

Ministers-at-Work

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Please email contributions to: rebeccaccraven@gmail.com

Editorial

Happy Eastertide!

Here is a festive collection of articles. Several reflect on, and further develop the theme of decision making from the Reflective Weekend at which we were encouraged to be countercultural and incarnational in our approach. There was more input and discussion than in our usual Reflective Weekends, hence we wanted to share some of it with all our readers in the first three articles. I hope you find them useful and perhaps they can inspire you to attend the conference in July. There follows a topical and challenging piece on organisational sin, summarising the work of the theology discussion group on this topic.

As ever, we welcome your responses, thoughts, and reflections in prose, poetry or images. Do think about becoming more involved in CHRISM by standing for election to the committee. There's more detail about various roles that are needed. Especially, do join in the July conference in Manchester (a great city!) to reflect together on our prophetic role and remember the October European Conference of the Worker Priests held in Germany this year. We hear great things of these gatherings from those who have attended.

Rebecca Craven



CHRISM Reflective Weekend, Kairos Centre, Roehampton, February 2024

A lucky band of CHRISM friends and members gathered for our Reflective Weekend at the very comfortable Kairos retreat house and enjoyed the warm hospitality of members of the Order of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. The house was a short walk to the wild expanses of Richmond Park where the first signs of spring were showing. We joined for prayer at morning and evening, shared silence on our first evening and a final Eucharist before dispersing on Sunday afternoon. We were blessed by a distinguished group of speakers: The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally DBE (Bishop of London); Ian Peters (Director of the Institute of Business Ethics); the Revd Annette Fritze-Shanks (Adviser for Self-Supporting Ministry to the Bishop of London); the Revd Neal Terry (Safeguarding Officer, Newcastle College).

Our discussions focused on decision making and ethical decision making. “Ethical business leadership means doing what is right for the long-term benefit of all stakeholders” according to the Institute of

Business Ethics. They define an ethical organisation as having the following characteristics. It:

- Has a defined purpose which goes beyond profit;
- Has a set of values that reflects purpose and helps create an ethical culture which in turn supports ethical behaviour;
- Considers its impact and demonstrates a duty of care to its employees, customers, the community and the environment;
- Strives to be genuinely diverse and actively listens to its employees and other stakeholders;
- Encourages people to 'speak up' when they feel something is wrong and does not tolerate retaliation.

This set us all wondering how the organisations we know well would measure up to this standard. We noted that the Church of England (or any other church) could join the IBE for just £700!

The culture is crucial and fortunately there is a IBE framework for building an ethical culture and you can access their IBE Business Ethics Toolkit <https://www.ibe.org.uk/knowledge-hub/ibe-businessethicstoolkit.html>

Inevitably the unfolding scandal of the Post Office was discussed. An ethical culture might indeed have helped warn that things were going wrong, as would admitting and learning from mistakes, and having an effective handover when roles changed but challenging assumptions too. We were wary of rushing to judgement given that in a large organisation we may be unaware of the culture in the same way that fish are of the sea they swim in. A CEO cannot know all that is happening but should make time for reflection, be curious, have good data and investigate anomalies.

The tensions are clear. How are we to bear with one another and forgive while still enabling us to challenge and make changes where needed e.g. the culture of over-work, bullying...?

We pondered our role in the workplace as salt and light, doing justice and loving kindness. We contrasted negotiation, as a sort of horse-trading ending in compromise where each party gives up something; with mediation, where, ideally, a new win-win approach emerges from careful listening to each other. It was obviously crucial in all this to be aware of who held the power in the situation. As MSE we are in a position potentially to influence the culture of the Church and of the workplace, taking learning from each setting and merging the best in secular and sacred.

In our final discussion we reflected on how often our decision making is unconscious and it may help us to review at the end of each day what decisions have been made and their likely impact. And when we the decision making is hard and we are struggling, why not seek out the support of trusted colleagues, mentors or CHRISM members.

Rebecca Craven



Discussions continue over breakfast.



Signs of Hope in Roehampton

Those things I have left undone... To conclude my presentation at the Kairos Centre by Neal Terry, Safeguarding Officer, Newcastle College

It was useful exercise for me to rehearse for CHRISM members my working role responsibilities and challenges in relation to ethical decision making in the workplace as MSE, and I am grateful for the opportunity. It was also affirming to be received well, though

unfortunate that the enthusiasm for questions following the group exercise meant that I did not quite finish.

This is by means of summarising and concluding comment. Those present will recall that the case studies presented were examples of referrals as received and having to decide what to do next. I trust they further recall my first question was how they *felt* about the scenario presented. That it was bizarre, (a fiction); pressured to respond, uninformed, lacking in information, concerned, confused, possibly distressed and yet... you are the safeguarding officer, and you must decide where this goes next. Having reassured the first group that their case, though highly unusual, was not a work of fiction and had to be responded to; I described the feelings expressed, are indeed those that I and work colleagues are struck with daily.

Doel et al. (2009) in their research with health professionals, social workers and teachers (n.504) on professional boundaries, posed a series of work-based scenarios asking whether the organisation/professional body would act on the information coming to light.¹ Participants were also asked to reference which organisational policy or procedure would be applicable in each situation. The report made a series of observations on responses that I parallel with safeguarding situations.

