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Belief and practice in multi-academy trust governance

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INTRODUCTION

School governance is facing considerable upheaval, or arguably is in the midst of significant development and change. In 2013 at a Liverpool Hope University Conference a, now published, paper on governance suggested:

"These developments (academies) raise questions about the traditional concept of 'lay governors' bringing their life experiences to bear on the education provided. Whether this is inevitable or a case of 'sleep walking' into the professionalisation of governance remains to be seen." (Morris and Simmonds, 2013, pp. 131 – 140).

In fact, the drive towards a skills based approach to the recruitment and development of governance continued unabated. Lord Nash introducing the latest edition of the Governance Handbook states:

"All boards, however many schools they govern, need people with skills appropriate to the scale and nature of their role; and no more people than they need to have all the necessary skills." (Nash with DfE, 2015).

Alongside this focus on skills a new language has emerged, one that has unilaterally re-defined the nature of the traditional role of the school governor. Hence the use of 'governance', 'governing boards and the move from 'stakeholder' governors to appropriately skilled individuals. Nash continues:

"This 'Governance handbook' has been re-named to make clear that it applies to all those involved in governance. It now refers throughout to the 'board' to emphasise that it applies equally to the governing body of a small maintained school as it does to the board of a large MAT. I want everyone involved in governance to be confident in tackling underperformance, challenging mediocrity, and setting the highest of expectations; refusing to accept second best for any child" (Nash with DfE, 2015).

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One article in The Guardian suggested that governance boards converting to academy status are adapting to a new environment rather like a chameleon changes it's skin colour (Moorhead, 2016)!

Recently the Government White Paper *Education Excellence Everywhere* (March, 2016) has introduced the intention to remove the requirement for governing boards to include the category of parent governors. This controversial move has been widely condemned by many including the National Governors' Association who, amongst several arguments, warn of the risk of boards becoming sets of like-minded people without the wealth of experience and viewpoints that strong governance requires (Knights, 2014).

Some would argue that much time and training for parent governors has had limited impact so that in the worst cases there are too many who cannot get beyond the needs of their own children or repeating claims from other parents. Of course there are many who play a supportive, challenging and effective part as well. However, having opportunity for more than two elected parents to express their views, concerns and be genuinely consulted without being in the role of a governor could make for a more engaging experience. Hence the response of Lord Nash to criticism of the policy not only confirmed that parents with skills to offer might still be appointed to boards, but that parents need to be at the very heart of schools with opportunity to make their voices heard and to take action (Nash, 2016). It is important that arrangements for such intentional consultation, academy parent councils (or other named groups of parents) be an imperative laid on governance boards.

There is also substantial evidence that many governing boards are effective. Ofsted reports:

“There are thousands of people across the country who give up their time to serve on governing boards. We know that the majority take their duties very seriously and act responsibly and in the interests of the whole-school community. Inspectors find that in many schools, governors and trustees are making an important contribution to raising standards and lifting aspiration. The best of these champion the school in

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the local community and take great pride in the success of their pupils.” (Wilshaw, Ofsted, 2015).

However the ongoing drive for school improvement, and the intention of the current government for every school to become an academy, eventually, is having far-reaching implications for governance. The Secretary of State confirmed,

“I know that academy status doesn’t raise standards as a matter of course. What I believe is that academy status means that you have the vehicle by which we can achieve higher standards and that you - the excellent leaders in the system - are the drivers, using it to propel schools to success.” (Department for Education and The Rt Hon Nicky Morgan, 2016)

It is undeniable that there has been a clear and developing policy of professionalising governance of schools over recent years. The rhetoric, guidance and changing structures of schools has led some, through the innovation that comes with setting up Multi-Academy Trusts, to develop new practices and procedures so that this has become more of a rollercoaster ride than sleepwalking into professionalisation. As the Rt. Rev. Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford mused:

“Leading an organisation or community today is therefore much more like steering a ship in choppy waters than like driving a car down a motorway” (Cottrell, 2009).

The challenge goes deeper, as Connor Ryan wrote:

“The reality is that a fundamental shift in the structural operation of schools has not been accompanied by anything like the rigour needed to improve governance both locally and in national academy chains. It remains an open question though as to whether this scale of ambition can attract the right calibre of trustees and governors – with the experience and vision needed to oversee the effective use of so much public money.” (Ryan, 2016).

