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From Establishment to Innovation: Rethinking Structure in a New Apostolic Age

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I begin this essay with three theses: 1) Structure is neither the primary problem nor the primary solution facing The Episcopal Church today; 2) We have entered a sustained period of disestablishment, disorientation, and rediscovery of identity analogous to the biblical wilderness or exile, through which there is no shortcut; and 3) Structure must be refocused on fostering learning, adaptation, and innovation in mission, largely at the local level. To put it another way: In this new era of mission we don't know clearly yet who we are or where we are going. The work before us, while involving reorganization, ultimately goes much deeper. We cannot simply manage our way through our present crisis and decline into a stable, secure future. Instead, we are being invited into a much more profound reimagining of the church's life and mission within the triune God's life and mission in a very different environment than those that gave birth to the structures, habits, and practices that dominate church life today.

The conversation about structural reform—as vitally necessary as it is—must be accompanied by a deeper discernment about what it means to be church in a culture that has largely rejected the gospel.¹ Our present structures are shaped by an establishment legacy carried over from the Church of England and then adapted over the centuries within American life. While I cannot rehearse this legacy in detail here, let me cite briefly some of its salient features. In this establishment paradigm, the church is culturally and socially privileged (even if technically disestablished after the American Revolution). The wider

community is assumed to know what the church is and what it is there for. Christian identity is assumed to be formed and supported by the surrounding culture. The church possesses moral authority without needing to earn it from a skeptical or hostile non-believing public.

In the establishment paradigm the focus of God's presence and activity is structurally embodied in consecrated buildings and people (clergy). People "go to church"; there is less emphasis on "being the church," because church and society are understood to be roughly contiguous. The church's vocation is to sanctify society from the center. The church relates to its surrounding neighborhood from a position of power, often as a benefactor to those less fortunate. "Mission" takes place somewhere distant—overseas or in another neighborhood—rather than primarily in one's own backyard. "Parishes" are the norm; "mission congregations" the exception. The church is willing to welcome people into its established life, as long as they follow established customs and norms. Christians are largely born rather than made.

Needless to say, we no longer inhabit this world in American society today. America has seen an erosion of religious participation over the past fifty years even as spiritual openness, hunger, and general belief in God remain strong. Colonial patterns that often informed foreign mission are rightly being called deeply into question, especially amidst the fact that Christianity is now primarily a majority-world religion rather than a Western one. The church is losing its children and grandchildren as young people are far more likely to be unbelievers than their parents or grandparents. These trends have been documented widely elsewhere. Suffice it to say: our present institutional challenges are not a minor blip requiring tactical adjustment or mere organizational re-alignment around some new strategy. They reflect the need for a deeper renegotiation of our ways of seeing the world and relating to God and the neighborhood.

A Different Imagination

The stories we tell ourselves—the narratives in which we live—constitute a kind of grammar through which we experience and interact with the world. For most of Episcopal Church history, we have lived within the story of establishment—the sense that the Episcopal Church held centrality and privilege within the culture, in part because the church was predominantly comprised of the socioeconomic elite, the "establishment." This establishment imagination (way of seeing, community) assumed a posture of clergy, resources, and influence aggregated in the corridor of hierarchical even congregations, even diocesan staffs, a consistent increasing regular flow of resources or internationalization. Clergy interchangeable of serving effects, following World franchise outposts who moved into the apex of its society and exert less in and secular.

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tion (way of seeing the world) was embodied in forms of organization that assumed a posture of authority and expertise. This includes professionalized clergy, resources to dispense to the less fortunate through mission, and access to the corridors of power in advocacy.

In the twentieth century, the church embraced the organizational paradigm of hierarchical bureaucratic corporations at the denominational, diocesan, and even congregational levels. This meant centralized lines of authority, professional staffs, a proliferation of committees, commissions, boards, and agencies, increasing regulation through legislation and rules, top-down power, and the flow of resources from the local and grassroots toward the regional, national, or international in order to support all of this. This paradigm prizes standardization. Clergy educated according to national standards were deployed like interchangeable parts in the denominational machine—assumed to be capable of serving effectively in any context. As the church spread in the new suburbs following World War II, a franchise model dominated. Local churches were franchise outposts of the national corporation, there to serve any Episcopalians who moved into the neighborhood. Yet even as the Episcopal Church reached the apex of its self-confidence in the mid-twentieth century, it began to shrink and exert less influence on the wider society, which was growing more diverse and secular.

