

## **Churches as organisations: towards a virtue ecclesiology for today**

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### Abstract

This article is an attempt to offer insights from organisation studies to ecclesiology. To do so it draws particularly on the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre to offer a virtue ecclesiology for today. The application of MacIntyre's conceptual framework of practices, institutions, goods and virtues to all kinds of organisations, which already exists in the field of organisation studies, is extended to the church as an organisation. It suggests that the church may be re-described as an organisation in which the practices of faith are housed within the institution of the church. On this understanding, the gift of the church to the world is not simply the practices of faith but the manner in which they are institutionalised.

Keywords church, ecclesiology, MacIntyre, virtue ethics, practices, institutions

### Introduction

In this article I want to respond to the general call made by Brodd<sup>1</sup> for a *rapprochement* between ecclesiology and the sciences. More specifically, however, I want to respond to his invitation to consider organisational theory as a potentially fruitful source for ecclesiology. Brodd writes:

“The Church is an organisation, sometimes easily identified as a bureaucratic institution, and in any society related to the dominant administrative procedures and theories of administration for its administration of finances, buildings, personnel, and so on. It is the same church which administers finances and sacraments.”<sup>2</sup>

But more specifically still, I want to respond to Mannion's<sup>3</sup> proposal for a virtue ecclesiology for today, (that is, in his terms, our postmodern society), and to his suggestion that in so doing we should look to the work of the distinguished philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

With others, I have been working with MacIntyre's ideas for some time in developing what might be termed a virtue ethics-based organisational theory. The application of this theory has largely been to business organisations (my home territory), but in the process we have noted the broader application of the theory to organisations of all types. So, for example, in a recent article<sup>4</sup> we apply the conceptual framework that we have developed, and its implications for organisational analysis, to the celebrated but infamous case of the Bristol Royal Infirmary, where infant mortality rates were significantly above national norms. It seems possible that we can similarly and usefully apply this conceptual and analytical framework to churches as organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Brodd, 'Ecclesiological research'.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>3</sup> Mannion, *Ecclesiology and postmodernity*.

<sup>4</sup> Beadle and Moore, 'MacIntyre: neo-Aristotelianism'.

The paper, then, proceeds as follows. First, I set out briefly Mannion's arguments for a virtue ecclesiology for today. Second, in order to fill in what, from an organisational perspective, Mannion leaves unsaid, I summarise the conceptual framework that we have developed, based on MacIntyre's work. Third, I look at the work that has already been done in applying MacIntyre to the church by Murphy et al.,<sup>5</sup> and extend this by considering a particular virtue-based understanding of church drawing on Wells' work.<sup>6</sup> I contrast these with case studies from organisational theory which help us to appreciate the institutional nature of the church, aside from its practices. In the fourth section I suggest that the church can be conceived, in MacIntyre's terms, as an institution which houses the practices of faith, and I explore the implications of this way of understanding church as organisation, before concluding.

## I. Mannion's proposals for a virtue ecclesiology

Mannion sets out competing ecclesiologies in the postmodern era, specifically ecclesiologies "from above" and "from below".<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiology from above represents the church as, in a sense, "given" and therefore above historical and social context. God founded the church in Christ and animates and directs it by the Holy Spirit. The Church represents a social reality that is sacred and hence other than and, in some sense, above the world and the natural order. The hierarchical structure and ordering of the church "descends" from above and so corresponds to the will of God. Thus ecclesiology from above is pre-critical and a-historical in the sense that it "will not admit a *critical* historical account of the church's origins, but rather tends towards an attempt to affirm and uphold an a-critical *doctrinal* account".<sup>8</sup>

Ecclesiology from below, by contrast, "acknowledges that the church is an organization within which and upon which social forces have an impact".<sup>9</sup> It is thus concrete, existential and historical, but also theological, such that it "cannot be reduced to conclusions that can be generated by history and sociology alone".<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, in being more worldly – but incarnationally so, in conformity with a 'Christology from below' – it is more able to respond to challenges posed from globalisation and pluralism. "It will be all the more able to hear and respond to the anguished cry of the unparalleled human suffering in the world today. It will listen to, learn from, and meet the challenges posed by the experiences of women, just as it will face the realities of rising secularisation in many part of the globe, as well as the rise in individualism".<sup>11</sup>

The above / below contrast in ecclesiology, as in Christology, can too often be played out unhelpfully in dichotomous terms. For a faith focussed on God's self-revelation through historical particularities and contingencies, neither is an exclusive option,<sup>12</sup> and while Mannion clearly favours an ecclesiology from below he is at pains to stress that he is not in search of a 'blueprint ecclesiology' that will suit all times and places. The function of ecclesiology, he claims, is "to aid the concrete church in performing its task of witness and pastoral care",<sup>13</sup> not about finding the one right way to think about being church.

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<sup>5</sup> Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian ethics*; Murphy et al. *Virtues and practices*.

<sup>6</sup> Wells, *God's companions*.

<sup>7</sup> Mannion, *Ecclesiology and postmodernity*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-5, emphasis in the original. Mannion is drawing largely on Haight, *Christian community in history*.

<sup>9</sup> Mannion, *Ecclesiology and postmodernity*, 33

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, citing Haight, *Christian community in history*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Mannion, *Ecclesiology and postmodernity*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Lash, 'Up and down in Christology'.

<sup>13</sup> Mannion, *Ecclesiology and postmodernity*, 37.