- The professionals surveyed make decisions as to actions, based on their own moral sense.

¹ Doel, M., Allmark, P. J., Conway, P., Cowburn, M., Flynn, M., Nelson, P. and Tod, A., Professional boundaries: crossing a line or entering the shadows? Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at: https://shura.shu.ac.uk/1371/1/Professional_Boundaries.pdf

- They make decisions without referencing the policy, procedure or code of conduct.²
- The infinite ambiguities of situational context are rarely covered in codes of conduct and policy that do not deal with 'the grey areas'.

The 'grey areas' are what they describe as the context around or outside of a specific guideline or process because it does not precisely relate to the situation, or that the complexity of the circumstance provides information that could be mitigating or provide a rationale for the behaviour. Human beings and behaviours are of infinite variety and complexity, and it is impossible to have a guideline for each and every situation. The 'grey' they imagine as a dark wood that the professional is trying to navigate between the extant circumstance without bumping into the wrong tree. Where an objective observer might see a simple 'right' or 'wrong' choice, no-one can see all possible consequences arising from even the very best choice. Even with prolific guidelines there is a point where professional agency must decide. Professionals in the field are engaging in decision making reliant on a personal ethical standard because the precision of policy and regulation does not comfortably 'fit' the welter of the context. This does not stop some organisational procedure writers from trying.

In CofE safeguarding, I note here its principal Safeguarding policy and process document "Protecting All God's Children" contains some eighty-four pages with seventy pages of additional reading in the

² 10% to 15% referred to a regulatory code, 15%-20% made reference to their particular agency's policy document)

“Parish Handbook; Promoting a Safer Church” twenty-four pages, “Promoting a Safe Church” sixty pages plus fifteen further documents as to specific aspects³, and “The Professional Guidelines for The Conduct of The Clergy” no less than 118 bullet points.⁴

“...the bullet points of prohibitions, warnings and injunctions can grow like topsy, but it is unlikely that when a transgression occurs it is the result of a missing bullet point.”⁵

Doel and colleagues went further and suggest that positive, innovative and creative practice that should be shared, could or would be ‘hidden’ as practitioners were afraid of sanction because the worked resolution was not ‘part of the playbook’. Their recommended shift is towards reflective ethical exercise, where the decision making is led by the practice of questioning the ethics in the choice made. Thereby, not a process of adding more complex choices to the wood but developing the capacity for ethical decision making in those charged with doing so.

As we spent the weekend considering what ethical decision-making means for the NSM I am reminded of the Appendix to the

³ Download from the Church of England Web-site

<https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/policy-and-practice-guidance>

⁴ Guidelines for The Professional conduct of The Clergy, 2015 Church House Publishing, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/clergy-guidelines-2015.pdf>

⁵ Doel, M., et. al.

“Professional Guidelines for the Clergy” mentioned above in which The Very Revd Dr Frances Bridger writes.

‘Ethical behaviour, though, is not just a matter of adherence to rules or principles. The revival of virtue ethics among moral philosophers and theologians in recent years reminds us that the character of the professional is as important as the moral code to which he or she adheres.’⁶

As I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, it is not the forgiveness of that which I have done that looms large for the Safeguarding Officer but the consideration of ‘that which I have not done’. The policies and guidelines make matters simpler but cannot enumerate the whole story.

Neal Terry
Safeguarding Officer, Newcastle College.

Micah

The book of Micah is not very familiar to most Christians. Apart from two well-known passages: one predicting the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem which is familiar from countless Christmas carol services (5:2); and the other (6:8) advocating holy living, and appearing on

⁶ From The Professional Conduct of The Clergy, Frances Bridger on Joseph J. Kotva, The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press 1996

numerous cards and fridge magnets, it is a book which is rarely studied and does not often appear in the lectionary. During our reflective weekend in February we shared together passages from this little-examined part of scripture to focus our reflections. Here I develop those thoughts to demonstrate why, as those who seek to display the values of the Kingdom of God in our workplaces, we can in Micah find an example and role model for our calling.

The man

We know little concrete about the background of the eponymous prophet in the book of Micah. Even when we are told that he came from Moresheth (Micah 1:1), it is not clear precisely where that was situated. Most commentators suggest that it lay to the west of Jerusalem on the border between Jewish and Philistine territory close to the Philistine city of Gath. This means it also lay close to the important coastal trade route between Egypt and Mesopotamia. As a result, it must have been a strategically important town which provided a bulwark against invasion from the south-west where Egypt was seen as a threat.

That area was in the rich, fertile, lands of Judah's southern hills and was an important centre for agriculture. The region was able to produce excess fruit and vegetables for the market over and above the usual subsistence farming prevalent in the Middle East at that time. Micah's own writing demonstrates a familiarity with the agricultural practices of his time in the use of farming illustrations and metaphors. Whilst this is not sufficient to conclude that he was a farmer himself, it clearly indicates how he was able to speak into the needs of the people around him.

It is evident that Micah was indeed called by God as scattered throughout his book he refers to his message as coming from the LORD. However, he is equally clearly not part of the professional religious establishment of the time, about whom he is uncompromisingly critical, for instance he refers disparagingly to priests who “teach for a price” and prophets giving “oracles for money” (3:11). This clear sense of a call from God but to a ministry which is different from what is generally accepted as the role of a minister in the Church will resonate with many who believe that their calling from God is not to conventional parish ministry but to bring Kingdom values into the workplace.

