

st john's episcopal church selkirk



News Letter

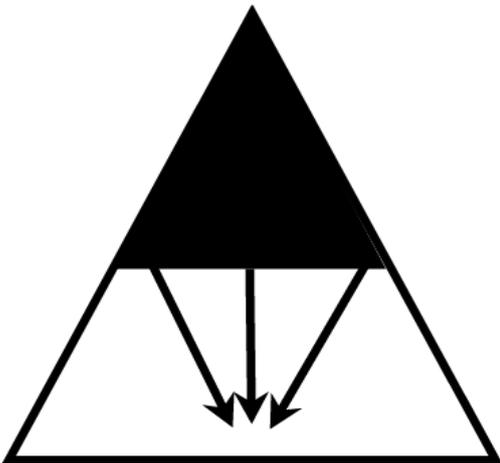
June 2007

Extract

View from the Rectory

Churches come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. So far as understanding what it means to be the church, and the attitudes to ministry and mission that flow from this understanding are concerned, however, there are four main types. I give them symbolic names: pyramids, mixers, pressure cookers and flower pots. Which do you think we are at St John's?

Pyramids



A pyramid church is one in which everything depends on the person at the top, and all the energy flows downwards and inwards. It might describe itself something like this: 'The key person in our church is Father X, our Rector. We're so fortunate to have him. He's our father in God, who prays and conducts worship for us, and teaches us the faith. He visits the sick and the housebound, and represents us at the local Council of Churches. He organises all the rotas, produces the newsletter, and makes all the decisions, so that we can get on with everything else we have to do. After all, he knows what's best for us and we're all pretty busy. Many of us have demanding jobs, or young families; even those of us who are

retired always seem to have too much to do, so we're happy to be able to leave all the decision-making to him. We'll support him as long as we can by paying his stipend, so he can look after the church while we get on with living our lives. When you think about it, that's why he went into the church in the first place.'

Mixers

A mixer church, on the other hand, would see itself rather differently. It might describe itself like this: 'At St N's we realise we can't expect Y, our Rector, to do everything herself, so we give her as much help as we can. Lay people read lessons and lead the intercessions. One or two of us even preach sermons sometimes. We have lay people involved in all sorts of ways – making the coffee, arranging the flowers, organising jumble sales, leading the home groups and junior church, representing us at the Council of churches. We also have a network of people who keep the rector in the picture about people who need home visits, or who've gone into hospital. There are even a few retired folk who meet once a month to pray for the work of the church. Of course, all this needs good leadership and co-ordination, and that's where Y comes in. She's our leader. If it weren't for her co-ordinating everything, it would all fall apart.'

In a mixer church the energy moves about in different directions because more people are involved in what's going on. But everything still depends on what's put in through the hole in the top!

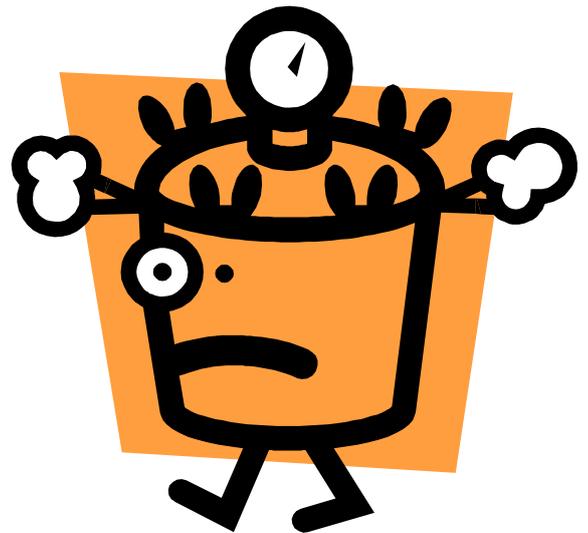


Pressure cookers

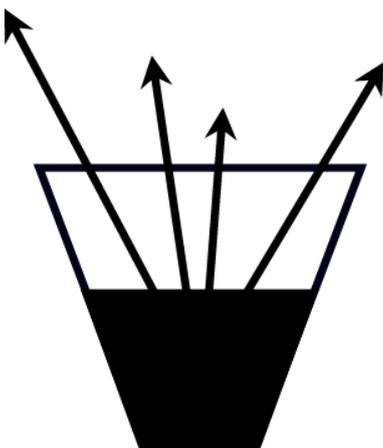
A pressure-cooker church looks, at first glance, as though it's gone rather further down the road of collaborative ministry than either a pyramid or a mixer. In reality, though, it flatters to deceive: what's at work is a process of manipulation, which is connived at by some in the congregation, and resented by others. Its story might be told something like this: 'When the present Rector came, a few years back, there was a lot of talk in the diocese about local collaborative ministry. He was all for it and made a big song and dance about appointing a team of lay people to share in the leadership of the church. He preached sermons about it, and gradually three or four people who liked the idea of being leaders, took up with him. The vestry was never very keen on the idea, and lots of people in the congregation had reservations, but the Rector held a service at which he appointed this group to become a team ministry. It was all somewhat unfortunate. Most of us feel they're really rather a clique, and the vestry, in particular, gets pretty fed up when these people who're not properly responsible to anyone, take decisions out of its hands or change things it has decided. The team ministry has turned out to be something of a buffer between the congregation and the Rector, and most of us would much rather be ministered to by a properly ordained person than by a group of cronies.'

In a pressure-cooker church everything looks well-ordered from the outside, but inside there's a lot of seething and disturbance because of the way things are being manipulated. As long as the lid is kept on tight, things remain outwardly successful. But eventually the pressure has to find some sort of release, and then someone is always likely to get hurt.

What characterises all these three kinds of church is that, in one way or another, all of them begin from the assumption that the church is constituted by the clergy. In different ways, each of these churches is a congregation gathered around a minister, and it's the minister who is the key to the church's identity and activity.



Flower pots



Flower pot churches are rather different. They're by way of being the reverse of a pyramid. Of course, if you turn a pyramid upside down so that the energy flows upwards and outwards instead of downwards and inwards, you get a structure that's highly unstable. Everything rests on the point and it easily overbalances. That's what happens in a pyramid church, if it starts trying to engage in mission: the Rector's expected to do it all, and that leads to burnout. But if you broaden the base of an upturned pyramid, you get something that looks like a flower pot.

Someone from a flower pot church might describe it something like this: 'We've gradually come to realise that we, the laity, are the church, and that it's we who are called to ministry. We've come to see that serving each other, and the people around us, is the way to follow Jesus in our setting. Our rector, C, is one of us. She shares in our ministry; her role

is to help us with our discipleship and equip us for ministry. She helps us understand the gospel; she teaches us about faith and discipleship; she helps us to see where God is at work, so we can join in with what he's doing. But we're the ones who do the ministering, and we all share responsibility for our common life. And we're in the process of identifying three or four more people, who we will call out to share with C in the task of equipping us to be ministers.'

In churches like this everything flows up and out from a solid foundation when leadership and ministry are shared, and responsibility is held by everyone. And, of course, it's always worth remembering that pyramids are places where dead people get buried, whereas flower pots are places where living things grow!

So which sort of church do you think we are at St John's? And which sort do we want to be?

David Sceats.