One crucial aspect of this establishment imagination is modernity, which presumes all of life can be rationalized, instrumentalized, and managed. Our response to the decline in institutional strength and influence has often been strategic plans for managed change. The assumption remains that we know the answers, we have the resources to accomplish our will, and we can effect that will on the environment around us (whether comprised of seekers to “target” with membership recruitment efforts or the poor as objects of benevolence).

What is missing from this imagination is God—the powerful, mysterious, present God of the Bible who liberated Israel from bondage in Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, the God who refuses to be domesticated or managed (one of the Bible’s great themes). It is possible to carry out a big restructuring plan, to develop expert proposals and recommendations, to pass resolutions at church conventions—and never attend deeply to the God in whose life and love for the world we find our identity and purpose. God is too easily and too often eclipsed from our conversations about the church’s life, renewal, and organization. We need to renew our theological imagination even as we seek to reorganize.

God’s people have been here before. The experiences of massive disruption in settled patterns of community life that defined the biblical wilderness and exile are instructive in this regard. The Exodus involved both deliverance from the imperial gods of control and exploitation and the loss of a certain kind of stability and security that they provided. Without the empire’s provision of
food and shelter (bought at the cost of freedom), God's people had to learn to rely on God alone—thus the manna (bread from heaven), which cannot be hoarded (Exodus 16). No wonder there was murmuring as the people faced the trials of navigating a new path through hostile and uncertain territory, with only God's presence in the pillar of cloud and fire to lead them. A whole generation died amidst this disorienting journey in which God's people learned to become a covenant community.

Similarly, the biblical exile forcibly disestablished Israel's elite from their homeland as the Jerusalem temple was destroyed—the sacred building where God was believed to dwell. Suddenly, those accustomed to exercising power from a place of privilege and security found themselves subject to foreign powers. They had to learn to share life with neighbors very different from themselves and tell the stories of God by the rivers of Babylon. Strikingly, this process of profound loss and disruption is interpreted within the Bible as God's action to disrupt their patterns of privilege and bring them back into right relationship.

These biblical stories offer provocative resonances for the disestablishment facing The Episcopal Church and other denominations today in an increasingly post-Christian America. We suddenly find ourselves in a new relationship to our neighborhoods where the power and confidence we once assumed is rapidly eroding. We must learn to get out of our buildings and form community with neighbors who don't know our stories and customs, who don't share our cultural assumptions, and who are not looking for a church to join. We must discern and interpret God's reconciling movement in the wider world as public witnesses to the cross and resurrection. Most importantly, we must wrestle with the very questions God's people faced in the wilderness or exile: Who are we in God? What does it mean to be a covenant community in a new land? Where is God leading us?

Restructuring for Learning

This work is fundamentally spiritual and theological work in which we hear afresh the deep stories of the faith and find ourselves in them. We must become learners—which is, after all, what a disciple is. We must follow closely the Creator God who calls us and all people to relationships of peaceful and just flourishing, who accompanies us in Christ, and whose Spirit opens up a new and more hopeful future in a world of brokenness and despair. The church's life must be refocused around this primary work of relearning the Way of Jesus in a post-establishment environment.

For we do not yet know how to be in ministry with many of our neighbors—especially those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus, those whose cultures differ from our own, or those who have rejected Christian faith. We need to learn from those neighbors what forms and expressions of Christian community will speak meaningfully to them. Gone are the days when we could launch a new program or initiative designed to attract people to church confident that it would accomplish "back to church."

Instead, now we must be not part of the culture of struggle, and hoarding and God's gifts and treasures claiming one of the sacred building where God was believed to dwell. Suddenly, those accustomed to exercising power from a place of privilege and security find themselves subject to foreign powers. They had to learn to share life with neighbors very different from themselves and tell the stories of God by the rivers of Babylon. Strikingly, this process of profound loss and disruption is interpreted within the Bible as God's action to disrupt their patterns of privilege and bring them back into right relationship.

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would accomplish that purpose. We so often assume that we can lure people "back to church," but in today’s world, fewer and fewer have ever been there.