The time

Micah places his own ministry in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1:1). These kings together reigned between 742 – 686BC. This is at the same time that Isaiah was also ministering in Judah whilst Amos and Hosea were active in the northern kingdom of Israel. It was a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity for the kingdom of Judah, but that prosperity had been built on the shaky foundations of a greedy and corrupt society against which Micah and Isaiah both railed. At the time of Micah there was gross inequality with a few rich people prospering, primarily at the expense of the poor. The foundational laws which governed Jewish society, and which had been given by God to Moses, had been largely ignored in the quest for wealth and prosperity. At the same time religious practices had continued in the temple but, in reality, these were little more than a performance for the wealthy which in no way impinged on their daily lives or occupations. Just like their political leaders and their judges, the priests and prophets had their price in Micah’s day.

At the same time the period of peace enjoyed by the Jewish people was heading towards an abrupt end. Assyria was in the ascendancy as the regional superpower. During the early part of Micah's ministry, the northern kingdom, Israel, was invaded by them and subjugated as the vassal state of Samaria (2 Kings 17:5-6). Throughout Micah's ministry Judah itself was under increasing threat from the Assyrians and it was only by miraculous intervention following Micah's own prophecy and repentance by Hezekiah that Jerusalem was saved from invasion by Sennacherib (Jer 26:18, 2 Ch 32). However, this respite was only to prove temporary and a century later, after the country's leadership had once again fallen away from God, Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar whose Babylonian empire had succeeded Assyria.

The message

Micah's message is most easily seen as three separate oracles, each of which begin with rebuke and judgement before moving to hope and salvation. In chapters 1 and 2 this is directed against the Jewish people in general; chapters 3 to 5 apply specifically to the leaders, both civil and religious; whilst the final two chapters are directed again at the Jewish people but perhaps more especially those of Israel who are castigated for following the evil leadership of Omri and Ahab.

In each instance, Micah offers examples of how the people and their leaders have strayed from the way of living that God had given Moses so that his people could be seen as an example to the nations around them and had instead turned to echo their wicked behaviour. Among the practices condemned are:

- Idolatry (1:7; 6:16)
- Greed and violence (2:2; 3:10)

- Dishonesty (6:10-11)
- Failure to offer justice (3:1-4, 9)
- Bribery and corruption (3:11; 7:3)

Micah makes it clear that God's people stand condemned as a result of departing from His way and predicts the disaster which is destined to befall both northern and southern kingdoms as a consequence of their apostasy. However, his message of rebuke and judgement is in each instance balanced by a message of hope, if only they will listen to the voice of God. So, Micah's dire warnings are woven through with hope, a promise of God's better plans for His people which far surpass the tawdry existence they have carved out for themselves in their own strength. This is most clearly seen in the famous picture of the Mountain of the Lord (4:1-4, cf Is 2:2-4) in which there is a clear indication of the peace, prosperity and justice which flows from a people who "go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob" (4:2), and there learn His ways and walk in His paths.

There is a clear link in Micah's teaching between wrong thinking and wrongdoing. It is this principle which underpins what is perhaps the most well-known verse in the book: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8). In that verse, and those leading up to it, Micah contrasts and describes the behaviour of the people, who have been behaving very differently from that required by God's statutes and yet expect Him to accept their sacrifices of cattle, sheep and oil. This contrasts with true behaviour which honours God. Such behaviour entails closeness to God and living out His own attributes of justice and kindness (which translates the Hebrew "hesed", which refers to God's covenant love for His people, or loving-kindness). Lives which display these godly

attributes will not be capable of the selfish behaviours which had been so criticised by Micah but instead will bring forth fruits which honour God.

An important part of Micah's prophecy is looking forwards to a time when God's good rule is re-established. He sees this as a time when humankind will turn to the LORD, sins will be forgiven, and God's mercy revealed (7:17-19). It would appear that Micah sees this occurring under the rule of a king born out of Bethlehem (5:2) who will:

... stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth... (5:4).

This demonstrates a clear Messianic focus to the hope which entwines itself amongst the judgements which we have seen foreshadowed by Micah indicating that we are to see that the fulfilment of salvation foreseen in each of his oracles is to be found in Jesus.

Relevance for Ministry in Secular Employment

On first consideration it might appear that the relevance of Micah's situation to the world in which we find ourselves today is somewhat limited. After all, he was writing over 2500 years ago to a primarily subsistence based, agrarian economy which was much less technologically advanced than our modern western civilisation. However, under the surface, the parallels between the two situations are much closer than we might realise. In the first instance, many of the adverse societal traits criticised by Micah, such as idolatry, greed, violence, dishonesty and corruption, are widespread within our

society. Just like Micah, we regularly see examples of the rich becoming richer at the expense of those who are already poor, and the strong enriching themselves by extorting from the weak. Just like what had happened in Micah's time, our society has moved away from the moral consensus, derived from Christian values and teaching, which had for a long time been accepted as a norm and has moved to a situation with less clearly defined norms where the end is frequently seen to justify the means, whatever they might be.