From this we turn to Mannion's proposal for a virtue ecclesiology. First, in distinguishing virtue ethics from deontological or consequentialist-based theories, he suggests a virtue- or character-oriented ecclesiology in which the church would be concerned less with what ends it should seek or what rules it should live by as "what sort of community it should be".<sup>14</sup> But beyond this, virtue ethics draws attention to the facts both that "ethics has a history" and that "ethics is fundamentally bound up with communities that likewise have their own "histories", i.e. their narratives and stories and past, present and future concerns and anxieties. Virtue ethics focuses on what sort of people we should seek to be and what sort of communities we should work to build".<sup>15</sup> In supporting Gill's warning against focusing on idealised rather than actual Christian communities, and in critiquing a narrow view of God's actions in history to the church alone, Mannion dismisses the work of Hauerwas as inappropriate to the task.<sup>16</sup>

And thus to MacIntyre.<sup>17</sup> In summarising MacIntyre's argument in *After Virtue* as against the Enlightenment project, Mannion points to the centrality of the *teleological* questions relating both to individuals and communities: "The *After Virtue* debate was and continues to be about putting the self in a new (communal) setting and having some notion of an overall end and purpose in life, rather than about rules and principles and consequences and individual happiness".<sup>18</sup> He notes that virtue is not "*anti-* organization and institutions" although insisting that "a virtue ecclesiology would look carefully at the *motives* behind planning, strategy, and structural organization, with a view to emphasizing the priority of love".<sup>19</sup> Similarly in relation to institutions he proposes that, "The virtuous life is to be preferred over the predominance of the "institutional" (using the term here in a negative sense). When the institution becomes the end in itself, the *telos*, and is not driven by *caritas*, by embracing and bearing witness to the love of God, then it has gone seriously astray".<sup>20</sup>

Beyond this, however, while mentioning key aspects of MacIntyre's work such as narrative, practice and tradition, Mannion leaves us, somewhat tantalisingly, wondering just what a MacIntyre-based virtue ecclesiology might look like in practice. In order to explore that, therefore, we need to turn to look at MacIntyre's project in more detail. And while it might be instructive to have some appreciation of MacIntyre's concepts of tradition and narrative, within which practice and institutions are set, we will here, both for reasons of space and to focus specifically on what organisation theory can contribute to ecclesiology, confine ourselves to a consideration of MacIntyre's conceptual framework that links goods, virtues, practices and institutions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mannion, *Ecclesiology and postmodernity*, 197. This does not mean that the church should not have a clear idea of what its *telos* or purpose should be.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Here Mannion is drawing on the work of Kirkpatrick, *The ethics of community*. It seems clear that such a dismissal of Hauerwas' work is mistaken. The church on Hauerwas' view is distinct from the world but this does not imply sectarianism. See Hauerwas, *The peaceable kingdom*, 99-102; Biggar, 'Is Stanley Hauerwas sectarian?'; and Wells 'No abiding inner city', particularly 129, 131, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Mannion is clear that he is using MacIntyre not in a privileged sense as *the* thinker on these issues, but as one whose work provides useful parallels (*Ecclesiology and postmodernity*, 198n).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 227, emphasis in the original.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 227, emphasis in the original.

<sup>21</sup> For just such a broader discussion, and in a Christian context, see Kallenberg, 'The master argument of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*', 20-9.

## II. MacIntyre's virtues-goods-practice-institution framework<sup>22</sup>

### *Goods, practices and institutions*

The significance of MacIntyre's work has been addressed by Beadle and Moore.<sup>23</sup> It is also the case that MacIntyre's arguments for, and developments of, virtue ethics and their application to organisations in general (but specifically to the area of business) are already well documented.<sup>24</sup> In order to explore their application to churches as organisations, however, 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.”<sup>25</sup>

It is worth drawing out the four central concepts inherent in this definition. First, engagement in practices is a social and co-operative activity – something never done alone, but always with others. Second, the outcome of engagement in practices is the achievement of internal goods. Such internal goods, which MacIntyre later identifies with both the excellence of the products that result from the practice, (such as “the excellence in performance by the painters and that of each portrait itself”,<sup>26</sup> and the perfection of the individuals in the process of such production,<sup>27</sup> can be contrasted with external goods such as survival, reputation, power, profit or, more generally, success. When achieved, MacIntyre argues, these external goods are “always some individual's property and possession. [They are] characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners”.<sup>28</sup> With internal goods, however, although there is competition in one sense, this is competition to excel and so benefits all members of the community engaged in the practice.<sup>29</sup> A point that is worth drawing out here, and to which we will return, is that external goods are predicated on scarce resources while internal goods are unlimited.

Third, practices have standards of excellence and it is implicit in this that such standards have come to be determined by those practitioners who have historically engaged in the practice: “To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those

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<sup>22</sup> The following section draws largely on a previous paper – see Moore and Beadle, ‘In search of organizational virtue’.

<sup>23</sup> Beadle and Moore, ‘MacIntyre on virtue and organization’.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Beadle, ‘The misappropriation of MacIntyre’; Moore, ‘On the implications of the practice-institution distinction’, Moore, ‘Humanizing business’, Moore, ‘Corporate character’, Moore, ‘Re-imagining the morality of management’.

<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187. Most of the work I refer to is taken from *After Virtue* which was originally published in 1981. I am using the third edition.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, ‘A partial response to my critics’, 284.

<sup>28</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-1.

whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point”.<sup>30</sup> Thus “practices always have histories”,<sup>31</sup> and we find ourselves engaged in a tradition which both confronts us and from which we need to learn.<sup>32</sup> But, fourth, practices are “systematically extended” such that there is always inherent within the notion of a practice the idea that the current standards of excellence are always being put to the test, and there is always debate amongst the practitioners about the ends and the goods of such a practice.

It is also axiomatic in MacIntyre’s schema, and another point to which we will need to return, that only those who participate in the practice can understand and therefore gain the internal goods that the practice affords. This is one reason why MacIntyre terms them internal goods – “because they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods”.<sup>33</sup>

So far, so good. But in order for practices to flourish institutions are required to provide for their sustenance.<sup>34</sup> MacIntyre provides a similarly complex and extended 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.”<sup>35</sup>

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”.<sup>36</sup> 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. Organisations, on this understanding, are not the same

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 188-9.

