How can Christian organisations keep being faithful?

*Drawing on the concept of 'Mission Drift', **Kara Martin** (with Stephen Judd and John Swinton) suggest that **theological drift** causes organisations to fail. They isolate three causes: the seductive donor, the hoax of harmony, and a focus on money. Remedies are suggested.*

Three authors of a new book, *Keeping Faith: How Christian Organisations Can Stay True to the Way of Jesus*, discuss the importance of theology underpinning an organisation's faithfulness as a means for them to maintain their Christian identity.

We all know Christian organisations that have wandered away from their Christian roots: the school that no longer is particularly biblical in its values, the aid organisation that elevates its activities but downplays its Christian purpose, the Christian entrepreneur that backs away from the distinctiveness of their start-up, or the not-for-profit that has removed the Christian origin story from its website.

Chris Crane of Edify, a global education aid organisation, is quoted in the book *Mission Drift*[1] as saying, 'It's the exception that an organisation stays true to its mission. The natural course— the unfortunate natural evolution of many originally Christ-centred missions— is to drift.'[2]

These temptations can equally be true for Christians who have started their own businesses, or Christian leaders of business, who are seeking to live out their Christian values in and through their businesses.

However, such a loss of Christian distinctiveness may *not* be inevitable. There has been a focus in the last decade on the dangers of mission drift, but what if the greater danger is **theological drift**? That is, a lack of attention to the organisational theology which Christian organisations need so that their people and culture, marketing and fundraising practices, match their mission rhetoric.

This would be a better analysis of the situation that impacted the Christian anti-persecution charity Barnabas Aid, where the founder and three key figures have been suspended following allegations of financial fraud and a toxic work culture.

Premier Christian News has reported[3] that the charity has admitted that 'objectively the founders created a toxic work environment which resulted in staff feeling entirely unable to routinely voice concerns. In addition, we have also identified significant payments made to the founders (and to others close to them – including some Board Members/Trustees) which cannot be readily explained.'

Or consider the Charity Commission's investigation into Rhema Church London which found that it "spent funds on gym memberships and other personal expenses, including over £95,000 on overseas trips"[4]. This reveals an obvious failure to apply biblical and theological reflection to behaviour, and to ensure that there is consistency between internal organisation and its external image.

Rhema Church London
Photo: Rhema Church

A checklist for theological drift

What are the forces which cause Christian organisations, businesses, charities, schools and even churches to lose their Christian identity? There are many, but here are the ones that really hurt:

- **The seductive donor**. Christian organisations often make the mistake of going "Jesus-lite" in order to meet the needs of a philanthropic supporter. Peter Greer is the President and CEO of HOPE International[5], a Christian microenterprise development organisation. Greer tells the story[6] of a meeting he had with a financial supporter in Houston, Texas, who loved what HOPE International was doing. The donor wanted to substantially increase his support, but there was a catch: the donor wanted HOPE to tone down its Christian mission. Greer's experience is not unusual: welfare, overseas aid and health organisations experience this sort of pressure on a regular basis, with philanthropic supporters wanting the good deeds without the Christian motivation. The temptation to acquiesce is enormous. Faced with what Greer terms as the challenge – 'tone down your Christian distinctiveness or forfeit our funding' – Greer graciously declined the donor's support and urges other Christian organisations to do the same.[7]

- **The hoax of harmony**. In T*he Dying of the Light[8]*, James Burtchaell gives examples of how the pursuit of harmony within educational institutions led to a loss of organisational faithfulness. Often it began with a desire not to be 'sectarian'. Burtchaell's research showed that purpose and belief statements that were workshopped over the years showed evidence of a 'repeated inclination to modify, to blur, to compromise … while claiming continuity' and there was increased willingness 'to soften any truth claim if it obstructed any fellowship.' Organisations ended up being 'neither sectarian nor Christian.'[9]

Yet a proper understanding of "unity in the faith" allows for strong and indeed significant disagreements – even theological ones – among people in relationship with each other through Jesus. In a society that increasingly adopts the paradigm that "if you disagree with me then you must hate me", this is radically counter-cultural. Consider how Jesus operated: he didn't agree with the lifestyle of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) and he didn't agree with Zacchaeus' lifestyle (Luke 19:1–10), but nonetheless he loved them.