Trees and ferns awaiting new life in Richmond Park

Whilst this shift in society's values has been taking place, the certainty and security enjoyed in the West since the end of the Second World War has also begun to break down. That certainty has melted away under threats from the emergence of new hostile forces such as militant Islamists, global problems together with the realisation of new problems such as climate change with its geopolitical consequences. Moreover, the development of modern weapon technology means that these pose a more existential threat than did the Assyrians in Micah's day. Hence, despite the many obvious but superficial, differences, there is much more in common between our present society and that of Micah's time than we might initially realise. His comments therefore remain as relevant to us today as they were when he made them over two and a half millennia ago.

Our workplaces tend to mirror the society in which they are situated and so it is little surprise that the self-same traits described by Micah and seen around us are also evident in the places where we work. These traits need to be challenged when we encounter them at work just as they were when Micah saw them all around him. It can be no coincidence that the "6Ms" put forwards by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) as a framework for Christian living in the workplace⁷:

- Model godly character;
- Make good work;
- Minister grace and love;
- Mould culture;
- be a Mouthpiece for truth and justice;
- and a Messenger of the gospel

can be seen placed in direct competition to the practices so vehemently criticised by Micah. In contrast, each of the Ms offers a

⁷ M. Greene, *Fruitfulness on the Frontline*. Nottingham: IVP. 2014 p38

positive example of at least one of the features of the pattern for the faithful living laid out in Micah 6:8:

- Model godly character – walk humbly with God;
- Make good work – do justice and love kindness;
- Minister grace and love – love kindness;
- Mould culture – walk humbly with God;
- be a Mouthpiece for truth and justice – do justice;
- and a Messenger of the gospel – walk humbly with God.

Thus, in our role as ministers in secular employment, where we have identified a call from God to bring the values of His kingdom into our workplace we should see Micah with his challenge to the status quo and a call in God's name to offer something better, as an important role model for our ministry.

Peter Selby
CHRISM Presiding Moderator

Can organisations sin... or is it more personal than that?

This article is based on conversations at a CHRISM Theology Discussion Group meeting held on Thursday, 27 September 2023.

Introduction

All the time these days we see things happening in/to society that are outside the democratic process, as power and wealth becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of unelected, private sector

organisations. Whether we like it or not, there's no escaping the fact that these organisations are becoming more and more influential in defining government policy and in shaping society and people's attitudes, for good or bad.

You might well ask why does this matter? It's because it can allow relatively small, unrepresentative, and not necessarily benevolent groups to affect the lives of much larger numbers of people and communities. Organisations form for specific purposes and can be very focused in pursuing their aims. Sometimes it's not clear whose interests are being served or where their funding is coming from, e.g. witness the recent proliferation of unaccountable think tanks, lobbying firms, pressure groups. As human creations, organisations aren't perfect. Organisations can be faceless. When things inevitably go wrong, it can be very difficult to hold organisations to account. But is it the organisations themselves, or the individuals within them who are responsible?

All this contributes to the fundamental question: can organisations sin? If we don't have an answer to this, we might be missing a trick.

The nature of organisations

These are some key characteristics of organisations:

- An organisation is a type of social structure, an entity—such as a company, an institution, or an association—comprising one or more people.
- Organisations are formed for a particular interest/purpose.
- They can have legal status—even a personality—independent of owners, managers, or employees.
- They can have an ethos or culture of their own, underpinned by a set of values or beliefs.

- Organisations can enter into agreements, borrow, or lend money, sue and be sued, commit crimes, be prosecuted and punished in their own name.
- However, whether organisations have a mind of their own and are capable of moral agency is less clear cut.
- People can behave differently in groups than when they're left to themselves.



Sculpture of the Three Wise Monkeys.
Photo by [Paulette Vautour](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The last point is key for this discussion. Reinhold Niebuhr, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), considered the way that people behave differently as individuals compared to when they're in groups. He noted that, left to themselves, individuals preferred demonstrably moral behaviour. However, groups that came together because of shared self-interest, showed signs of pooled selfishness. A group formed to further the interests of its members in a particular direction has no reason to be altruistic, when to do so would undermine its *raison d'être*. We see this in observing the actions of

lobbying/pressure groups as well as economic groupings of individuals, such as limited companies, which can act in concert to protect their business interests. Recent examples of large-scale corporate rule breaking, cover-ups and collusion include the Post Office Horizon IT scandal, VW emissions scandal, water company illegal discharges, fossil fuel companies sponsoring climate change denial.

The nature of sin

Sin is a theological concept. It is usually defined as purposeful disobedience to the will of God. Sins are generally considered to be any act or failure to act, any word, or thought judged to be immoral, selfish, shameful, unkind, or hateful in the light of what we know about God. Sin not only offends against God but can also offend against other people. Therefore, as well as damaging a perpetrator's relationship with God, sin undermines relationships between individuals too.

Most organisations are secular in nature and therefore do not see the spiritual connection between themselves and God and between themselves and other people that can be broken in this way. Whilst there are so called 'sin' stocks traded on the Stock Exchange, the use of this term has more to do with ethics than theology. Sin stocks are companies involved in or associated with an activity that is considered unethical or immoral, including alcohol, tobacco, gambling, sex-related industries and weapons manufacturers. However, religious terminology is generally avoided when discussing an organisation's involvement in morally dubious sectors that exploit human weakness and frailty.