<sup>34</sup> One disappointing aspect of the work contained in Murphy et al., *Virtues and practices in the Christian tradition*, and specifically in Kallenberg, ‘The master argument of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*’ within it, is that it almost entirely fails to note or explore the role that institutions play in MacIntyre’s conceptual framework.

<sup>35</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 188.

as institutions: it is only when we include the practice dimension in combination with the institutional dimension that we have a fully-fledged organisation.<sup>37</sup>

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 survive without being institutionalised; and yet practices are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness and competitiveness of the institution – and similarly the essential association *and* tension between internal and external goods, and that this gives the texture of organisational life a central dilemma. But it is also important at this stage to appreciate the nature of external goods: “I need to emphasize at this point that external goods genuinely are goods. Not only are they characteristic objects of human desire, whose allocation is what gives point to the virtues of justice and of generosity, but no one can despise them altogether without a certain hypocrisy”.<sup>38</sup> Before returning to consider the implications of this, however, we first need to consider the place of the virtues and to put in place one other aspect of this framework which is also 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.”<sup>39</sup>

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:<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting here that drawing this equivalence between organisations and practice-institution combinations does not preclude non-organisational examples of practices being institutionalised. The making and sustaining of family life (one of MacIntyre's example practices) is institutionalised through arrangements such as marriage (often referred to as an institution of course), taxation and other fiscal allowances, and cultural mores which support it, without it being in any sense an organisation. New Institutional Economics has done useful work in this area and distinguishes between formal institutions (writing and enforcing constitutions, laws, contracts and regulations or, in other words, sets of working rules) and informal institutions (such as norms of conduct, beliefs and habits of thoughts and behaviour) (see Menard and Shirley, *Handbook of new institutional economics*, 1). Formal organisations, on this understanding, are formal institutions “together with the people taking advantage of them” (Furubotn and Richter, *Institutions and economic theory*, 7, citing North, *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*, and see also Ricketts, ‘Editorial: the economic analysis of institutions’ and Furubotn and Richter, ‘The new institutional economics’) such as firms or a City Council. Informal organisations are things such as a market community. Formal organisations have an “objective function” – some overriding objective which they seek to maximise, such as shareholder wealth in the case of a firm or a community's well-being in the case of a City Council. It is in this sense of a formal organisation that I have applied MacIntyre's practice-institution combination to business organisations and, although churches may be seen as highly complex organisations without necessarily a clear objective function that they are seeking to maximise, it is my argument that the same practice-institution combination notion can be usefully applied to churches as organisations.

<sup>38</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 196.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> “... although I have in no way restricted the exercise of the virtues to the context of practices, it is in terms of practices that I have located their point and function”, *ibid.*, 201.

“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.”<sup>41</sup>

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 the practice, 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. Nor is this search and movement purely individual, a point made well by McCann & Brownsberger:

“... the normative character of MacIntyre’s definition of a social practice ... is secured within a larger account of the moral life as a whole. There must be some *telos* to human life, a vision anticipating the moral unity of life, given in the form of a narrative history that has meaning within a particular community’s traditions; otherwise the various internal goods generated by the range of social practices will remain disordered and potentially subversive of one another. Without a community’s shared sense of *telos*, there will be no way of signifying ‘the overriding good’ by which various internal goods may be ranked and evaluated.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus, MacIntyre’s framework offers an account which links individual and communal *telos*. 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 ... For the ability of a practice to retain its integrity will depend on the way in which virtues can be and are exercised in sustaining the institutional forms which are the social bearers of the practice.”<sup>43</sup>

In other words, what at the institutional level we might (in business terms) call 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 practice of making and sustaining 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. While this opportunity is afforded particularly to senior managers, it has also been argued<sup>44</sup> that managers at all levels (in business terms, those at supervisory, junior and middle as well as senior management) must engage with the practice of making and sustaining the institution and so have the opportunity to exercise the virtues here and gain the internal goods available from this practice.

It has also been argued<sup>45</sup> that managers at all levels, even the most senior, must continue to engage with the core practice so that they both understand it and can promote the pursuit of excellence within it. Here too, even if only to a limited extent, managers can continue to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>42</sup> McCann and Brownsberger, ‘Management as a social practice’, 227-8.

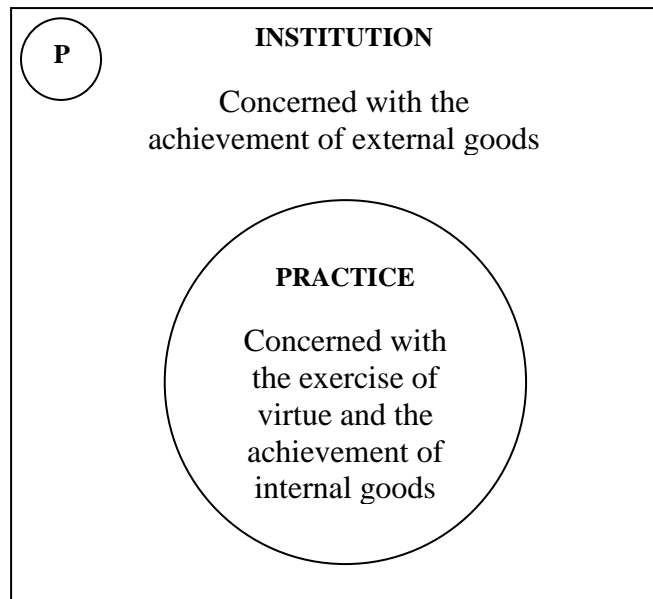
<sup>43</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194-5, emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> Moore, ‘Re-imagining the morality of management’.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

exercise the virtues and gain the internal goods available from the core practice. It will be clear that in the context of the church, while the terminology of managers sits uncomfortably, those at all ‘levels’ are expected to continue with a full and fundamental engagement with the core practice at the heart of the church, and this is but one of the distinguishing features of churches as organisations.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup>



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”.<sup>48</sup> 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

<sup>46</sup> Although the church is unusual in this respect, it is not entirely alone. Academic organisations may also have something in common with churches here, senior academics continuing to engage (if only to a limited degree), through teaching and research, with their own area of expertise. Similarly in professional service organisations such as architects, lawyers, accountants and doctors in General Practice, partners are expected to continue to engage in the core practice as well as having responsibility for the institution that houses it.