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Even where a highly skilled board of directors is operating effectively with new ways of working and ensuring good governance, Ofsted Inspectors still make judgments based on the expectations of a more traditional governing body. Furthermore the increased responsibility of directors and the time that is required for the enormity of the task is in danger of perpetuating the limited demographic of persons able to serve in this way. Added to which is the likelihood that only a few, with the time, skills and/or personality to become what have been described as the “Big Four”, “senior clique” or “core of governors”. They are often considered the “mainstay of the governing body” (Wilkins, 2014). This has led some, including the Chief Inspector of Schools to propose that the history of governance as volunteerism should be reviewed. He wrote in November 2015:

“I expressed my belief that we should not rule out payment to governors with the necessary expertise to challenge and support schools with a long legacy of underachievement. Aside from a relatively small number of interim executive boards that have been put in place in some of the worst cases, nothing I have seen or learned in the intervening period has altered my view on these matters. Indeed, if anything, the need for decisive action in this area has become even more pressing, especially when it comes to underperforming secondary schools in certain parts of the country. I therefore pose the question once again: has the time not come to consider paying chairs and vice-chairs in order to recruit the most able people to schools in the most difficult circumstances?” (Wilshaw, Ofsted, 2015)

STRUCTURES INFORMED BY FAITH

Church schools have developed today through a long history of over two hundred years of involvement in education. They also, and significantly draw on two thousand years of a metanarrative that includes story, reflection, wisdom and experience (Cox, 2011)

Archbishop Justin Welby has stated:

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“Church schools also have a distinctive identity and ethos that values the emotional, the spiritual and the social development of children as highly as their academic development.” (Welby, 2014).

Very recently the Church of England Education Office has published a new vision document that provides a fresh and theologically developed set of ideas that will drive forward the churches contribution to schooling across the country. This proposes a vision of:

“Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good.

Our vision embraces the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social development of children and young people. We offer a vision of human flourishing for all, one that embraces excellence and academic rigour, but sets them in a wider framework. This is worked out theologically and educationally through four basic elements which permeate our vision for education:

Wisdom Hope Community Dignity.” (Genders, 2016)

Whilst Church Schools might more easily identify with these goals for their children, the governance of such schools should also reflect this ethos. David Smith, at a Liverpool Hope University Conference in 2013 spoke of:

“an attempt to find a form of life as educators and learners that resonates with God’s ways with the world in Christ.”

This reflective approach must surely be about focusing on the emotional, spiritual and social development of board members as much as gaining knowledge, developing processes and procedures and effective meetings! Miroslav Volf has suggested that:

“Christian practices are such that a Christian normative vision is part and parcel of what these practices are... Practices are essentially belief-shaped and beliefs are essentially practice-shaping” (Volf, 2001).

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Much governance training is focussed on mechanistic processes and measures of accountability that make up the business of governance such as monitoring, providing challenge for the headteacher, setting targets and performance management objectives etc. Perhaps at least some attention needs to be given to the building of character and enabling the spiritual formation of all school leaders including governors or directors/trustees.

This is not just a focus for foundation governors. Arguably this category of governor is likely to diminish in the wake of new structures. Whether a school joins a Diocesan Multi Academy Trust (DMAT) or become part of a Church School led MAT (or any other combination permitted in a particular Diocese) the model of governance will vary and in many cases there may no longer be positions for foundation governors. Where there is a position, the imperative of a skills based appointment process is becoming the norm. Whether serving on a local governing board, the board of directors/trustees or as a member, the importance of a distinctively Christian approach does not start with the schools ethos but the person themselves. Gregory argues:

“Whatever ministry we exercise, it is not, first and foremost, ‘ours’ but God’s, initiated and sustained by him. Human agents may come and go. It is the God of resurrection who works decisively, irresistibly, to fulfil his promises.” (Gregory 2016).

Of course it must be recognised that not all members of a board will necessarily be self-presenting as committed Christians. There should always be space and opportunity for a diversity of beliefs and understanding. Nevertheless the expectation will continue to be that, as a member of a board, there must be sufficient sympathy for the ethos and foundation of the church school or academy. Responsible leadership of the board therefore must mean that, like shepherds, they are people who create trust and identity in an organisation and are leading by example. (Thompson with Bryan, Revd Dr. Howard J. Worsley, 2015)

It is possible to view the work of governance in a purely mechanistic way. In *How To Run An Academy School* it states:

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“the management of an academy is the responsibility of the board. The members of the board have a tri-partite role.” (Paxton-Dogget, 2014).

The author goes on to describe them as directors of a charitable company, governors of the academy and trustees for the purposes of charity law. There is also another tri-partite role listed on the same page:

“According to the funding agreement, the priorities for the governing body of the academy are to:

- set the vision of the school,
- hold the headteacher to account for educational performance and
- ensure that the academy’s money is well spent.” (Paxton-Dogget, 2014).

This reflects the three roles of a board as set out in the Governance Handbook (Nash with DfE, 2015).

In a church school, academy or multi-academy trust it is reasonable to expect more. Although specifically addressing headteachers, guidance from ‘*A framework for excellence in church schools and academies*’ insists:

“Successful church school leaders will demonstrate: personal commitment to a Christian world view and way of life through being a role model for the fruits of the spirit and demonstrating characteristics such as dignity, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.” (National College, 2012).

