

## How shall we live?

By John Bottomley

*The question 'How shall we live?' was raised at the end of the last conversation. For me, the question addresses what it means to be a faithful disciple of Christ when all of our actions are taken under the shadow of violence.*

*As Director of the Creative Ministries Network, I am engaged like other agencies of UnitingCare, in grappling with the Synod requirements to improve standards of governance. At first blush, this seems like a good thing. But the Synod's approach to governance does not appear to address the deeper fears in our society about risk and insecurity. The pervasive nature of violence in our culture has been ignored, and the UnitingCare governance edifice is being constructed on the resigned acceptance of 'that's the way things are'. Is that the way we are called to live?*

### A new Synod structure for governance

The recent Victorian Synod of the UC agreed to establish a Governance Committee in the Church. The purpose of this new structure was to provide oversight across the whole church to how issues of governance in the church were being attended.

The justification for this new structure was reported to be recent failures of various governing bodies to do their job properly. Examples quoted in the preceding discussion across the Synod included:

- The upheavals at Wesley Mission a couple of years ago.
- The major financial losses accrued by an aged care facility in Victoria.
- Accumulated losses at a church school in Western Australia that were said to have almost sent the Synod broke.
- A major conflict in a suburban congregation that destroyed that community.

### Governance the problem, governance the solution!

All these problems were blamed on the failure of the relevant governing body to do its job properly. Problems had not been addressed and little empires had become stumbling blocks.

These problems were seen to be of a similar nature to the problems that a Royal Commission had found at the heart of the collapse of the insurance company HIH. Poor governance! Lack of proper oversight to keep a check on inflated egos or corrupted work practices.

To address these concerns the Victorian Synod brought in a firm of leading consultants in organisational governance. The consultants then identified the church's problem was the lack of appropriate governance to ensure its goals were being met. The solution was a proposed new Committee within the Synod comprising nine people with special expertise who could oversee and renew proper governance behaviour across the church.

### The mission of the governance experts: keeping God pure!

The Pharisees and scribes who came from Jerusalem in Mark chapter 7 were the leading governance experts of their day. They knew what was proper behaviour to keep the people of Israel pure and holy as they believed God required of God's people. Indeed, that was their mission in the world polluted by the profane rule of the Roman Empire.

Because the Pharisees believed God was fundamentally pure and desired Israel to achieve purity as God's people, they devoted their energy to structuring the world to exclude impure influences. The governance council of the Pharisees knew non-kosher behaviour when they saw it. "They noticed that some of Jesus' disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them." (Mark 7:2)

The disciples' behaviour was the sort of behaviour that would lead to a breakdown in the good order of Jewish society. It was viewed as dangerous behaviour because it polluted and corrupted the social organisation of the community. To encourage the disciples' compliance with the rules of good governance, the Pharisees asked Jesus "Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?" (Mark 7:5)

#### Jesus focuses on what is at the heart of human behaviour

But Jesus does not engage in a discussion with the Pharisees about what constitutes good governance. Jesus does not appear interested in the Pharisees' discussion about best practice for keeping the social life of Jewish society pure.

Instead of engaging in a debate about how to read the policy and procedures manual for ritual purity, Jesus shifts the debate to an ethical plane. "It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in the passage of Scripture – 'This people honours me only with lip service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.' You put aside the commandments of God to cling to human traditions." (Mark 7:6-8)

In Mark's gospel, good governance starts with God and God's commandments. And this God is concerned with the whole of human life, not just the outwardly observable actions. Jesus teaches that God calls forth actions from people's inner disposition – from what is in your heart.

When you know God and God's desire for your life in your heart, then your actions will flow from that spirit. But if you do not know God's love for you in your heart, then your heart which is empty will bring forth a life that is empty. Your heart, which is godless, will bring forth a life that is godless and self absorbed.

#### At the heart of human behaviour is who you worship (or give your trust to)

The Pharisees bad press usually focuses on their hypocritical attitude to strict observance of regulations. But in Mark's gospel, Jesus' teaching not only challenges the focus of the Pharisees on regulations and compliance. His teaching also challenges the Pharisees' view of God.

Jesus preaches that God is not a distant figure removed from the world to preserve God's purity. God is not fundamentally preoccupied with being pure and therefore keeping a boundary between God and humanity. Jesus teaches that God enters human hearts and addresses the messiness of our lives. Violence here may be defined as beliefs and behaviour that seek to deny God's purposes, and keep God's presence at a distance from the world.

Jesus teaches that God desires to fill our empty hearts with love, to heal our broken hearts in mercy, to draw forth from our yearning hearts a spirit that is grateful for the gift of life. Jesus seeks to free us from idolatry, from trusting in the work of our own hands as the means of security and salvation.

God's grace is the starting point for right relationships, including good governance. Mark's gospel suggests this is a foundation for reviewing the life of the Church that organisational consultants working from the insights of the secular social sciences can never address.

The Pharisees identified that Jesus disciples' behaviour was a risk to how the Pharisees viewed the security of Israel. In the same way, responsible officials of the Synod have identified behaviour in various parts of the church that they view as a risk to the security of the church. But increasingly governments set the standards by which risk is assessed, and assessment of risk is driven by the insurance industry. So the church ends up trusting for its security in its own efforts, and these are judged by the standards of the world.

If the church's effort is increasingly to meet government standards of service delivery, and avoid insurable claims against risk, how will we escape Jesus judgement: "It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied - 'This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations'. You put aside the commandments of God to cling to human traditions." (Mark 7:6-8)

#### Discerning God's calling in the struggle with governance issues

Jesus judgement offers several alternatives to the present dilemma.

1. The Synod needs to confess how the church clings to human traditions, that is, how we have trusted our identity to governments and the insurance industry, for example. God calls the Synod to worship God and be open to God's commandments. This is too important to be passed off to local congregations. It is the Synod's life as church that is at stake, because it is in the Synod that this preoccupation with 'human traditions' took root.
2. This calling is also for the sake of the world, which is increasingly oppressed by government control and its fear of risk. These 'powers that be' falsely promise to provide security while continuing to foster insecurity. It is the church's vocation to unmask these powers, and pray for their redemption through Christ's healing grace.

The Synod's grappling with the issue of governance needs to be grasped as important, not for the church's security as institution, but for the sake of a world that is lost and oppressed.

3. Worship is worthless that does not honour the God who is the source of life. All the talk about governance is simply 'human regulations' if it does not connect with the mercy and justice of God. This connection is to be a connection of the 'heart', a test that all previous governance and policy manuals gloriously fail!

The Synod's Governance Committee could pilot some initiatives that connect a heart-felt obedience to God's desire for mercy and justice with the development of right relationships in Boards and within agencies. The Creative Ministries Network would be willing to be part of such a project as our Board begins to struggle with the need for a three-year strategy plan and our commitment to a creative and prophetic ministry.

4. Symptoms of bad governance may then be seen for what they are, symptoms of faithless worship. From this perspective, the failure of HIH may be attributed to the worship of Mammon, and other collapses reveal other idolatries or worship of false gods. If this is true, then Boards may need to be equipped in the art of spiritual discernment and the practice of prayer and meditation as well as the skills of governance.

The challenge for the Synod's Governance Committee may be to take into its own processes a commitment to discerning the presence of God in the very midst of the current struggles over governance.

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