Instead, now is a time to enter into relationships with neighbors who are not part of the church in order to listen attentively to their stories, dreams, struggles, and hopes. Out of these conversations, as trust and credibility develop and God’s Spirit works between us, visions emerge for how the particular gifts and treasures of our Anglican tradition might speak afresh. This means claiming one of the deep values of Anglicanism—the vernacular principle. Like all Reformation traditions, Anglicanism is committed to worship being in the language of the people. At its best, that has meant adaptation and translation from the original British culture of the Church of England to a myriad of languages and cultural forms in today’s Anglican Communion. This is part of the genius of Anglicanism—the capacity to recontextualize, or reinterpret, the church’s life in new times, places, and cultures. This work of translation of inherited traditions to speak to new populations and generations must take place with those populations and generations as a collaborative effort.

Yet currently, most of our churches and diocesan and denominational structures are not designed to be learning organizations. They instead perpetuate establishment patterns of hierarchical authority and expertise, whether through a culture of clericalism or the regulatory posture of churchwide and diocesan bodies. Those in positions of hierarchical authority do not know the answers to most of the questions facing us. These are adaptive questions that require participatory learning and experimentation at all levels, not technical fixes from experts. Ordinary members of local churches are the primary innovators and learners in this process, for they are the frontline missionaries in a new apostolic age. Leaders must shift their focus from doing ministry for the people to equipping and encouraging the people in discipleship and ministry.

Moreover, standardization no longer fits the cultural complexity of a twenty-first-century world. The twentieth-century establishment franchise model of local church structure (dedicated building, professional clergy and staff, programs for all ages) is increasingly unsustainable in many places. More importantly, it cannot faithfully incarnate Christian witness in the wide diversity of contexts we are called to serve. There are many populations who would never consider showing up and participating in the model of church that has dominated our imagination for the past fifty or hundred years.

The Church of England, facing an even more explicit establishment posture and an even more acute crisis of irrelevance, has realized this and responded with the Fresh Expressions movement. As Rowan Williams has observed, we need a “mixed economy” approach to church organization today.  

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Alongside "neighborhood" churches there must be "network" churches that meet up with people where and how they live in contemporary life. The parish system, which is a product of the establishment era, cannot adequately connect with many populations in today's world. Thus the Church of England has authorized a plethora of experimental forms of Christian community—pub and tea shop churches, churches for bikers and punk rockers, churches for families of elementary school-age children, youth churches, and so on. We have much to learn from their initiatives. One of the geniuses of the Fresh Expressions approach is that it affirms the value of both traditional forms of church and experimental ones—a classic Anglican "both/and." We live in an era of overlap between what has been handed down and what is just emerging, and the discernment of a faithful future requires holding both together. Jettisoning traditions too hastily is not a solution when we need to rediscover deeper roots.

**Improvisation: What the Church Can Learn from Silicon Valley**

I am the son of a software engineer and spent the first part of my life in Silicon Valley growing up, like most of my peers, in a secular home. When I came to faith in Christ as a young adult and began to participate in church communities, I was struck by many cultural differences between my native culture and the culture of these churches. One in particular bears exploring here. The culture of Silicon Valley is biased toward openness, innovation, and change. There is an inherent fluidity and tolerance for risk-taking. I did not find this in the church. The bias against change and innovation in the church is in many respects understandable—religious communities have many treasures to conserve, and I was drawn to The Episcopal Church in part because of its historical rootedness. Yet without the ongoing adaptation of the gospel and the church's life into fresh vernaculars, the church ceases to speak as the body of Christ incarnate to those in its neighborhood.

I have come to realize that the church has some vital lessons to learn from Silicon Valley. First among these is a common mantra: "Fail faster to succeed sooner." Entrepreneurs know that the path to innovation proceeds through trial and failure. This inherently risky process involves many iterations and prototypes before something useable and useful takes shape. In Silicon Valley, failure is expected, normal, and embraced as the necessary avenue to success. The key is to learn from one's failures by reflecting upon them along the way.

The church tends to have a risk-averse culture inherited from the establishment posture of authority and control. Many churches find the prospect of risky experiments in forming Christian community with neighbors to be daunting. We may expose ourselves as culturally incompetent in interacting

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6 See [www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk).
with diverse neighbors; we will be vulnerable; we fear we may even disappoint God. Yet when we read the Gospels, the disciples (learners or apprentices) are continually making mistakes. The Way of Jesus is a way of vulnerability, not security and control. It is precisely through trying things out in ministry that the disciples learn how to be the body of Christ in the world. Yet they do not do this alone; Jesus is with them, and they are led by the Spirit.