- **Serving two masters**. 'No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money' (Matt 6:24). Jesus' teaching here has as much relevance for the Christian organisation as for the individual Christian. A focus on money[10] rather than mission leads a Christian organisation into unfaithfulness.

One corrective is to measure things that relate more directly to your mission. Are the outcomes of your business practices gauged by faithfulness to the mission of God who gifts, inspires and guides us? Are the business cases over the past year determined primarily by financial metrics or missional imperatives? Is your service to clients shaped by budgets rather than compassion and grace?

Statements of Faith and Codes of Conduct are not enough

So, what is the alternative to your organisation gradually losing its Christian identity? While these red flags help indicate a decline into unfaithfulness—14 such indicators

are identified in our *Keeping Faith*[11] book—it is more important to focus on what leads to persistent organisational faithfulness.
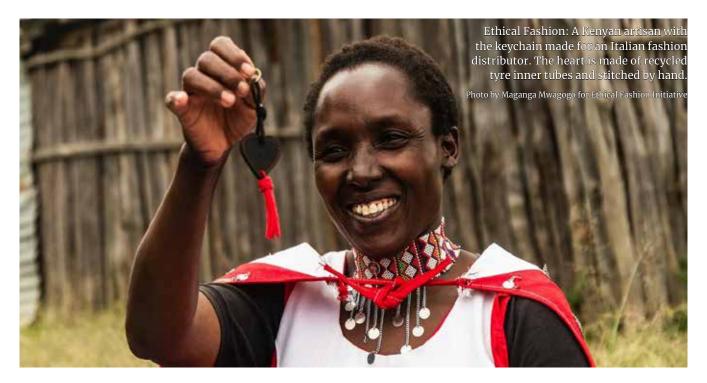
For many organisations there is an over-reliance on certain tools: statements of faith, codes of conduct, agreement with a set of values… These are useful but are no guarantee that the employees are fully committed to the behaviour that flows from such documents. There are many recent examples, including one on the public record[12] involving a prominent Australian Bible college, where the protagonist said she was able to sign the values statement, the faith statement and even a code of conduct statement which included the historical sexual ethic of the church on the basis that she was very happy to affirm that marriage between a man and a woman is a "sacred and a beautiful thing". She had no problem affirming that, but that is not the limit of what she affirms, such as that marriage can also be between two women.

In our conversations with networks for Christian schools there is a growing concern that employees and parents join the schools because of the values, but are cautious about beliefs, and have no intent of abiding by the behaviours that flow from those values and beliefs.

Organisational faithfulness

A more effective way, that is, the gauge for what makes an organisation worthy of the label "Christian", is found in the idea of faithfulness. The "Christian-ness" of an organisation emerges not simply from shared values or affirmations of faith, but from the way in which Christian truths find expression and are embedded in the outlook, disposition, behaviours, and daily practices of the organisation. Those truths

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must be lived. That is what we call organisational faithfulness, the idea that those within the organisation are participating faithfully in what God is doing, and putting God's will into practice in the here and now, 'on earth as in heaven' (Matt 6:10)

When we reflect on passages from the Gospels, the various stories and parables that focus on business have one thing in common: the outcome of our business practices are gauged by our faithfulness to the mission of the God who gifts, inspires and guides them. And note that it is God's mission, not ours. That is the surprising thing, perhaps: that the focus is not on results or outcomes, but on the input. All we have to offer to God in response to what he has done for us is our faithfulness to his mission.

Perhaps one of the best known is the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30, NIV). While, in our reading of that familiar parable, we often focus on the outcomes, that is, the return on investment for each servant, the focus of the Master is on the "faithfulness" of the servants:
"Well done, good and faithful servant!" he told him. "Because you have been faithful…"
And this is the same whether they brought an extra five bags of gold or two (Matthew 25:21 & 23).

Such faithfulness is not developed purely by a focus on mission, or even God's mission. This is important but does not guarantee a coherent Christian identity. In this way, we do not see the problem as primarily "mission drift" but as "theological drift". That is, organisations need to develop a vibrant and living organisational theology, which seeks to apply theology to behaviour, and articulates how key Christian principles and beliefs find expression in an organisation's daily life. What we know about God—our theology—is thereby embedded in every aspect of an organisation's structures, management and practice.

This faithfulness is maintained by ensuring an overlap between the identity (the story of who the organisation is and why it exists) with its ethos (how the organisation operates including its culture and values) and the impact that it has (what the organisation does measured spiritually as well as via its missional effectiveness and financial stewardship).

