

# Discerning the heart of the organisation

## Using a biblical approach to increase organisational awareness

by Chris Bemrose



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**Renewal of an organisation's mission and identity is often done by such techniques as SWOT analysis, but this tends to be superficial. To renew an organisation's heart, try biblical study, even with non-Christian organisations and individuals.**

### The importance of organisational awareness

It is easy for organisations to lose a sense of their essential identity. This, perhaps, may be seen in the roots to the recent financial turmoil as so many financial organisations moved into the sub-prime mortgage business without fully appreciating what was involved or how it fitted with their central purpose. It might equally be seen in the rush amongst so many well established building societies to demutualise in the 1980's, providing short-term benefits for members but often at considerable long-term cost as they struggled with the financial climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Organisations, following what is thought to be the latest trend or 'good practice' fall into a conformist trap. Fear of being different leads organisations to lose their distinctiveness and creative individuality. In biblical terms, they become conformed to

the world, 'me-too' organisations, often becoming self-serving in the process. Greed and vanity can often play a role in this.

This is not always easy to recognise at the time. Reading and reflecting on biblical passages can, however, provide a powerful way to help us to become more aware of the forces which, often unconsciously, shape and form us and our organisations.

I remember one discussion on the application of Jesus' temptations in the desert to my own organisation, L'Arche, an organisation concerned with building communities around the gifts and needs of people with learning disabilities<sup>1</sup>. The temptation to turn stones into bread was seen as the temptation to measure everything in terms of productivity. In this, we have no time to appreciate the unexpected and unplanned happenings that make for a full life. Factors such as relationships, compassion and beauty easily

become neglected. Jesus being promised the whole world if only he would worship the devil was seen as the temptation towards empire building and growth for its own sake. Jesus being tempted to throw himself off the temple, knowing that angels would protect him, was seen as the temptation to go for the spectacular when one is called to the ordinary but essential of the day-to-day. No doubt other people and other organisations would interpret the temptations differently. What was important was thinking what temptations might look like so that they are recognised for what they are. It provides a simple example of the importance of organisations being self-aware.

### Establishing organisational identity

Organisations that have lost their sense of identity are like the salt that has lost its taste. They become prisoners of

circumstance, rather than developers of creative opportunities. In biblical terms, they do not know their place before God.

How then, can organisations develop and retain a clear sense of their identity and calling? There are many possible approaches. The most well known is the SWOT analysis, looking at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This is a helpful starting point, but is often relatively superficial: it engages people's heads, but rarely their hearts. It tends to emphasise the more rational, objective and analytical attributes of the left side of the brain. The more creative and inspiring right side



■ *The organisation as a light in the darkness* ■

of the brain is left largely untouched. It rarely inspires passion.

Biblical texts have been used in Ignatian spiritual exercises over the centuries for a number of purposes including to help individuals to reflect on God in their lives. One of the tools of the exercises involves encouraging people to use their imagination to reflect on bible passages. They might, for example, imagine themselves in

different roles in the Jesus' parables, or imagine Jesus talking specifically to them as he gives his sermon on the mount, exploring their own feelings and reactions as he does so.

This same approach, originally developed for individuals, can be usefully and powerfully adapted for use by groups of people in organisations. This type of reflection operates at a deeper level than objective rational analysis, drawing on both sides of the brain, involving both the head and the heart.

One recent discussion I was involved with entailed seeing the organisation as a light that could be put on a lamp stand or hidden away (Matthew 5:14-16). Part of the discussion involved seeing areas of light within the organisation. Examples included a case of exceptional customer care, the impact of a person with learning disabilities working in the office, and the example of someone with a relatively low position in hierarchical terms, but acting as the glue of the organisation in keeping different groups together. Someone else saw the light as the things he felt passionate about, and this in turn led to a discussion of the link between passion, the giving of one's self and servant leadership.

These could all be seen as examples of God at work in the organisation, and clearly point to some of the organisation's values as lived out in practice. It is unlikely, however, that they would



■ *Sermon on the Mount, Unknown Anglo-Saxon, possibly Canterbury, about 1000, Getty Museum* ■

have been raised in a straightforward discussion about the organisation's strengths and weaknesses.