<sup>47</sup> It is quite likely that many institutions will house more than one practice. For simplicity, however, we assume here a single practice within any particular institution. Universities as institutions, for example, house parts of many practices in all the different subject areas which are represented. Note, however, that neither teaching nor research are practices in their own right – teaching and research are always the teaching and research *of something* (mathematics, literature, history) and it is these subjects and their application in ‘the real world’ that are the practices. Research explores and challenges what the goods are and so is fundamental to the debate about the ends and goods of the practice in question. Teaching passes on knowledge of the particular practice to those who are being apprenticed into it. See Moore, ‘Re-imagining the morality of management’, 501-502 for further discussion of this issue.

<sup>48</sup> MacIntyre, ‘A partial response to my critics’, 289.



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 to promote excellence in the core practice that it houses.

### *The character of the virtuous institution*

It has been argued elsewhere<sup>49</sup> that “character” is an appropriate term to use when thinking of the features of an institution that either promote or frustrate excellence in the core practice. This borrows, of course, from the notion of the virtues or vices possessed and exercised by an individual being aggregated in some way that allows us to make a description of their overall character as virtuous or vicious or as somewhere in between.<sup>50</sup> 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, it 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*. Fourth, the institution would be such as to be able to *resist the corrupting power of institutions in its environment* with which it in turn relates, where these encourage a single-minded concentration on external goods.

A virtuous institution would also embody a number of other features.<sup>51</sup> These are the development of a *power-balanced structure* that will ensure that the views and desires of particular constituencies are not privileged over those of others, and decision-making *systems and processes* that enable rational critical dialogue having the effect of countering biases and enabling the questioning of the hitherto unquestioned. In particular, these will allow the institution not to see itself as compartmentalised from other institutions in society but as one part of a larger whole. While to some extent outside of its control, the encouragement of a supportive *culture*, will also be a feature of the character of a virtuous institution.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Moore, ‘Corporate character’.

<sup>50</sup> Porter, *The recovery of virtue*, 114-115, makes a four-fold distinction. The person of *true virtue* “is characterised by harmonious unanimity among her feelings, judgments and will” such that there is no conflict between the passions and the will. “The actions of the *continent* [self-controlled] person are of a kind that is characteristic of temperance and fortitude, and yet the overall pattern of the individual's life, including his responses as well as his actions, reveal that he does not truly possess the virtues.” The “*incontinent* person ... has a correct understanding of his true good [but] nonetheless acts contrary to that understanding. Such an individual performs the actions of a particular vice, for example of gluttony, without actually being a glutton.” “Finally, what characterises the truly *vicious* individual ... is that he truly believes that his inordinate pursuit of the pleasures of the palate, or whatever, is necessary to his ultimate happiness” (emphases and explanatory notes added). In a manner similar to the above, I wish to argue that it is appropriate to extend these descriptions at the individual level to the institutional level and therefore to speak, by way of metaphor, of institutional virtues (and vices) and of virtuous, continent, incontinent and vicious institutions.

<sup>51</sup> Moore, ‘Corporate character’.

<sup>52</sup> In Moore, ‘Corporate character’, I distinguish between culture and character broadly along the lines that culture is externally and institutionally oriented (culture in the business literature tends to be associated with success), and character which is internally and practice orientated and is therefore focused on excellence.

This, then, summarises MacIntyre’s virtues-goods-practice-institution conceptual framework in so far as we need it here.<sup>53</sup> Along the way, we have indicated at various points how it might apply to churches as organisations, but it is now time to consider this in more detail.

### III. Applying MacIntyre to the Church

Although previously one major existing work in this area was criticised for its lack of attention to institutions (see footnote 34), various authors within Murphy et al.<sup>54</sup> do provide a detailed consideration of precisely what the practice(s) at the heart of the church are. The central practice, they argue, is that of “establishing and maintaining Christian community”,<sup>55</sup> abbreviated to “community formation”,<sup>56</sup> and derived from St. Paul’s explanation of the purposes of spiritual gifts “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12), “including especially the making of one new people out of what used to be two” (Eph. 2:15).<sup>57</sup> There are similarities here with Gill’s concern with moral and, more specifically, Christian communities.<sup>58</sup> Having defined the central practice, Murphy and McClendon then articulate the other practices in answer to the question, “What must the church do to be the church?”<sup>59</sup> These are:

- a) Worship understood as dialogic in which “God takes the initiative and human response consists in worship”.<sup>60</sup> Worship typically involves public prayer, sacraments, reading of Scripture and preaching. True worship also involves penitence and the ability to forgive others (indeed McClendon sees this as almost a separate practice),<sup>61</sup> and the overcoming of all forms of discrimination (ethnic, class and gender) in line with the making of one new people out of two.<sup>62</sup>
- b) Witness understood as a collection of activities such as “evangelistic preaching, door-to-door visitation, revivals at the home church, mission work in all its forms abroad”.<sup>63</sup>
- c) Works of mercy carrying on Jesus’ ministry to the poor, the sick and the outcast, including therefore the ministry of pastoral care.<sup>64</sup>
- d) Discipling referring to the church’s teaching and formation of its members including the exercise of church discipline.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Further issues associated with this conceptual framework may be found in Moore and Beadle ‘In search of organizational virtue’.