To analyse the behaviour of secular organisations in theological terms requires us to build a bridge to the sacred. However, in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is held out as a model society e.g. "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; it is you the LORD has

chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Duet. 14.2).

Admittedly the Israelites acknowledged their special relationship with God and that it permeated all aspects of life, which is not the case for most organisations in today’s world, which prefer to try and distance themselves from religious considerations. However, the most important point is that the supposed separation between sacred and secular is a false divide, it doesn’t exist! The idea that certain activities can be carried out in a way that is ring-fenced from God is anathema. God rules overall and nothing is outside his jurisdiction or his grace.

Social responsibility

Human associations and groups can have clear purposes and responsibilities that have a significant bearing on those they exist to serve. The nation state, for instance, through its various institutions, departments, authorities and agencies, is responsible for upholding democracy, defending its borders, enacting legislation, managing the economy, conducting international relationships, providing for the health and welfare of its citizens, maintaining the rule of law and order and promoting culture and the arts. Other organisations also have fundamental responsibilities in maintaining the fabric of society, for example:

- The NHS is responsible for providing a comprehensive healthcare service that is available to all. Access to its services is based on clinical need, not an individual’s ability to pay.
- The Police are responsible for upholding the law fairly and firmly; preventing, detecting and investigating crime and bringing to justice those who break the law; maintaining order, providing protection, help and reassurance to the public; and being seen to do this with integrity, common sense and sound judgement.

- Banks are responsible for protecting depositors' funds, lending money, maintaining the payments system and treating customers fairly.

Whilst all organisations are subject to budgetary constraint in pursuing their objectives, for commercial organisations, the profit motive can be the overriding factor. The economist, Milton Friedman (1912-2006), introduced his **shareholder theory** in a 1970 essay for *The New York Times* titled "A Friedman Doctrine: The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits." In it, he argued that a company has no social responsibility to the public or society; its only responsibility is to its shareholders.⁸

Attitudes are changing. Today, **social responsibility** is becoming far more important to organisations as investors, customers, stakeholders and partners increasingly expect them to be aware of the economic, social and environmental impacts of their operations and show that they are managing them to enhance society and the environment rather than causing harm to them.

For many companies, **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** is an integral part of their brand image, because they believe that customers will be more likely to do business with brands that they perceive to be more ethical. From a purely mercenary perspective, CSR activities can be an important component of corporate public relations. However, some company founders are motivated to engage in CSR due to their convictions.

⁸ Friedman, Milton: "A Friedman Doctrine: The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits," *New York Times*, September 13, 1970.

Accountability

Accountability is defined as an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions. Individuals may be held accountable where their action/inaction leads directly to an accident, loss, failure or disaster. However, apportioning blame to an individual should not excuse others who may have contributed by ignoring risks, not having appropriate safeguards or checks in place to prevent such a situation from arising, or who acted in concert to cover up wrongdoing. In the Bible, the idea of justice includes the concept of collective or corporate accountability, e.g.:

- **Gen. 11** – the judgement on those building the Tower of Babel is on all involved. No individual is mentioned. It is a corporate punishment for a corporate sin.



The Tower of Babel by Pieter Brueghel the Elder - from Google Art Project, Public Domain

- **Lev. 16.20-28** – one of the oldest established ways of dealing with corporate sin has been the use of the ‘**scapegoat.**’ This has been used both literally and metaphorically to show

abhorrence at what has been done in the past and a commitment to turn things around and behave better in future. However, the challenge with this approach is to ensure that the sinner (in this case the organisation) bears the cost of its sin rather than the scapegoat being just the innocent bearer of someone else's faults.

- **Amos 1-2** - in the first two chapters of Amos there are a series of prophecies promising judgement against Israel, Judah and a number of neighbouring kingdoms. In two of the cases, the whole nation was to suffer although only the government and army could have been involved:

“For three transgressions of Gaza,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they carried into exile entire communities,
to hand them over to Edom.
So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza,
and it shall devour its strongholds.
I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod
and the one who holds the scepter from Ashkelon;
I will turn my hand against Ekron,
and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish,
says the Lord GOD.” (Amos 1.6-8 NRSVUE)

- **Rev. 2.12-17** – the church at Pergamum had certain members who held to the teaching of Balaam or the Nicolaitans. The call to repentance is directed to the whole church and not just to those individuals.

This sense of corporate obligation and accountability is fundamental to the wider understanding of justice which means that it is not necessarily enough to isolate an individual or small group and by making scapegoats of them and punishing them alone, claim that justice has been done.

It is important to note, however, that the concept of collective responsibility for action only really works within a community or organisation if all members accept that they each have a part to play that can affect the outcome and that a positive outcome depends on them all playing their part well. Collective responsibility requires there to be a sense of mutual dependency and shared responsibility between all parties. We see collective responsibility in action in the context of cabinet government, whereby individual ministers hold each other accountable for the actions and decisions of government as a whole. This means that once an issue has been debated and voted upon in cabinet, all ministers are expected to abide by the decision (or resign). Similarly, boards of directors can agree that they will act as a collective entity, sharing responsibility for their actions. Without this understanding between all members of a group, community or organisation, an individual member cannot be held responsible for the actions of others. In that case, blaming a whole community for the bad actions of a minority would be unjust.