### The process

The process for using bible passages to reflect on organisations depends on the particular situation and the issues thought to be significant. Having an external facilitator can be important both in designing the process and providing a framework for the discussions.

A number of possible bible passages and questions for reflection are given at the end of this article. It is important to allow the passage to speak to people in whatever way it arises. To do this there is a need of an environment which is both relaxed and safe, with an expectation that God's Spirit will be present. There is also a need to allow time to establish a spirit of trust and develop and ground rules, particularly regarding confidentiality of personal comments.

In most cases, participants read and reflect on the passage by themselves for between 20 and 60 minutes. It is important that they do this in a quiet place where they will be uninterrupted. It is important to remember that it is not immediate or superficial responses that are being sought – but something deeper.

During the time participants may be encouraged to:

- Start with a time of quiet, clearing their minds and freeing their thoughts, and praying for insight. A sense of anticipation is helpful. Others may simply wish to have a simple time of stillness



- Read the passage slowly two or three times to become familiar with it
- Imagine that Jesus is speaking to them together with other members of their organisation (or part of their organisation)
- Consider what words and images strike them
- Consider specific guide-lines and questions for prayer and reflection (see examples at the end of this article)

- Have a period of ‘free dialogue’ with Jesus in which they reflect on the moments when they felt inspired and feelings were strong, or where they sense that God is being revealed
- Give thanks for whatever they have received, and consider what they want to share in a wider group, recognising that some things may be best kept between them and God.

Groups of 5-10 people then share, one by one without interruptions, how the passage struck them. It is important not to get into discussion at this stage. A second round enables each person to talk about what they heard and felt during the first round. This might be a comment of the consistencies – and inconsistencies – of views expressed, or how they had felt energised, angry or turned off when others had spoken

about different matters. Finally, a third round of free discussion enables tentative conclusions to emerge. The session finishes with a period of thanksgiving for what has been received, shared and concluded.

It is important at the outset to establish that there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way of interpreting a particular passage. Some might use the parable of the talents, for example, to support the firing of the lowest performing employees

in the organisation each year, along with bonuses for the most successful. Others might focus more on the fear expressed by the person with just one talent,



■ *One talent: fear ... or trust?* ■

and through that be led to a discussion of fear and how trust may be engendered in the organisation. What is important is the raising of these issues in a deep and safe way.

## Fruits

In a recent example of what Professor David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, described as ‘an example of corporate wisdom seeking’<sup>2</sup> L’Arche used an essentially Ignatian approach to reflect on its fundamental identity and mission over a period of three years. We invited David to assist us in this exercise.

The first stage, called ‘Once Upon a Time’ used Bible passages to enable groups of people – including trustees, assistants and people with learning disabilities – to share stories, seeking to distil the fundamental convictions, perceptions and purposes and to identify the essential elements of the first 40 years of L’Arche.



The essential elements of L'Arche were summarised in three key words:

- *Relationships*: People with learning disabilities and others sharing life together (not just as carers and clients)
- *Transformation*: Seeing how we can all change one another
- *Sign*: seeing L'Arche as a small but significant sign of God's love in the world

The second stage, called 'Welcoming our Shadows' faced L'Arche's failures and the pitfalls



■ 'Go out into the deep' - Tapestry 'The Miraculous Draught of Fishes' by Pieter van Edingen Aelst, c. 1519, Musei Vaticani ■

and obstacles that have hindered or distorted our living out of the basic convictions and essential elements. A third stage called 'Go out into the Deep' focussed on L'Arche's mission and priorities.

As a participant, the fruits of the process were threefold. First it helped to give a new sense of meaning and purpose to life and

work both personally and in relation to the Community of which I am a member. As David Ford commented, the process stimulated personal and communal heart-searching and renewal. In this, the practice of reflecting on how bible (and particularly gospel) passages might relate to daily life and work was significant. Perhaps a more cerebral and 'objective' approach may have led to similar results, but for me the process reinforced my experience of how the Bible can inspire and guide us in very practical ways.

