

# Finding God through the Organisational Margins

*In FIBQ 19.1 Karen Blakeley wrote about the importance of love in the transformation of business. In this article **Chris Bemrose** starts by exploring the theology of the centre and the margins, and the way that Jesus appears to have a partiality for the margins. He suggests two contrasting models of organisations based on power and love, and explores the potential implications of these models for organisations and their leaders, highlighting the role of the margins in generating change and transformation.*

## God and the margins

God is often seen – particularly in the Old Testament – as the ultimate power and authority, the creator of the world. There is no other power above. Despite this, particularly in the New Testament, God appears to have a fascination for the margins:

God,  
so the storytellers  
say, sent Jesus to be born  
on a marginal planet - earth - in a  
marginal place - a stable - to a family  
from a marginal town - Nazareth - in a  
country on the margins of the Roman Empire.  
The baby was welcomed by marginal people -  
shepherds - and escaped to Egypt as a marginal  
refugee. He lived 30 years in marginal obscurity.  
He surrounded himself with a marginal group of  
followers, healed marginal people and preached  
a gospel of the margins. He was crucified as  
a marginal outsider. In so doing, he went  
beyond the margins, was resurrected  
and ascended to be one with  
God.

Jesus' ministry was founded in the margins. The beatitudes – the foundational bedrock of his teaching – are a paean of praise to those who are in the margins: the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the pure, the merciful, peacemakers and those who are persecuted. In Matthew 25:36-40 he teaches how he is to be seen in people on the margins: the poor, the naked, the hungry and those who are in hospital, in prison or who are strangers. In the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7) he tells of the shepherd going out to the margins to recover the lost sheep and bring them triumphantly back into the centre. In the story of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24) he tells

how the Master instructs his servants to go out into the streets to invite the poor, crippled, blind and lame.

The prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32) is similarly a story of a son going away from the centre to the margins until, finding himself out of money and friends, he decides to return to the centre, a humbled and contrite figure. I wonder if the elder brother was secretly envious of his younger brother's courage in leaving the security and comfort of the centre (home), losing everything in the margins and yet in the process finding himself.

Jesus not only spoke about the margins. He experienced them. His moment of greatest weakness – on the cross – was also the point of his

**Marginalised**  
left out of the  
group



Photo: Stock  
Market Films

highest achievement. His last words on the cross, 'My God My God, why have you forsaken me' (Matt 27:46), were the ultimate cry – and prayer – of every person on the margins. It was the moment of ultimate abandonment – and yet also the moment just before he died, figuratively moving from the margin over the edge to resurrection and new life.

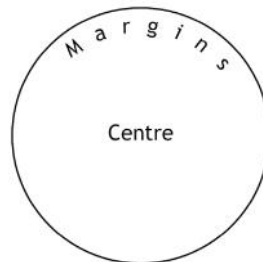
The next section uses this analysis to propose two contrasting models for organisations.

### Contrasting organisational models

Imagine any organisation – commercial, charitable, community or Church – in which you are involved. The chances are that most people see the centre as the hub of power and authority: the place where the CEO sits together with others with access to the major levers of change, especially in relation to the allocation of financial, technical and human resources.

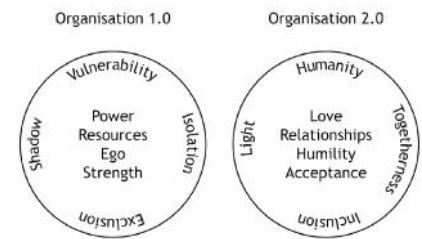
By contrast, the organisational margins are seen as places of relative isolation, often geographically and hierarchically away from the centre of power. The margins are the place

of the eccentric – literally the person away from the centre. The margins may include the whistleblower or the scapegoat; the person who feels at odds with the prevailing organisational values and culture, or the person who feels abandoned or overlooked or taken for granted (often one and the same); those on zero hours contracts or who may be the first in line to be 'let go' if hard times strike; or even the less articulate, less 'beautiful' or less outwardly successful by worldly standards.



In this model, if the organisational centre is characterised by power and ego, the margins are characterised by struggle and humility. Let's describe this model as Organisation 1.0 or the Kingdom of man. But, following the examples given to us in the scriptures, there seems to be a radically different model – let's call it Organisation 2.0 or the Kingdom

of God – in which the centre is defined not in terms of power and authority so much as love and relationships. The contrasting models are shown below:



In Organisation 2.0 the leader leads through relationships, not power or force; humility, not ego; fragility, not perfection.

Through all this, we see Jesus leading us from a world of organisations based on Model 1.0 to one based on 2.0. He comes from a place of power to a place of fragility; he accepts people as they are, not as he would like them to be; he endures a place of aloneness – on the cross – to come to a new relationship with God and people.

### The organisational implications of moving from Model 1.0 to 2.0

What are the implications of all this for organisations, and especially



#### Forsaken

*Christ at the Column*  
(1476–1478) (detail)  
Antonello da Messina  
Musée du Louvre,  
Paris

their leaders? I suggest three main factors.

### 1. Increase awareness of the organisational margins

It is often said that society is renewed from its margins. New ideas and practices start, often hesitantly, in the margins and then come more and more into the mainstream as they are adopted more widely. The same is true in many other fields, ranging from art (where the new invariably comes from the outside) to agriculture (where the diversity of plants and wildlife in the ecological margins is invariably key to long-term sustainability and finding solutions to existing problems).