For God's chosen people, there is no shirking their shared, special spiritual responsibilities within their unique covenant relationship with God. Their privileged position depended on them keeping their covenant promises by being faithful to God and obeying his commandments.

Just as the Old Testament prophets, most notably Jonah (Jon. 1-3) and Jeremiah (Jer. 20.9), found it hard to speak out against the waywardness of their communities, the decision to turn whistleblower to call out wrongdoing in a work situation is not one that can be taken lightly. Whilst there is plenty of biblical support for this course of action – Christians are called to be yeast in the dough (Matt. 13.33), salt and light in the world (Matt. 5.13-16) – trying to speak truth to power can carry a very high emotional cost. Negative

consequences for whistleblowers can include occupational, legal, financial, socioemotional, and other (e.g., physical health, character assassination) effects. Society's attitude to whistleblowers needs to change and support for them needs to be much stronger to recognise the courage and cost involved in standing up for what is right.

Can organisations sin?

Organisations are human creations and, as such, are subject to human fallibilities and frailties. Organisations have the potential to be a force for good by providing structures and frameworks within which people can come together and collaborate to achieve far more good than any person could achieve acting alone. Within a healthy organisation with good governance and a strong culture, there will be a diversity of views and healthy debate which will result in balanced, well-rounded strategies and tend to militate against extreme outcomes.



Photo by [David Tomaseti](#) on [Unsplash](#)

By the same token, organisations that behave badly or make mistakes have the potential to cause far more harm than an individual might. This can happen when an organisation's internal checks and balances (i.e. appropriate governance processes and culture) to regulate their

actions have either broken down, been overridden or weren't there to start with.

There are two main scenarios in which organisations are in danger of losing their way. The first is when they're doing well. The other is when they're under pressure. Success breeds confidence but this can easily turn into arrogance. When hubris kicks in, organisations can forget what's important (the key things on which their success has been built), they can overreach and become complacent. Standards fall and controls are relaxed.

Likewise in difficult times, especially when facing a potentially existential threat, organisations' decision-making can become more hasty and less considered. In their desperation to reverse their fortunes, they can slip into 'panic mode' and become defensive, inward-looking and insular. In such situations of adversity, the survival instinct kicks in and people will pull together to overcome whatever difficulty it is that they're facing (in an "us against the world" way), sometimes regardless of whether what they're doing is the right thing to do.

These scenarios can be triggered by internal or external changes, e.g. fresh leadership, new IT system, economic conditions, market development (innovation), or emerging competitive threat. Whatever is the cause of the change in an organisation's operating model, in extreme cases, this can lead to a serious loss of perspective and moral compass.

The culture of organisations can be corrupted, becoming self-serving and protectionist, closed to outside influences, refusing to listen to other perspectives, or consider evidence that might challenge their fixed point of view. Messaging within organisations can be strictly controlled so that they create their own version of the truth and

become “echo chambers” for the development and promulgation of a distorted and sometimes deeply flawed worldview. We can see, then, how organisations might be self-affirming in the error of their ways. Within the protected environment that an organisation provides, bad practices can develop and be allowed, even encouraged, to proliferate by members of the organisation actively colluding, conspiring, acting in concert, or being complicit by their inability/refusal to speak-out against what was happening, even if they felt it was wrong. Within the organisation, actions that would be condemned outside can seem reasonable and be justified. They can be reinforced by policy and culture until an amoral monstrosity is created. It is only when those actions are exposed to the hard, cold light of external scrutiny that the level of malfeasance is revealed.

We have seen this in the way that the Post Office has behaved since the problems with the Horizon system first came to light. Facts were willfully ignored, evidence suppressed, false denials issued, board



Photo by [Mick Haupt](#) on [Unsplash](#)

members colluded with each other, employees were victimised and

wrongly prosecuted, whistleblowers silenced, and an independent investigation was scrapped. The staff association, regulator, auditors,

MPs and the public were gaslighted. As a result, the lives, reputations, and livelihoods of hundreds of sub-postmasters have been ruined. Why? It seems that all this evil was unleashed in a desperate and misguided quest to preserve the Post Office's reputation as one of Britain's most trusted organisations. In the bitterest of ironies, the Post Office has, by its lies, misrepresentations and lack of compassion, completely undermined the public trust it was trying to preserve. It is a scandal of monstrous proportions. There can be no doubt that

individuals in positions of responsibility in this case have acted unscrupulously but the collective behaviour of the organisation as a whole has exacerbated the situation by using its power to seek to crush individual sub-post masters.