<sup>54</sup> Murphy et al., *Virtues and practices*.

<sup>55</sup> McClendon, ‘The practice of community formation’, 92.

<sup>56</sup> Murphy, ‘Using MacIntyre’s method in Christian ethics’, 43.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian ethics*, 2-3, 7, for example.

<sup>59</sup> Murphy, ‘Using MacIntyre’s method in Christian ethics’, 33.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> McClendon, ‘The practice of community formation’, 94-102.

<sup>62</sup> Murphy, ‘Using MacIntyre’s method in Christian ethics’, 35.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. Murphy makes the point that, given MacIntyre’s definition of a practice and the receipt of internal goods by the practitioners from their involvement in it, such practice will require more involvement than simply writing cheques.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

e) Discernment which is a complex social practice involved in testing spirits to see if they are from God, recognising genuine prophets, receiving guidance from the Spirit for mission works, and for determining church policies.<sup>66</sup>

f) McClendon<sup>67</sup> also argues that the covenant meal (the Eucharist) is part and parcel of the central practice of community formation, a rite that is moral and ethical first of all, which is “aimed at the shaping of the common life of the Christian community”.<sup>68</sup>

This analysis is clearly helpful but there are a number of points to be made in relation to the categorisation of practices that we have here. First, there is the issue of a central or master practice and other subordinate practices. MacIntyre nowhere uses this terminology and, indeed, specifically warns against activities within a practice being regarded as themselves a practice.<sup>69</sup> The terminology that seems to be developing here (of practices and sub-practices), may not be unduly problematic, but it does seem to be important to ensure that sub-practices genuinely are practices in and of themselves, and not simply component parts of what a particular practice entails.

More substantively, however, there is a question over the central practice of community formation, or “establishing and maintaining Christian community” to give it its full title. This seems to have a striking similarity to MacIntyre’s “making and sustaining of forms of human community – and therefore of institutions” that we noted above. There is therefore a question as to whether what McClendon has identified is not the core practice but the small “P” practice in the diagram above.<sup>70</sup> This is clearly an essential part of Christian practice, but whether it is *the* core practice from which all other sub-practices derive is not adequately substantiated. We will return to this point below.

Let us move on from this specific consideration of the application of MacIntyre’s concepts to another, rather different approach. Wells’ work<sup>71</sup> is also instructive in identifying the core practice(s) of the church. He is also explicit in acknowledging that, “the Church by no means exhausts the kingdom”,<sup>72</sup> and many of the examples with which the book is replete describe the actual church grounded in the world rather than some idealised version of it. Nor is he

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<sup>66</sup> Murphy recognises that not all of these five practices that she identifies will necessarily be agreed upon, and accepts that the last two may be more controversial (*ibid.*: 37-8).

<sup>67</sup> McClendon, ‘The practice of community formation’, 92.

<sup>68</sup> A comparison of these six practices with the early church’s practices, before these were institutionalised, makes interesting reading – see, for example, Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37.

<sup>69</sup> So, for example, “Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187).

<sup>70</sup> There is a further issue here of the different ‘levels’ of analysis. Coe & Beadle, ‘Could we know a practice-embodied institution if we saw one?’, 12-14, speak of “practice-based communities” although MacIntyre himself does not use this particular term. Their purpose, however, is to draw attention to how practices (and the way they are institutionalised, whether this be formally or informally) combine to be significant constituent parts of any community and, *vice-versa*, how any community might be characterised by the extent to which it enables and encourages, and is supported by, virtuous practice-institution combinations. The argument here is not that Christian communities would be examples of such self-sustaining communities (although there have been and are such examples, as in the Amish communities in North America), but that Christian communities would themselves be parts of (and, one would hope, significant parts of) such self-sustaining communities. MacIntyre refers to such communities in these terms: “It must ... be some form of local community within which the activities of families, workplaces, schools, clinics, clubs dedicated to debate and clubs dedicated to games and sports, *and religious congregations* may all find a place” (MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 135, emphasis added).

<sup>71</sup> Wells, *God’s companions*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

uncritical of the church as an institution.<sup>73</sup> Hence his is very much a work that presents a concrete, critical, historically and socially situated, but also theologically informed, ecclesiology from below without in any sense undermining the notion that the church is also a social reality that is sacred, set apart and different from the world.

As with Murphy, Wells' work is similarly based on the church as the 'Body of Christ'. The core practices which Wells identifies<sup>74</sup> are those of forming (evangelism and catechesis), incorporating (baptism), performing (praying, sharing life, faith and troubles together in the body of Christ, and welcoming the stranger as a gift to the church), restoring (speaking the truth, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and healing) and the Eucharist which, like McClendon, Wells sees as a "definitive practice" of the church.<sup>75</sup> While many of these core practices can be found in Murphy and McClendon's work, Wells offers a rich, descriptive and ultimately more convincing ecclesiology. He also sets this in a context which is particularly relevant to our concerns. For one of his repeated mantras is that God gives "everything his people need to follow him".<sup>76</sup> Indeed the church lives in abundance – God gives it too much. This is therefore in contrast with the scarcity that we noted earlier in relation to the external goods of institutions which are characterised by competition for such goods. Wells notes God's abundance particularly in relation to the practices of the church,<sup>77</sup> but the point is well made and we will need to return below to a more detailed consideration of abundance in relation to the institution of the church.