Secondly, the process helped to re-establish unity and commonality of purpose. This is currently enshrined in the person of Jean Vanier, the founder, but was in danger of becoming dispersed. L'Arche Communities face very different economic, cultural, social and religious realities around the world. The diversity is further pronounced by the involvement of people from many different nationalities, social and cultural backgrounds and intellectual capacity (including people with learning disabilities).

Though this made the process a complex and time-consuming one, especially in distilling and agreeing on the results, it resulted in a clear agreement of what constituted the essentials of a L'Arche Community.

Thirdly, the process is helping to develop a new sense of adventure and innovation. In L'Arche, a particular model of group home had grown up which could be

recognised with relatively minor differences across the world. The process revealed, however, that this model was not the essential part of L'Arche. What was essential was the relationships between people with and without learning disabilities, and the way they could transform each other. As a result of this realisation, L'Arche is gradually moving to different models of care and community in different countries, ensuring that it is more fully adapted and relevant to people's needs around the world.

### Application

Almost any organisation can use this approach to deepen their self awareness. It most clearly applies to Christian organisations including individual churches, dioceses, schools, charities, and other types of Christian organisation. It is also highly applicable to Christian businesses. All such organisations invariably employ non-Christians, but careful choosing of passages and presentation (e.g. encouraging them to treat the passages simply as stories in their own right) usually enables them to participate fully. Those with a particular antipathy towards the Bible may have difficulty, however. The approach may also be used by groups of Christians to develop a deeper spiritual perspective on secular organisations for which they work, whether they are public, private or voluntary.

Timothy tells us that 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone

who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work' (2 Tim 3:16-17). Just as Jesus related the scriptures to his own position (e.g. Luke 4:18-19), perhaps we can benefit by exploring more fully how scripture may relate to us not just individually but in the organisations for which we work. ■

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## Notes

1. L'Arche, French for the Ark, is a federation of 120 Communities in 30 countries based around the needs and gifts of people with learning disabilities. For further details see [www.larche.org](http://www.larche.org) or [www.larche.org.uk](http://www.larche.org.uk)
2. Ford, D (2007) *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, Cambridge University Press.

## Reflections on selected bible passages designed to increase organisational awareness

### The pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44-46)

Picture your organisation as a field. If you want, add in other groups (customers, suppliers, shareholders, head office, subsidiaries etc).

- Imagine yourself digging in the field. What (in relation to your organisation) do you see as the pearl of great price - remembering you may find many pearls of lesser price as well? What do you feel as you find the pearl?
- What do you have to sacrifice or give up in order to obtain or secure the pearl of great price?
- What does this mean to you and the organisation?

### Jesus' Baptism (Matt 3:13-17)

- Reflect on whether there was a moment in the history of your organisation when it (or your part of it) was 'baptised' or affirmed in some way: when it really came into being. It might have been by winning a particular order, or a respected person complimenting the organisation in some way, for example. Reflect on what happened, or what was said and what it meant.
- Imagine your organisation being baptised today in some way. What would it look like? What words from heaven would you hope or imagine to hear? What is the significance of that for the organisation?

### Rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-25)

Imagine you are going as a representative of your organisation or church to see Jesus.

- What is the question that you would want to pose to him?
- What do you imagine he might say in response to that question?
- Is there anything that Jesus might say that your organisation needs to do (or give up) that you would find difficult or sad?
- How would you respond?

### The man sick of the Palsy (Matt 9:2-8)

Using all five senses imagine your organisation in the form of the body of someone who is paralysed

- What is the body like?
- Who is holding the body?
- How does Jesus respond?
- How does the crowd react as the body descends?
- How do the crowd, the friends, the body and Jesus respond as the body is healed?
- How does the body feel before and on meeting Jesus?
- Speak to Jesus about your organisation. What do you say? How does he respond? Develop a dialogue.
- Reflect on the areas of hurt and woundedness in your organisation and what Jesus wants you to do to heal it.