Sadly, this is not the only example of organisational sin. The VW emissions scandal was a widespread and elaborate fraud within the company over a number of years with the deliberate intention of convincing authorities and customers alike that its cars were cleaner than they really were. This was not a victimless crime as published research spearheaded by MIT scientists predicts that the excess particulate matter (PM) and nitrogen oxide (NO_x) emissions produced by the fake clean diesel vehicles will lead to some 1,200 premature deaths in Europe and 60 in the United States.⁹ The Sackler

⁹ Steven Barrett et al., "Impact of the Volkswagen Emissions Control Defeat Device on U.S. Public Health," *Environmental Research Letters*, Oct. 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2WyLLIP>; Guillaume P. Chossière et al., "Public Health Impacts of Excess NO_x Emissions from Volkswagen Diesel Passenger Vehicles in Germany," *Environmental Research Letters*, Mar. 3, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2KGpdyk>

family is an American dynasty who owned the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma. The company developed the highly addictive narcotic painkiller OxyContin which it aggressively and fraudulently marketed. The Sacklers and Purdue Pharma have been heavily criticised for their role in the US opioid epidemic which is estimated to have cost 453,300 Americans their lives between 1999-2016¹⁰ and devastated families, destroyed communities and drained the resources of social services. Another example of organisational sin is the way in which allegations of systemic child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and many other denominations were denied and covered-up for years before the sheer weight of evidence meant they could no longer be ignored. Finally, there's big tech and how its unfettered use of generative AI and algorithms is flooding the world with misinformation, degrading data protection and threatening democratic processes. Like individuals, organisations can commit offences through errors of omission as well as commission, e.g. by not complying with tax regulations, having inadequate checks to prevent the laundering of the proceeds of crime, by failing to pay compensation due, or by only doing so at a glacial pace.

Evil, once it gains a foothold within an organisation, can spread and infect the way an organisation's systems, control mechanisms, processes and culture operate. In worst case scenarios, the organisation can lose its moral compass. When organisations cease to try to do what is right and start to operate in ways that are not responsible, respectable, or sustainable, they can cause real harm to individuals and society as a whole.

Repentance and redemption

¹⁰ "The Opioid Epidemic Might Be Much Worse Than We Thought" The Atlantic, 27 February 2020.

Recognising and taking responsibility for one's mistakes is hard enough for individuals. It can be even harder for organisations.

Repentance involves owning what's been done wrong and the consequences of those actions. Organisations, especially those founded specifically for economic benefit, can be reluctant to admit fault or take any action which shows there could be anything morally wrong with what they're doing because of their requirement to further the interests of the members who formed the organisation.

The first reaction of many organisations when they receive a complaint is to protest innocence or indifference and, if pressed further, to fall back on legal defences, counterclaims and threats. It's very important, however, for the good of organisations, as well as for the good of wider society, that they own up to their mistakes and say "sorry" to those they've wronged. Apologising is a first step towards forgiveness and redemption, but consideration should also be given to whether some form of restitution is also appropriate to rebuild relationships and restore trust.

Holding organisations to account can be challenging and the larger they are, the more difficult it can be. But it is essential. Highlighting their shortcomings and encouraging them to be better can help them to adapt and change in a constructive way.

Conclusions

The ideas presented here on the question of organisational sin will, I hope, have prompted readers to think again about the ways in which organisations are capable of sinning and how the impact of their concerted actions and behaviours can, because of their extended power and influence, inflict far more harm than the action or behaviour of any individual within the organisation ever could.



Photo by [Katrin Hauf](#) on [Unsplash](#)

I think it's fair to say that the Christian faith has over the years tended to avoid the issue of relationships of any organisation (other than the Church) with God and has treated both sin and ethics on an individual basis. The time is ripe to revisit this position and begin to address the fallacy that it's only the individuals within organisations who can sin. Then, maybe, we can start to have conversations as a society about how we make sure that organisations stay on the right path and avoid the pitfalls that might cause them to stumble and fall.

Questions for discussion:

- To what extent is people's sense of right and wrong derived from Christian teaching?
- Can organisations sin or just individuals within them?
- What can we do about it?
- Is religious language relevant and/or helpful in this context?
- How can those who stand up for what's right be made to feel valued?

Further reading

Foroohar, Rana: *Don't be evil. How big tech betrayed its founding principles – and all of us* (2019)

Handy, Charles: *Understanding Organisations*, 4th Edition (1993)

Niebuhr, Reinhold: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932)

Dates for your diary

12-14 July 2024: Annual Conference and AGM, Luther King House, Manchester

The theme will be “The MSE as Prophet”. Guest speakers include: The Rt Revd Julie Conalty, Bishop of Birkenhead, Revd Peter Scott, Samuel Ferguson Professor of Applied Theology and the Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute at the University of Manchester. For more information and to book see the flyer or CHRISM website <https://www.chrism.org.uk/>

25 - 27 October 2024: European Conference in the Tradition of the Worker Priests, at Nell-Breuning Haus, Herzogenrath, near to Aachen, Germany

The weekend runs from Friday evening dinner until Sunday lunch, but it will be possible to stay additional nights. Based on previous years, the cost is likely to be about € 160. The historic city of Aachen is only a 15-minute train ride away – and well worth visiting.

The theme will be based around some key topics: Spirituality / Faith; Work / Daily Life; Colleagues / Collectivity / Solidarity; and our Socio-political context.

How does my spirituality underpin my way of working, in the work I do, and among the people with whom I work? As members of a community of daily life and destiny, how do we live currently?

We think this would allow us to include the themes we are looking at in CHRISM this year – ethical decisions and being prophetic. Participants will be asked to prepare an individual half page on the theme based on our personal situation and experience (in our own language and translated into French). This worked very well at last year's event and helped us to understand each other's current concerns.

