

*Paper to be presented at a conference on  
“Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning:  
Learning to be Church Together”  
Ushaw College, Durham, January 2009*

## **The institutionalisation of the practice of faith: churches as organisations**

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### Introduction

At the heart of “Receptive Ecumenism” is receptive learning – each tradition taking the creative step of rigorously exploring what it needs to learn and can learn (or “receive”) with integrity from its others. This is, of course, not simply about theological learning but also about practical learning, and part of such practical learning is about how we ‘do’ church. At one level this takes us into organisational theory and practice for, whatever else they may be, churches are organisations. And so it will almost certainly be beneficial to study churches as organisations in order to learn what we can both about our own churches and about these others – and always with the intention of improving our practice.

But in order to do so we first need a way of understanding and analysing organisations. Organisation theory gives us many such ways, usually conceived of generically as metaphors. So organisations might be considered as machines, organisms or as political systems, to take just three such metaphors as examples. But a concern within organisation studies has been not just to describe organisations metaphorically but to consider what ‘good’ organisations might be – and good not just in the sense of effective but in a moral sense as well.

What I aim to do in this paper, therefore, is to suggest that the application of a conceptual organisational framework based on the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre might be a particularly helpful way of ‘coming at’ churches as organisations. This conceptual framework of organisations has been developed mainly within business ethics and by application to business organisations, though its application to organisations of all types has been noted. I will aim to demonstrate here that there is a singular richness to this conceptual framework and that, with so many points of contact with churches and faith, the further study of, and practice within, churches using this framework might prove to be worthwhile.

The paper as presented here, then, proceeds as follows – the full paper has other sections which I will note in passing. So, a brief discussion of the existing literature on churches as organisations is omitted. A summary of the conceptual organisational framework based on MacIntyre’s work (but omitting sections on narrative and tradition which also form part of MacIntyre’s overall conceptual framework) is followed by its application to churches as organisations. Parallels with existing ecclesiology which I cover in the full paper are also omitted before suggestions are made as to the practical implications and further research that might be worth pursuing in the light of the discussion.

MacIntyre’s virtues-goods-practice-institution framework

### *Goods, practices and institutions*

In order to explore the application of MacIntyre's framework to churches as organisations we need to begin by considering MacIntyre's notion of a practice. This he defines very precisely as:

“Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” (MacIntyre 2007: 187)

So far, so good. But in order for practices to flourish institutions are required to provide for their sustenance. MacIntyre provides a similarly complex definition of institutions:

“Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with ... external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions – and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question – that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential feature of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.” (MacIntyre 2007: 194)

MacIntyre's description of institutions and their relationship with practices can be applied in almost any context. MacIntyre himself indicates that, “the range of practices is wide: arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept” (MacIntyre 2007: 188). The argument here is that this can be extended to include organisational life in general (as has been done in relation to business organisations) and to churches as organisations in particular. In other words, the argument is that any organisation can be re-described as a practice-institution combination, and that this applies as much to churches as to any other organisation. An important point to note, however, and one to which we will need to return, is that MacIntyre's conceptualisation of practices and institutions immediately brings to light the essential association *and* tension between practices and institutions (they form a single causal order; practices cannot exist without being institutionalised and yet practices are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness and competitiveness of the institution). However, we first need to consider the place of the virtues and to put in place one other aspect of this framework which is equally important.

### *Virtues and institutional governance*

MacIntyre initially defines the virtues as:

“dispositions not only to act in particular ways but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously ... is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues.” (MacIntyre 2007: 149)

But he later links virtues, goods and practices more specifically, a link which, while not excluding the exercise of virtue outside of practices, gives to practices a particularly important place in the moral life:

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” (MacIntyre 2007: 191)

Virtues, therefore, are enduring character traits (as, of course, are vices), not practice-specific, but spanning and necessary to the flourishing of any practice. And the possession and exercise of the virtues enables an individual (in community with other practitioners of course) to achieve the goods internal to practices, and the achievement of those goods *across a variety of practices and over time* is instrumental in the individual’s search for and movement towards their own *telos* or purpose.