In the commercial world, people on the margins are often closer to customers, competitors and others and therefore are more exposed to emerging changes and the mess of the external world than those who may feel more comfortable (and, perhaps, isolated) at the centre. Invariably it is people on the margins who are the eyes, ears and mouth of the organisation who sense changes well before others in the organisation.

Equally, it is often in the margins that new ideas are formed and developed – usually away from the eyes and control of the centre. The hardest part is frequently bringing the seeds of such developments to fruition in the mainstream.

For churches, charities and public institutions the margins are important because it is often those on the margins who have most to lose (or gain) from changes in policies and practices. As such, they merit close attention, not just in their own right as humans, but because they are important and invariably sensitive indicators of what is, or is not, working in wider policy terms.

### 2. Seek to integrate the organisational margins into the centre

Organisational margins can be seen not just in terms of people and ideas. They can – in Jungian terms – also be seen as those parts of the organisation that people find it difficult to accept or face up to: those parts of the organisation that are hidden, ignored or denied. The organisational margin – or shadow – may include those aspects of the organisation which have, metaphorically, been brushed under the carpet. The organisational stories which are shrouded in secrecy, perhaps out of shame or guilt, or the practices which go close to the margin of acceptability.

Jung suggests to become whole we need to integrate those parts of ourselves that we have marginalised or excluded from the centre. The same holds true for organisations. The margin or shadow is often seen as negative or dark, perhaps a source of shame or guilt, and yet, according to Jung, it may also be the source of our creativity and energy. To know ourselves – to become whole – we need to integrate that part of ourselves that we have excluded from the centre – or the conscious.

Organisationally, however, issues which are initially hidden away have a habit of seeping out and causing often unexpected, unwanted and expensive organisational damage. Just look at the churches and some aid agencies in relation to sexual abuse; Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust in

relation to care; Tesco in relation to accounting or VW in relation to emissions testing. It takes courage to go into murky areas, but in the process of becoming more transparent, the organisation becomes more open and whole.

### 3. See the family as a potential model for organisational transformation

It was suggested above that Model 1.0 has money at its centre while Model 2.0 has love at its centre. Of course, these are extremes, and most organisations are on a spectrum between them. If the model of the former is the ‘pure’ profit maximising business of the neo-classical economist, the model of the latter is the family. Admittedly, not all families – nor all organisations – are fully functioning, but nonetheless the family can, in theory, give an example of Model 2.0.

In the family it is the person who is weakest and most vulnerable – a newborn child, for example – who is normally placed at the centre. By contrast, neo-classical economic theory takes a more hard-headed approach, expanding output or cutting costs until marginal cost equals marginal revenue – at which point profits are maximised.

People on the organisational margins – those who are often struggling with life – help us become more human. Gandhi said that ‘a nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members,’ and the same might also be said of organisations. In his account of the Anglo Felt factory in Lancashire in FiBQ 19:1, Peter Riley commented on the pride generated by giving a person who was deaf meaningful employment. This could be replicated in organisations all around the world.

As Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche says, the strong need the weak in order to become more human and more compassionate. It is the cry of people in need which can awaken our hearts and help us discover a well or fountain of life within our own being.<sup>2</sup>

I’ve talked with many people about their journeys between the centre and margins of their own organisations. I’ve been struck that, in moving from

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## The struggle and humility of the margins



Photo: Erickson Business Coaching

the margins to the centre, people often talk about the importance of the Chief Executive or others near the centre talking and spending time with them, and in the process drawing them closer to the centre: classic examples of both servant leadership and the parable of the lost sheep in practice. This does not only support the person who felt on the margin. It also, paradoxically, often brings the ‘helper’ closer to the centre. In this way, the organisation becomes more compassionate and human – transforming itself from model 1.0 to 2.0.

### Conclusion – the personal implications for organisational leaders


Margins are often difficult places, associated with fragility or loss and exclusion. Yet they are also the place of the new and prophetic.

This is true at both the individual and the organisational level. Jesus was a man of the margins, leaving all power and authority to risk all on the cross, and being transformed into new life in the process. Perhaps there is a lesson there for us as organisational leaders. Dare we risk losing everything to move from the centre of our worldly, power- and ego-centred organisations, as we move through the struggle and humility of the margins and, in the process, become centred within a new world of love?

It may not be a requirement for the job, but most leaders have passed through the margins at some point in their lives: one or more marginal moments when they have felt

### ‘Most leaders have passed through the margins at some point in their lives

essentially alone in taking key decisions. For some, this may be moments of personal risk: most obviously at the beginning of a new enterprise where they risk everything – money, career, relationships – on a particular project, with no definite guarantee of success. For others it may be a moment when they have felt isolated or lonely in anticipating or taking difficult financial, ethical, organisational or other decisions.

Just as angels in the Christmas story announce their presence by saying ‘do not fear’, perhaps leaders need not fear the margins in their lives: for the times on the margins can encompass the supernatural and the unusual, and this invariably leads to change. 

1 Faith in Business Quarterly, Vol 19.1: ‘What happened when God turned up at Work?’

2 Jean Vanier: Community and Growth pp 97-8, quoted in David Ford: Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine).



**Chris Bemrose** is a Quaker and Anglican, and former Community Leader and General Secretary of L’Arche. He designs and leads experiences to help people explore spiritual, psychological and social issues, particularly the organisational margins. Further details at [www.chrisbemrose.org](http://www.chrisbemrose.org).