We would like to encourage you to attend - come and join this interesting and stimulating group of people, who still represent our roots as MSEs. It is not essential to be able to speak or write in a different language – other participants are at hand to help and translate. Do please contact Phil Aspinall or Margaret Trivasse if you would like to know more. philaspinall840@gmail.com

So here is the invitation – do come to Herzogenrath in October!

International Update

European Conference in the Tradition of the Worker Priests, Spring Meeting of French Working Worker Priests, February 2024

The preparation group met in Paris at the beginning of February – 5 of us from different countries. We agreed the proposal for the 2024 international conference, which will be held: **25th - 27th October 2024 at Nell-Breuning Haus, Herzogenrath, near to Aachen, Germany – see above.**

Following our session and after lunch together, prepared by Jean-Pierre a caterer in a hostel in Paris, we joined in the meeting of the

Working Worker Priests (POAP). Six further French priests had arrived, all of whom are in paid work.

The afternoon divided in two parts: firstly, a round table sharing personal contributions on the realities of our lives. We then had an open discussion on their theme of Incarnation:

How our life and ministry as Prêtres Ouvriers (Worker Priests), embodied at work, are sacraments of the incarnation of the Son of God and of our humanity. We worked on two texts, including I John 1 vv 1-4:

- What do I discover about the incarnation?
- To live the incarnation at work in life together - what does that mean?
- How are our life and ministry as worker priests sacraments of the incarnation of the son of God and of our humanity?

I hope this is a tantalising introduction and intend to prepare a further article based on the discussions.

We shared a simple Eucharist around our meeting table on the Saturday evening, before going across the road for a Japanese meal. Discussion continued on the Sunday morning.

And Finally.....

A Note to CHRISM

It is a CHRISM tradition during our weekends together to send a greetings card to absent friends and members. Here is a note from Esther Cummins who received one. Her husband, Jim, was a much missed member who died in 2018.

“Dear Phil and all the friends at CHRISM. How cherished Jim would feel to get your card greetings from a wide circle of friends from days past! He always looked forward to meeting with you, and being buoyed up by the fellowship between you. So I feel very cherished too by getting your lovely card. All good wishes for the future. Esther”

"Having an open mind must not be confused with having an empty mind! The need to hold views firmly is vital. So also is the need to be listening, learning, sifting ideas and information at all times, and from all sources to test and, where necessary, modify or change your former beliefs and stance". *Jim Cummins*

CHRISM Theology Discussion Group - Future Meetings

This Discussion Group, which is open to all CHRISM members, provides an online forum where we can reflect on and discuss the theological aspects of our work. We meet monthly by Zoom for an hour and a half. Recent topics have included: The Importance of our Work to God and Us, The Idea of Rest, What is Work?, Justice at Work, The Kingdom at Work Project, Eternal Life, Christian Perspectives on Conflict in the Workplace, Organisational values - Help or hindrance to ministry in the workplace?, Is it OK to be ambitious?, Who is Jesus?, and Neighbourliness at Work.

If you are interested in joining the Theology Discussion Group, please email me at rev.julian.e.blakemore@gmail.com and I will add you to the invitation list so that you receive Zoom links for future meetings.

We look forward to welcoming you.

Revd Julian Blakemore

Your chance to be involved in the future of CHRISM

Have you ever thought – “I wish CHRISM would do x!” or “I would love to edit the Ministers-at-Work journal”? At the CHRISM AGM in July is your chance. There are several roles you might consider, though not all are due for election this year.

- Moderator who serves for three years; year 1 as incoming moderator, year 2 as the presiding moderator, year 3 as outgoing moderator. The presiding moderator chairs the committee meetings and helps guide the vision and direction of CHRISM for that year.
- Secretary who has the usual duties of arranging meetings, setting agenda, taking minutes and being a point of contact and co-ordination.
- Membership secretary who maintains, and keeps updated, the lists of members both individual and institutional, and requests and follows-up members to renew their subscriptions.
- Journal Editor who has the usual duties of an editor in co-ordinating and collating contributions into a journal.
- CHRISM nominee to CHRISSET who is a representative appointed by CHRISSET, the charitable Trust which administers the finances of CHRISM. CHRISSET also appoint a treasurer who manages the finances – income from subscriptions, Gift Aid, sales and donations; outgoings for events, publications, website and other expenses.
- Committee members participate in CHRISM committee meetings and activities.

The committee meets usually via ZOOM three times a year and once a year in person (travel expenses paid). If you might be interested do contact the present officer holder for a chat about what is involved.

Please be assured that, to stand for office, you don't need to have been a CHRISM member for years!

CHRISM is on Facebook, 'Ministers at Work':

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/129656640430436/>

and LinkedIn, at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=3756477>

CHRISM is the National Association of CHRistians In Secular Ministry and is for all

Christians who see their secular employment as their primary Christian ministry, and for those who support that vision. To further this aim, CHRISM publishes a quarterly Journal, releases occasional papers and organises an annual retreat. Conferences are held regularly and worldwide links pursued.

CHRISM welcomes members, both lay and ordained, from all Christian denominations, encourages them to be active within their own faith communities and to champion ministry in and through secular employment.

If you would like confidential support as an MSE, please contact any member of the Committee. **Further information may be obtained from the Secretary or the Journal Editor.**

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