Smart entrepreneurs have developed new approaches to learning from their audiences as they innovate. Instead of dreaming up a product, investing heavily in its development, and then launching it with great fanfare while hoping it finds an audience, many are now using a much leaner approach. Small experimental versions of the technology (known as the “Minimum Viable Product”) are made public and tested with users, who teach the company what, in fact, the offering should become. The innovators engage in ongoing listening and learning loops with the wider public. This is much less expensive, much more adaptive, and ultimately more innovative. What might it mean for the church to develop bridge relationships with neighbors in its life of witness and service, where those neighbors help shape the forms of ministry that the church is called to embody?

This improvisational approach does involve risk and failure. Yet it is a different kind of failure than the church is currently facing. By resisting adaptation and change, too many churches are refusing to risk their lives. Fearing smaller failures, they are heading into a bigger one: losing the church’s very identity and calling. Jesus makes clear that following him means putting our lives on the line. To refuse to do so is to turn from his Way. We can either enter into the messy, ambiguous work of being learners who experiment and innovate new forms of Christian community and witness with our neighbors in the power of the Spirit, or we can turn away from them, keep our doors closed, and accept a much more catastrophic failure—the loss of the church’s integrity, vitality, and future in a changing world.

Organizing for Innovation

This vision for a learning (discipleship) church sent into the world is inherently fluid and unsettled. It befits a pilgrim people. Let me make this vision clear: I am not suggesting that institutional forms of church life be jettisoned wholesale in order to try to recover some primitive and romantic Jesus movement. When I read the New Testament, things actually look rather chaotic, improvisational, and conflict-ridden. There is no “golden age” to try to recover—whether the 50s CE or the 1950s. Institutionalization is necessary for any community’s life to continue over time; practices must be embodied. The question is what kind of institution.

As many people have observed, the twenty-first century-world is a world of networks. The Internet offers the most powerful metaphor for contemporary culture—a self-organizing, fluid, decentralized, adaptive network. Networks are inherently uncontrollable. They emerge and change not through planned, top-down management, but through participatory innovation, often at the edges. At the same time, they are governed by standards and rules—covenants of behavior and practice. They embody, to use an old Anglican phrase, "ordered freedom."

The shift from the hierarchical, regulatory bureaucracies that we have inherited to participatory learning networks requires new forms of trust. No longer can identity be enforced through top-down compliance. It must be cultivated through relationships, interpretive leadership, and faith in the presence and guidance of the triune God. Networks cannot be legislated or mandated, as Ian Douglas points out in his essay. They emerge from the grassroots. Perhaps the best thing that Episcopal Church structures (whether at the churchwide, diocesan, or congregational levels) can do in this era of innovation is to limit their interference. This likely means scaling back centralized budgets and programs, eliminating regulations, flattening hierarchies, and loosening restrictions. It may mean suspending many rules until some new and more adequate pattern emerges. The establishment era was about control; we now need widespread permission-giving.

Amidst all this, there remains a vital need for our structures to meet. Networks depend upon communication flows. Learning organizations thrive when there is open sharing of insight and innovation. Local churches experimenting in mission cannot expect to find the answers to their contextual challenges through implementing some standardized denominational or diocesan program. Yet they can learn from and with other local churches experimenting in similar or different contexts. Stories can be shared—not to replicate a proven technical solution, but to spark imagination for what the Spirit might be yearning to bring forth. The denominational structures of The Episcopal Church can be radically re-envisioned as learning networks in mission. They can spread and share stories, connect leaders in various places for mutual encouragement and edification, and help the church interpret its identity and calling in this new apostolic environment. Fortunately, with today’s information technology this can all be done relatively inexpensively.

Yet it calls for a different imagination, a different posture, and a different culture. Ultimately, these are theological issues. We have an opportunity to rediscover a deeper identity as learners of the Way of Jesus, as risk-taking innovators in the formation of Christian community, as translators of our rich traditions, as those who face toward the neighborhood not with the intimi-

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ating walls of fortress-like buildings but the open hands of a body of Christ who goes in vulnerability to give and to receive. We have the chance to attend afresh to the Spirit's presence and movement in our midst and in the lives of those to whom we are sent, trusting in a power that is not our own. We have the calling to risk our very lives for the gospel, to be dispossessed of much that has heretofore defined us in order to rediscover our lives in Christ in relation­ship with our neighbors in a world God so loves.