But while Wells presents what is, in effect, a narrative-based virtue ecclesiology, there are various points and criticisms of the work that may be made. First, it is an ecclesiology of the local church<sup>78</sup> and hence it does not address other manifestations of church aside from the local. It does, however, assume these other manifestations – the book, while not a-clerical in the sense that priests play an important function in many of the examples (and so identifies the *laos* as, in effect, priest and people together), is a-institutional in paying no attention to the structures that, for example, selected, trained and now support, discipline and finance them in their ministry. Nor does it pay attention to the institutional structures even at the local level which support and maintain the practices of the local church. So while we would do well to use Wells' work as definitive of the core practices of the church, we need to consider these other dimensions of church if we are to arrive at a comprehensive virtue ecclesiology.

In order to illustrate these other dimensions there are three examples that are worthy of our consideration. These each draw on insights from organisational theory and do so at different levels of the church – local, regional and national. The first is a study by Harris at congregational level<sup>79</sup> which drew on institutional theory and empirical study to draw conclusions about the nature of religious organisations. Her case study congregations were three very different Christian churches (a large, inner-city Roman Catholic church; a small, Black-led Pentecostal church in an industrial town; and an Anglican church in a market town) together with a suburban Jewish synagogue.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 55-124.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 5, for example.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 5-8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., *passim* but explicitly 5.

<sup>79</sup> Harris, 'A special case of voluntary associations?', Harris, *Organising God's work*.

Harris' basic finding was that such congregations had many features of voluntary associations with similarities in having broad purposes, members attracted by social opportunities, and a responsive approach to the local environment. They also faced similar challenges such as difficulty in setting goals, partly in response to pressures from local communities and the secular environment and partly because of resource constraints which forced a higher priority on maintenance than longer-term strategy. Organisational change was also problematic, as was engagement with formal welfare projects which competed for human and financial resources against other congregational activities. Interestingly, the Pentecostal church in her study was able largely to avoid these problems with the pastor seen as the key decision-maker and church commitments having a high priority in members' lives. For the three churches, internal interest groups caused difficulties in decision-making, often circumventing formal committee structures. Ministers found it difficult to balance the numerous demands placed on them and there was evidence of power struggles between lay and ordained members.

Many of these features accord with a voluntary association model in which members seek social and personal benefits from the organisation, and have the option to exit if these are not met. Leaders' power can consequently be weak, and there can be tensions between paid and voluntary members of staff. Associated with this voluntary model, growth in voluntary associations can be counter-productive as it "can give rise to pressures towards formalization and professionalization which conflict with drives to remain small, informal and member-focused".<sup>80</sup> Resistance to change is similarly explained, as is disinterest or even resentment towards denominational structures "which prescribe and monitor adherence to goals".<sup>81</sup>

Harris concluded that while the voluntary association model explains much of what she observed at congregational level, religious organisations were "special case" voluntary associations with two particular characteristics that distinguish them from other voluntary organisations: the role of the 'minister' as a boundary spanner between the local church and denominational institutions, but also one who has traditional / charismatic authority; and as organisations which have "low-ceiling" ultimate goals – goals which are set by religious principles and are not open for debate or negotiation.<sup>82</sup>

This rich study highlights a number of important aspects of churches as organisations, and gives a nuanced account of many features of congregational life. In effect, while Wells' account describes the core practices of the local church as they can be at their best and, normatively, as they should be, Harris shows the local church as many would recognise it.

The second study, by contrast, takes us to the regional level and the more formal structures of a church organisation where most of the staff were paid employees. Parker's study of the Victorian Synod of the Uniting Church of Australia (a merger of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational denominations), provides an in-depth case study of one organisation over a period of one year (1988-89).<sup>83</sup> While focusing on the Synod (regional) level, it noted the tensions that had arisen between this and the other levels of parish and presbytery (formal groups of parishes). The context was of an organisation that was suffering recurrent budgetary deficits and, as time went on, an inability to control its financial position. The

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<sup>80</sup> Harris, 'A special case of voluntary associations?', 609.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 611.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.

<sup>83</sup> Parker, 'Reactive planning in a Christian bureaucracy', Parker, 'Budgetary incrementalism in a Christian bureaucracy'.

study, therefore, focused on the planning and control systems in place in the organisation. In summary:

“Thus in this religious not-for-profit organization, the outcome of reactive planning, both direct and mediated by intra-organizational relationships, managerial (in)expertise and multiple governing agendas, appears to be an incremental budgetary melange. Strategic planning may be absent, and the annual incremental budget becomes, by default, the only formal planning vehicle and at the same time, the major control tool.”<sup>84</sup>

Aside from the lack of expertise noted here, previous failed attempts to “generate priorities”<sup>85</sup> and philosophical resistance to planning,<sup>86</sup> Parker also noted the complexity of “multiple calls – the calls of God, of secular society, and of the organization’s own internal communities”.<sup>87</sup> There was evidence of a “sacred-secular” divide within the organisation such that, “the observed suspension of belief in a resource crisis and the reluctance to determine strategic operating priorities or to trim programs and related expenditures suggests a dominance of a sacred agenda over secular resourcing concerns”.<sup>88</sup>

This similarly rich study offers insights into religious organisations that are missing from accounts that describe simply the core practices of the organisation. Here is an organisation struggling to make sense of itself, or, in MacIntyre’s terms, struggling with the tension between the practice and the institution and having difficulty finding the right balance between internal and external goods.

