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MINISTERIAL DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

By Hans Taling

Recent developments of the Ministerial Development Review (MDR) have led the Diocese of Oxford to implement a review program that is more related to Performance Management processes than to fraternal meetings to encourage ministry. Performance Management is a process intended to achieve higher levels of (organisational) performance, but it requires a shared understanding of what is to be achieved in longer-term goals if performance is to be maximized.

Performance Management became popular in the 1980's mainly because of its humanizing approach, in which not systems, rules or processes were most important, but people. In the early years of the 21st century Performance Management also became established within local government in England with the idea of improving performance. One of the big outcomes of Performance Management is that it provides a strategic common goal within an organisation from high to low and from left to right.

The Church of England began to implement similar strategies by introducing Ministerial Development Reviews. The Ministerial Development Review (MDR) has become an integral part of assessing the functioning of all office holders in the Church of England. The MDR is founded on the assumption that each is responsible to God for the ministry entrusted to him or her, but that each is accountable to the Church and to one another for the way that ministry is exercised.

Already at the very heart of the MDR lies a discrepancy; an ambiguity which raises concern and creates hurdles for the whole process of the review. The responsibility for ministry is said to be to God, but the accountability is to the Church.

Here lays the first hurdle, because in essence this means that somewhere along the line the Church takes the place of God in deciding whether the office holder is fulfilling his or her ministry in a responsible and effective way. In order to fulfil this task, Church doctrine has to enter in to determine what ministry to God entails and what indicates a good fulfilling of this ministry. As a result we are heading towards a control mechanism, based on theological interpretations, bearing in itself the danger of making the serving of God subservient to new dogmatics or contemporary explanations of the Christian faith. The MDR is said to be mainly about preparing for growth and development on the basis of experience and the learning gained from it. Affirmation, encouragement, as well as challenge, are mentioned as the primary aims of the MDR. This will be exercised through facilitating a guided discussion framed around an office holder's ministry, which looks back and reflects over the past and anticipates what lays ahead in future objectives and areas for potential development.

The second hurdle in this process is the lack of any formal, written statement of the function form of the office holder. Of equal importance is the omission of any clear objectives or targets for the office holder. Both the lack of a statement of the function of the office holder and the lack of clear objectives must hinder the review process, because there's not much else to hold on to during the review. What remains is only an interpretation of how the office holder carries out the ministry to which he or she is responsible to God. The latest development within the MDR process has been to introduce so-called 360 degree reviews. Such reviews are seen as a further step towards reaching higher levels of achievement. But, without determining what has to be achieved, the whole process (not to mention the office holder himself or herself) is left very vulnerable indeed because no clear targets can be set, achievements measured or performance assessed, let alone maximized.

Because Performance Management aims to provide a strategic common goal within an organisation from high to low and from left to right, the logical consequence of implementing it in the Church is a re-organisation of the Church into a body that can measure performances by introducing targets and common goals. This simply means, in the end, one common explanation of the gospel, driven by organisational structures that can measure how its office holders achieve the common goal set by the hierarchies of the Church.

Whether God moves freely within such a structure remains to be seen.

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