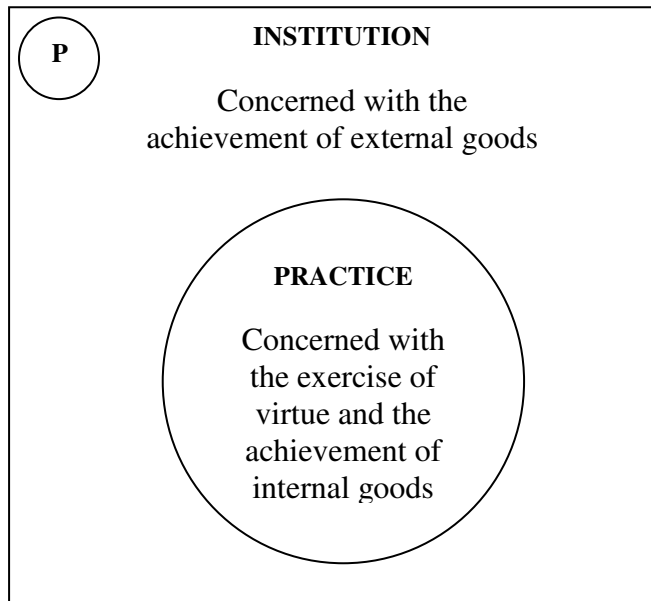
But we need now to consider one other aspect of MacIntyre’s framework:

“the making and sustaining of forms of human community – *and therefore of institutions* – itself has all the characteristics of a practice, and moreover of a practice which stands in a peculiarly close relationship to the exercise of the virtues ...” (MacIntyre 2007: 194, emphasis added).

In other words, what at the institutional level we might term senior managers – those who have, in one sense, outgrown the ‘core’ practice and now represent the institution that ‘houses’ it – also have the same opportunity to exercise the virtues in the making and sustaining of the institution, and there are internal goods to be achieved from this practice in just the same way as there are from the core practice which the institution houses.

It will be clear that in the context of the church a continuing, full and fundamental engagement with the core practice (which later we will term ‘faith’) is to be expected. The church is, perhaps, unusual in this instance although academic organisations may also have something in common with churches here.

This conceptual framework, then, may be represented by the diagram below where the core practice is ‘housed’ by the institution and the smaller circle with the “P” inside represents the practice of making and sustaining the institution.



MacIntyre, in drawing attention to the central dilemma of his framework that we noted earlier, argues that, “practices are often distorted by their modes of institutionalisation, when irrelevant considerations relating to money, power and status are allowed to invade the practice” (MacIntyre 1994: 289). It is, in other words, the *prioritisation* of external goods that corrupts the institution and threatens the practice. If this is so, the question then becomes what can be done to maintain an appropriate *balance* between the pursuit of internal and external goods in such a way that the institution is able to preserve its practices by ensuring that they are not eroded by the inordinate pursuit of external goods. Thus, an important part of the whole virtues-goods-practice-institution framework is to focus on the level of the institution in order to assess what features of the institution will better enable it promote excellence in the core practice that it houses.

#### *The character of the virtuous institution*

I have argued elsewhere that “character” is an appropriate term to use when thinking of these features of an institution that either promote or frustrate excellence in the core practice. The first requirement, then, of an institution with a virtuous character would be that there is a *good purpose* for the particular practice-institution combination that it comprises. Second, the institution would be aware that it is founded on and has as its most important function *the sustenance of the particular practice that it houses* and following from this, the institution would *encourage the pursuit of excellence in that practice* whatever that may mean for the particular practice in question. Third, the institution would focus on *external goods* (such as survival, reputation, power, profit or, more generally, success) as both a necessary and worthwhile function of the institution (they are *goods*, not *bads*, as MacIntyre emphasises), but *only to the extent necessary to the sustenance and development of the practice*.

#### *Preconditions for virtuous organisations*

Omitted.

#### MacIntyre’s notions of a narrative quest and tradition

Omitted.

## Churches as organisations within a MacIntyrean understanding

### *Purpose*

Omitted.

### *The practice of faith*

What then of the core practice at the centre of churches as organisations? It seems to me that the essence of the initial and continuing command to disciples by Jesus is always “follow me” and that the response to such a command is one of faith (“Believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1)). The practice of faith (we will need to add something like “in God, as Father and as revealed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and as sustained here on earth by the Holy Spirit” to give it its full and Trinitarian formulation), fits MacIntyre’s definition of a practice (it is “a coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity”) even if we may wish to add that it is divinely called into being and divinely sustained. The practice of faith is also, of course, always both individual and corporate.

The practice of faith will involve: worship (including public prayer, sacraments such as and in particular the Eucharist, the reading of Scripture and preaching); penitence and the concomitant offering of forgiveness (including engagement in activities inside and outside of the church involving reconciliation); witness; works of mercy to the poor, the sick, the outcast (pastoral care and including engagement in things like peace and justice activities) such that Christians engage with God in the inauguration of the kingdom; discipling (of ourselves and others); and discernment. It will also include personal worship, private prayer and study, the giving of resources (time and money) and a commitment to the formation and maintenance of the Christian community. There may be other parts to the practice of faith, of course, but these are surely the main ones.