A similarly complex and inductive study is provided by Berry of control and accountability in the Church of England.<sup>89</sup> His focus is at the national level and on the processes of debate and decision-making that arose in relation to the introduction of an Archbishop’s Council. His working hypothesis was that the Church of England had “evolved over many hundreds of years into a multiplex ecosystem, very complex and polyarchic in theology and in its patterns of authority, with very complex and hidden relationships between the parts”.<sup>90</sup> The study is of an attempt by the Evangelical wing of the church, in response to a significant financial crisis, to introduce a more managerialist, hierarchical, centralist and unaccountable organisation structure. The proposal was that a new Archbishop’s Council would take on a role similar to the Bishop’s Councils that operate at Diocesan level but without the balancing effect of the ‘Bishop-in-Synod’. This approach to organisational restructuring was opposed by the Anglo-Catholic and Liberal wings within the national church and gradually watered down. This was, then, an example of a conciliar model, which “located the authority of the church not in the hierarchy exclusively, but in the whole body of the faithful united in the sacraments ... the conciliar model of the Bishop-in-Synod”,<sup>91</sup> reasserting itself. Berry’s conclusion is instructive:

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<sup>84</sup> Parker, ‘Budgetary incrementalism in a Christian bureaucracy’, 86.

<sup>85</sup> Parker, ‘Reactive planning in a Christian bureaucracy’, 348-349.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>89</sup> Berry, ‘Accountability and control in a cat’s cradle’.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

“The substantial defeat of the project for control via an autonomous “new head for the body” was because the managerialist model of organisation and control being infused into the Church of England sought a new monarchical form of governance and a return to traditional forms of Episcopal control which ignored the evolution of the church from those models to the loosely coupled, multiplex ecosystem which had emerged to contain competing theological stances.”<sup>92</sup>

The study by Harris shows the complexity of goals, and the multiple and to some extent competing constituencies, which local congregations are seeking to satisfy. The link to denominational structures is also present here. The denominational aspects, of course, dominate the studies by Parker and Berry and show the added complexity of ‘church’ when this dimension is present and recognised as significant. What all three studies show, however, is the significant presence of the institution in the life of the church. Without the institution, life may be simpler, but describing the practices of the church does not describe the church in all its fullness. An organisation theory-informed virtue ecclesiology points to the need for both elements.

#### IV. The practices of faith and their institutionalisation in the church

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.” Matt. 20: 25-27

“It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”  
Acts 6: 2-4

We have, in the consideration of the contributions of Murphy, McClendon and, in particular, Wells derived an adequate understanding of the core practices at the heart of the church. That these practices are well-defined and articulated should not surprise us; that, it seems, has been the primary concern of Christian ethicists for some time.<sup>93</sup> We have not, however, so far developed an adequate short-hand for the core practice, given the problems associated with “establishing and maintaining Christian community” that were noted above. A possible answer is simply to name the core practices at the heart of the church (for as we have seen above, there is more than a single practice) as the practices of faith.<sup>94</sup> It is worth, however, returning to MacIntyre’s definition of a practice to draw out several implications of this.

First, practices are always social and co-operative activities. So, with the practices of faith, this is never an ‘activity’, or set of activities, carried out in isolation from others. It is, in Wells terms, always a “shared faith”.<sup>95</sup> Thus, it is from other practitioners that individuals are apprenticed into the faith and grow in it; it is from other practitioners that individuals learn “those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity”. It is with others that the faith is practiced. It also the case, of course, that the practices of faith have a history (we “enter into a relationship not only with its

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 292-293.

<sup>93</sup> Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian ethics*, 13.

<sup>94</sup> Wells uses this phrase explicitly – *God’s companions*, 215. Another book which specifically acknowledges its debt to MacIntyre’s concept of practice also refers to practices of faith – see Bass (ed), *Practicing our faith*.

<sup>95</sup> Wells, *God’s companions*, 209.

contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point”) and so there is a proper sense of the need for individuals to be inducted into the history of the practices of faith. As Wells suggests, “the Holy Spirit enables the church to conceive its form of life as *walking backwards*”,<sup>96</sup> always looking back to its founder and those who have practiced the faith before. But there is also the forward-looking notion of the practice being “systematically extended” so that, as well as looking backwards, there should always be a suitable dissatisfaction with the current standards of the practice and a sense of moving forwards to new and higher standards. Thus the present is never definitive – in line with Mannion’s point against a ‘blueprint ecclesiology’.

Associated with the core practices of faith, of course, is the need to identify those virtues which are particularly important to its sustaining and thriving, and the theological virtue of faith acts as a reminder that faith is not just something attained ‘from below’, but is also something given ‘from above’ – along, of course, with the other theological virtues of hope and love.<sup>97</sup> There is insufficient space here to consider in detail the virtues appropriate to the practices of faith, although again a reading of Wells’ work would enable such a list to be compiled. Similarly, there is not space here to consider the internal goods of the practices of faith, except to note MacIntyre’s claim that such goods consist both in the excellence of the products that result from the practice (liturgy, music, acts of mercy and so), together with the perfection (sanctification) of the individuals in the process.

Of more importance here, however, is a consideration of how the practices of faith are institutionalised and so it is to this that we now turn. The institutionalisation of the practices 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 legitimated 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 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.<sup>98</sup> Then there is the organisation of the church into committees, teams, task groups or whatever the terminology may be, which may well involve formalised governance arrangements.

It may be objected that some of those items in the list above properly belong to the practice rather than the institution. Is liturgy when ‘performed’, for example, not a practice within the practices of faith, rather than a part of the institution? The answer to this may well be that it is both. Liturgy is both ‘performed’ as one of the practices of faith and authorised by the institution. But this highlights the point that MacIntyre has already made in relation to practices and institutions, of the intimacy of the relationship between them such that they “characteristically form a single causal order”. This being so, we would expect to find that there are points at which the practice and the institution almost fuse, and it is certainly the case at points like this that practice and institution may be most in harmony with each other. Nonetheless, the fact that the liturgy has been authorised points again to the role of the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 45, emphasis in the original.

<sup>97</sup> See Hauerwas, *The peaceable kingdom*, 102-106, where he also identifies patience, justice and living out of control as other virtues of the Christian community.