For example, A fashion label run by a Christian entrepreneur positioned itself as a 'profit with purpose' organisation, donating a percentage of profits to fund an orphanage in Africa. In this way, the organisation's Christian good was entirely linked to its impact.

During a Christian programme designed to help start-ups innovate and grow, the business team was challenged about the intended supply chain: How would the clothes be manufactured? Were the manufacturing companies paying their employees a liveable wage? Where would the material be sourced from? Would the material be using dyes that impacted on the environment?

These questions went to the heart of the ethos and identity of the organisation. While the business impact was good, its practices would have contributed to the worst elements of the fashion industry. After prayer and reflection, the business team decided to morph the organisation into an online ethical fashion hub. Their Christian vision was to be a leader in setting a new ethical standard in the fashion industry by making it easier for consumers to access ethical fashion.

Developing organisational theology

An organisational theology will look different for each organisation and part of its strength will be in its active development.

Let's think about a subject we often avoid: sin. We often imagine that Christian organisations are perfect, and sin and evil exist outside them.

Of course, there are way too many practical examples of how that is not true; but our very doctrine of sin tells us that perfection on earth is impossible, other than in Jesus. Christian organisations are full of sinful, broken people, and have systems and structures also impacted by sin. We need to acknowledge that, rather than trying to cover it up. It starts with a leader being prepared to be vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and supporting others to both identify brokenness in the organisation, and be proactive in moves toward restoration.

In terms of the impact of sin, it might lead to organisations (including churches) suffering from poor mental health, even psychosis. If you are on the inside, everything may feel normal, but anyone looking in can see that things are a mess. Or the organisation may be depressed, and everyone working there is flat, disheartened, unenthusiastic, lost. Organisations can also become neurotic: anxious, distracted.[13]

While sin, confession and judgement might be considered reactive aspects of an organisational theology, in our book we also consider forgiveness, grace and redemption; and then other positive theological categories such as radical hospitality. In the Bible, we see that God demonstrated radical hospitality in many ways, most definitively in Jesus leaving heaven and coming to earth as a human, to embrace our limitations.

One example of what this might look like in an organisation is the story of Grace, who had been a long–time missionary in Pakistan before she retired. She finally returned to Australia as poor as the proverbial church mouse. While many aged care homes have expensive entry contributions, one organisation saw that Grace could provide much greater value through her participation. For the next 30 years she paid a small rent for her villa. She was a key member of the retirement village community, blessing others through her hospitality, love and service. Her personal contribution far outweighed any entry contribution that was waived to enable her to join the community.

Three simple ideas to promote organisational faithfulness

So, what is the way forward for Christian organisations? Here are three ideas to start the process:

1. Review the three bulleted items above: do you have a seductive donor, practice the hoax of harmony, or serve two masters? (There are 11 other items in a checklist in chapter 15 of *Keeping Faith* to check for mission and theological drift.)

2. Look for inconsistencies between the organisation's external communications (for example, 'we promote care and flourishing') and internal practices ('because this is a ministry, we need staff to "volunteer" extra hours of work').

3. Remember that cultural change starts from the top, so ensure there is common language and theological understanding among the Board and Executive staff.

Our Christian organisations are in desperate need of solid organisational theology, to enable them to maintain their Christian distinctiveness, to continue the mission of God. We pray that our book can start the conversations needed to provide a more hope–filled witness.

This article is based on the book: Keeping Faith: How Christian Organisations can Stay True to the Way of Jesus*, by Stephen Judd, John Swinton and Kara Martin. Published by Langham Publishing, it is available from Amazon, Waterstones and Eden Books.*

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12. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-08/openly-gay-teacher-karen-pack-sacked-morling-college-email/100055422
13. For more on this, listen to a wonderful conversation between John Swinton and Kate Bowler, particularly in his discussion of hospitals. https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-presence/

Kara Martin is the author of Workshop: How to Use Your Work to Worship God, *and* Workshop 2: How to Flourish at Work; *and co-author of* Keeping Faith: How Christian organisations can stay true to the way of Jesus. *She is a lecturer at Mary Andrews College and Adjunct Professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Boston. Kara is also a Visiting Fellow with the Mockler Center for Faith and Ethics in the Public Square and on the Board of the Theology of Work Project in the US.*