Of course, different understandings of the significance of each of these elements of the practice of faith combined with different skills and interests will mean that some are involved mainly in works of mercy, for example, whereas others are involved mainly in worship. But every Christian might reasonably be asked what involvement in each of these practices he or she has, suggesting that a balance needs to be struck. There might also be a reasonable question as to whether the practice of faith is the central practice in the life of the Christian believer so that all other practices (the making and sustaining of family life, arts, games, any involvement in politics and whatever practice might be involved in the ‘making of a living’) are regarded as in some sense subordinate to and contributory towards the practice of faith.

If faith, as expounded here, is the practice at the heart of the church as organisation, the question that then remains is how is such practice institutionalised, and is such institutionalisation conducive to excellence in the practice or not. It is to this that we now turn.

### *The institutionalisation of the practice of faith*

The institutionalisation of the practice of faith occurs in a number of ways. Most obviously at the congregational level there is usually a physical building, one or more ministers with legitimate authority and in that sense a hierarchical structure, and then various activities most

notably corporate worship. Worship is, of course, usually institutionalised in liturgy and within worship there may be other conventions such as the singing of hymns, often itself institutionalised in the choice of liturgical music. The content of ‘faith’ (what believers ought to believe) is institutionalised in doctrine, and the establishment of doctrine may well be centralised in ‘higher’ levels of the church. Then there is the organisation of the church into committees, teams, task groups or whatever the terminology may be, which, partly because of charitable status may well involve formalised governance arrangements. Similarly, at the congregational level activities such as house or cell groups provide for mid-week study and pastoral support. Activities such as campaigning for political change, fund-raising for charitable causes, witnessing (the seemingly ubiquitous Alpha courses or open youth clubs, for example), may well be organised. There will also be the institutionalisation of giving through stewardship campaigns, enabling tax benefits to be realised.

At ‘higher’ levels, for example Deanery or Circuit, Diocesan or District, further institutionalisation occurs as resources are collected and disbursed and there is usually some centralisation of power and status, as MacIntyre’s definition of an institution suggests will occur. Engagement in some activities may be through ‘para-church’ organisations such as development charities which have institutionalised “works of mercy”.

It will be apparent from even this brief and probably partial description that institutionalisation is both formal and informal. In MacIntyre’s terminology we have, as we noted earlier, the distinction between internal and external goods with the institution focused on the latter. Institutions have to make the books balance. Institutions are concerned with their own reputation. Institutions have a natural tendency to try to ensure their own survival. It is this acquisitive and competitive nature of institutions that can mean that, on occasion, the practice seems to be at the service of the institution rather than *vice-versa*. Even when the institution appears to be in good order, it seems to have a remarkable ability to siphon off resources that might well be better used in the service of the practice. When the institution is in bad order it can, of course, lead to the corruption of the practice – as the miss-use of indulgences in the Catholic Church that led to the Protestant Reformation or the inability of the German churches to withstand the rise of Nazism bear witness.

The point, however, is that the practice of faith is inevitably and deeply institutionalised, probably more deeply than we at first recognise and there is always the question as to whether such institutionalisation promotes the excellence of the practice of faith or alternatively tends to corrupt the practice.

#### Parallels with existing ecclesiology

Omitted.

#### Things left unsaid and undone

Inevitably there are many things left unsaid and undone in what is, effectively, only an introduction to ecclesiology from a MacIntyrean perspective. Most obviously from a theoretical perspective I have said little about the virtues themselves. Similarly, I have said little about internal and external goods and I have omitted material on narrative and tradition that would have provided further and important links between MacIntyre’s framework, the practice of faith and churches as organisations.

At an empirical level I have said little about the way in which different ‘church traditions’ have institutionalised the practice of faith. This, it seems to me, is an important (and possibly the most important) development that can be explored using MacIntyre’s conceptual framework. It is anticipated that, as part of the current project on “Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church” being led by the Dept. of Theology and Religion in Durham University, some of these aspects of practice and institution can be teased out and the extent to which the different forms of institutionalisation that the various church traditions have led to, the way they have influenced the practice of faith and the extent to which they support or otherwise that practice, can be explored. In the work that has been done to date, it is already clear that there are marked differences in the way that different churches are institutionalised and, not surprisingly, that there are also marked differences in the way in which the practice of faith is then characterised and understood. This is to some extent down to different emphases on the sub-practices – some traditions emphasising liturgical worship over evangelism, for example. But the interplay between tradition, institutionalisation and practice is clearly one that warrants further study.

In the spirit of “Receptive Ecumenism” the hope is that this empirical work will provide a resource for learning within the traditions. In MacIntyre’s terms it might then lead to institutions which enable the better pursuit of excellence within the practice of faith. So, as usual, there is more to be done and more to be said and I would like to invite others to explore this with me, whether theologically, theoretically or empirically.

### References

MacIntyre, A.: 2007, *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (London: Duckworth).