<sup>98</sup> For example, in the Church of England, Parochial Church Councils, Deanery Synods and Diocesan Synods are all expressly forbidden to issue any statement purporting to declare the doctrine of the Church (of England) on any question. Compare Harris’ “low-ceiling” ultimate goals mentioned earlier.



institution – a role which, again, is implicit in Wells’ rich description of the “definitive practice” of the Eucharist, where the structure of the Eucharist is taken as given (by the institution).

But it may be a distinctive element of the church as organisation, part of its contribution to the world, that the practice and the institution are so in harmony that the distinction between them is (or should be) hard to see. That this is often not the case – as illustrated particularly in the case studies offered by Parker and Berry – is a weakness of the church that a MacIntyre-informed organisational analysis exposes.

The distinction between practice and institution, however, becomes clearer at ‘higher’ levels, for example at Deanery or Circuit, Diocese or District or indeed nationally or internationally. Here institutionalisation occurs as resources are collected and disbursed, doctrine is formulated and decisions are taken over issues as various as the church’s view on homosexuality or stem cell research, the place of women in ordained ministry, the number of ministers the church may be able to afford, whether to close or merge a particular parish church, whether and how to resource ‘fresh expressions’ of church and so forth. In the nature of institutions there is usually some centralisation of power, decisions being made which affect the church at lower levels but to which it has not been asked for or given consent other than by whatever form of representation is granted.

Associated with this, and a point that was touched on earlier, is the necessity for those who ‘attain to higher levels’ in the church, to continue in a full engagement with the core practices of faith. That the church is unusual, if not unique, in this respect was also noted, together with the observation that this may be a further point of distinction between church and secular organisations – a distinction that bears witness to the primacy of the practice in all organisations. However, if, as Murphy, McClendon and Wells maintain, the practices of the church can operate only at the local level, there is an issue here for those who have ‘outgrown’ the core practice in the sense of no longer being a member of a local manifestation of church.<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, status is sometimes conferred on those at these ‘higher’ levels, so that individuals at more senior levels find themselves, for example, speaking for ‘the church’. Associated with this is the fact that for many outside the church, their view of the church is often conditioned by the church as institution. MacIntyre makes the point, which we noted above in the consideration of internal goods, that it is only those who participate in the practice who can understand it and therefore gain the internal goods that the practice affords. For those outside, therefore, their understanding of church may be limited to the institutional ‘face’ which the church presents. But this then makes further demands on the church as organisation to enable its institutional face to be such that it witnesses to the truths of the practices of faith at its core.

But institutions also 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 core practices seem 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

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<sup>99</sup> In a conversation with Stanley Hauerwas during the writing of this article he suggested that bishops, for example, are travellers from one Eucharistic assembly to another who ensure that the same story is being told in each. As such, they are institutional officers performing an (internal) ecumenical function.

resources that might well be better used in the service of the practice.<sup>100</sup> When the institution is in bad order it can, of course, lead to the corruption of the core practices – as the miss-use of indulgences in the Catholic Church that contributed to the Protestant Reformation, or the inability of the German churches to withstand the rise of Nazism, or the recent cover-ups of sexual abuse (partly due to a misplaced institutional loyalty), bear tragic witness. But it is the church's task, on this understanding, to show to the world an organisation whose mode of institutionalisation is such that, despite the deep and inevitable institutionalisation of the core practices, it nonetheless maintains the primacy of those practices. To do so it would need to continually, through its power-balanced structures and decision-making systems and processes, subordinate the institution to the practice, seek an appropriate balance between the external goods of the institution and the internal goods of the practices, and to do so by possessing and exercising the same virtues at both practice and institutional levels. The practice of making and sustaining the institution that does these things should, on this account, stand equally alongside the practices of faith.

If, as Wells maintains, God has given everything his people need to follow him, then perhaps too the church should be an organisation that witnesses to the world not simply the sufficiency but the abundance of such provision. And if this is true of the core practices of the church, perhaps it is also true of the institution and of the external goods required to support it and the core practices of which it is the bearer. What difference would it make to the church, as organisation, to start from the assumption that it has all it needs to follow God, rather than 'buying into' the assumption of scarcity? What would it mean for the world to have an organisation that witnesses to sufficiency and abundance, even when it is apparently under-resourced, because it has discerned the will of God for what it should, and should not, be doing?

## Conclusions

In this paper, then, I have outlined a MacIntyrean approach to organisation theory that offers to the church the possibility of a virtue ecclesiology for today. That the conceptual framework based on MacIntyre's explication of the relationships between virtues, goods, practices and institutions has something to say to the church is, I hope, apparent. That it provides a tool for organisational analysis and, therefore, change is also, I hope, evident even though space here precludes a discussion of this. Doubtless there is more work to be done here, as well as in relation to other aspects of the proposals for a virtue ecclesiology outlined above.

In one sense this approach fits with an 'ecclesiology from below', for what we have here is a virtue ecclesiology that, far from being anti- organisation and institution, explains the place of the institution, identifies the organisation as a practice-institution combination, and affirms the primacy of the core practices. At the same time, this is an ecclesiology which emphasises the institutionalisation of these core practices and the equally important practice of making and sustaining the institution. It is an ecclesiology that is thus concrete, existential and historical, but also one that is deeply theological. And yet it also fits with an 'ecclesiology

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<sup>100</sup> Vanstone in his seminal book *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, 22, describes the building of a new Church in a new neighbourhood: "But sometimes, at the end of a long and thoughtful discussion, I was compelled to ask myself what, in fact, had been achieved. The outcome of so much thought would not be the emergence of some great work of art or the offering of worship of sublime and unearthly beauty; it would be the provision of a fresh coat of paint on the brick wall behind the altar".

from above' in that it represents a social reality that is sacred, set apart and different from the world, in order to witness to it that there is another way of organising things.

It is, as Brodd noted, the same church which administers finances and sacraments. Perhaps it is the administration of both that constitutes the church's offering to the world.

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