meeting you and having an opportunity to converse with you. His integrity became clear because he would then go on to listen with great intensity and interest to what you had to say in answer to his questions – and more than that he could show that he still remembered what you had told him last time you met, even if that had been some weeks before. He genuinely marvelled at you as a person and cared deeply for your welfare. There was an element of contemplation in the way he related to people: he saw in them something of the beauty of God who had made them in the divine image. Paul Hinnebusch in a chapter entitled ‘Appreciation as the Fullness of Love’ put it like this:

‘Such mutual appreciation in loving communion is the fullness of every truly human relationship. Every human being deserves such appreciation. For Christian love recognises, accepts and rejoices in the profound human and divine worth of every person redeemed by Jesus. To appreciate another in love is to hold him or her dear and to rejoice that she or he is a child of God and friend of Christ.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

One of the most powerful examples of this kind of appreciative love embodied in Christian community is L’Arche or The Ark communities, founded in 1964 by Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe. There are now 135 L’Arche communities in 36 countries round the world. In each of them people with learning disabilities and their assistants live and work together, helping and supporting each other. L’Arche believes that whatever their gifts and limitations people are all bound together in a common humanity. Everyone is of unique and sacred value and everyone has the same dignity and the same rights.

Hilary Wilson who has lived in L’Arche communities for many years wrote of her experiences and saw a three-fold pattern of sharing life together as

**Relate**

**Relinquish**

**Receive.**

**Relate is about the welcome offered to all who join the community** It helps them to be part of the loving relationships that make up the community but also to welcome what inside themselves they find unattractive and irksome, knowing that God’s love reaches right down to that depth..

**Relinquish is about facing our limitations and letting go**. It is about not beating ourselves up for our weakness and failure. Instead we stop clinging to them and hold out empty hands to receive new blessings from God. We do not let what we can’t do get in the way of what we can do.

**Receive takes us ‘below the surface’ of relationships.** We experience a deeper mutuality of appreciationof the other persons whose lives are closely entwined with ours. We have to learn who the other person is and who I am and then how best we can love each other. Once we manage to engage in that degree of truthfulness we discover freedom and joy,

A delightful book written about L’Arche Communities, called ‘Enough Room for Joy’ contains two stories which illustrate these outcomes.

The first happened in a community garden. Jake was busy tending the vegetable plot and asked his disabled companion Simon to fetch buckets of water. But every time Simon filled a bucket he would carry it so far and then throw the contents upwards into a nearby tree, laughing out loud as he did so. Jake became more and more irritated as Simon continued to repeat this action until suddenly….. he stopped and saw what was exciting Simon. It was the water cascading down the branches and twigs of the tree and catching the sunlight – a truly dazzling sight! Jake realised that his obsession with the garden and getting things done had blinded him to the fun and freedom and beauty of the outdoors. Simon’s carefree abandon had reminded him of what he was missing and in doing so helped him gain a new appreciation of his companion.

The second story takes us to the beach. Claude went with his companion, Jean-Pierre for a day at the seaside. When they arrived Claude thought of a simple pastime. He suggested to Jean-Pierre that he draw pictures in the sand. ‘Draw a house’. ‘Draw a face’ Jean-Pierre did simple sketches of both. Then Claude made a third request: ‘Draw a picture of joy’. Jean-Pierre looked one way down the vast expanse of sand, and then looked in the other direction at an equally long stretch of beach. He was a young man who had been rejected by his parents and been very unhappy in the ’special’ schools to which he had been sent but he had finally found a home in L’Arche. Smiling as he contemplated drawing the picture of joy, Jean Pierre exclaimed ‘There isn’t enough room!’ He had found such a depth of appreciative love in the Christian community to which he belonged that his joy knew no bounds.

If we can likewise build meaningful mutual relationships of freedom, joy and love in the Christian community to which we belong there is every chance it will overflow into the wider community around us. Rather than being drawn inward by friction and frustration we will feel released to draw from the wealth of love we have discovered in God and one another to be able to reach out to others in service and solidarity. Paul Hinnebusch makes this helpful comment:

‘We are not really Christian if all we do is feed the hungry and clothe the naked and shelter the homeless in a condescending, paternalistic way but wanting no community or friendship with the ones we help. The truly Christian social apostolate, and concern for justice to the poor, springs from the fullness of covenant love and community, and from the fullness of communion with God in prayer, and seeks to bring the needy ones into the brotherly love and friendship which is community, and thus into the fullness of communion with God.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Questions to Part Three.**

1. Can you think of reasons to ‘marvel’ when you meet other members of your church?
2. In what ways does the *sociality* of the Church spring from its *spirituality*?
3. What, if anything, should make the Christian community distinctive among other organisations in your parish?
4. How has the love of your Christian community overflowed in response to those affected by the Covid-19 crisis?

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1st June 2020..

**If you wish to discuss any points in this Paper please feel free to email me (**[***paul.thomas@lichfield.anglican.org***](mailto:paul.thomas@lichfield.anglican.org)***)* before 12th June.**

1. The Constitution of the Church 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sam Wells has argued that there will be conflict in heaven if it is to be marked by healthy relationships. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the parish SCM 2010 Andrew Davison and Alison Millbank [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martyn Percy Anglicanism Ashgate 2007 page 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ralph McMichael in The Vocation of Anglican Theology SCM 2014 page 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mark Oakley The Splash of Words Canterbury Press 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ECUSA Response to the ARCIC Final Report [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul Hinnebusch Community in the Lord Ave Marie Press 1975 page 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Lyndal Roper Martin Luther Renegade and Reformer Penguin Random House 2016 for a recent treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See his autobiography ‘Leaving Alexandria’ Canongate 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stephen Pickard Seeking the Church SCM 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hospitality as Holiness Ashgate 2006 page 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ann Morisey Journeying Out [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Paul Hinnebusch Community in the Lord page 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Paul Hinnebusch Community in the Lord page 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)