Such an expectation implies this be true of all leaders which would therefore include board members. It might suggest another and overarching tri-partite role namely:

- Providers of spiritual and focussed leadership of the academy;
- Custodians of the church school foundation; and

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- Advocates for the human flourishing of all the academy community.

Every type of multi-academy trust board will, by whatever means set out in the Articles of Association, have a Chair and usually, a Vice-Chair. Together with the senior leaders within the academy staff, usually a Chief Executive Officer or Executive Headteacher/Principal, they will provide leadership and drive for the board. This is substantially and significantly more than serving as a chair of a traditional governing body, perhaps due to the size of the operation or, more likely, a change from 'chairing meetings' to driving the vision, growth and business of the MAT.

CASE STUDY

Over a number of years chairing different governing bodies the skills of critical friend to the headteacher, enabling governors and proposing roles, setting agenda and chairing meetings etc. had become almost second nature. With a 'Good' Ofsted outcome the opportunity to consider becoming an Academy became a focus of conversation with the headteacher. Attending conferences with the headteacher, discussing the reasons and expectations led to a process through which the governing body were helped to consider the pros and cons. Once successfully converted it was not long before the conversation moved on to thoughts of becoming a sponsor academy. In the course of time a MAT was established.

The expectation was that chairing a MAT Board of Directors was not dissimilar to the past. How wrong that has proved to be. There are significant differences (Moorhead, 2016). Just as importantly this role has quickly resulted in a greater sense of personal ownership and responsibility. Working with the Executive Headteacher and undertaking the performance management of each headteacher has been strategic activity but at the same time felt in some senses managerial. This is not to suggest a move into day to day operational activity – far from it. Rather it's been about ensuring that the Trust, the schools and key leaders have a kind of 'hands off' but engaged leader and not just at formal meetings. It can be a tight rope to walk so as to maintain distance, avoid the operational and not stepping on toes! The responsibility, time and attention this requires far exceed what might be deemed reasonable for a 'volunteer'.

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Providing a distinctively Christian inspired and inspiring leadership role is a huge opportunity. It is beginning to be perceived by some as being a ministry – lay ministry for those not ordained. This might be informed by a sense of calling or a vision to achieve greater things. Underpinning this vision is a challenge:

“Spur yourself on with a ridiculously large vision of how things could be: one that is beyond human imaginingone that is for ever drawing on the talents and abilities of those involved...”. (Cottrell 2009)

This means much more than facilitating, chairing and leading. Most important of all it is intentionally following the model and practice that is found in Jesus Christ as a shepherd, servant, teacher and pastor. In other words

“Leaders need to recognise the gifts of others and make disciples by pasturing, orchestrating the gifts of all to reach maturity and thus empowering others, not just encouraging participation.” (Thompson with Bryan, Revd Dr. Howard J. Worsley, 2015)

What might church school governance in multi academy trusts need to be like in the future?

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Church of England and Department for Education affirms the right to a diversity of structures whilst the Academy Trust remains accountable to the Secretary of State (DfE, 2016).

Over a decade ago it was suggested that:

"The overarching responsibility of the governing body is to keep the school developing in the context of a continually changing society. You cannot wind up a school once and

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expect it to run perfectly or without stopping! ...Schools need to use the strategic levers to make constant adjustments" (Martin, J. and Holt, A. (2002).

Before suggesting some strategic levers, Church school governance might well be marked by being about:

1. **people more than performance** – human flourishing will trump all attempts to purely focus on data and achievement, important though they are;
2. **interdependence instead of independence** - Interdependence has more biblical resonance than independence. Building stronger and more fruitful relationships within a group of schools must surely be preferable to creating barriers and reliving the competition of recent decades. This is an opportunity across schools committed to sharing the burden of responsibility equally. (The changing role of education leaders in the future, 2016)
3. **strengths as well as skills** – St Paul identified “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function” (Romans 12: 2-4). Whilst practical skills are vital, discovering spiritual gifts and character is a uniquely Christian way of building a team.
4. **responsibility more than duty** – there are a plethora of legal and recommended duties that make up the business of governance. Focusing more on responsibility that is not limited by duty will enable governance to thrive and all in the school community to experience positive outcomes.
5. **faithfulness hand in hand with achievement** – in a climate of performance-driven agenda (which have their uses) there are many attributes that might outweigh or even enable the very best for everyone involved. It was Jesus who said “Someone who is faithful in a small matter will also be faithful in a large one.” Luke 16.10 (Wright, 2011).

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Everywhere the evolution of governance is a topic of conversation, the focus of innovation and a challenge for boards. A report on one conference confirmed:

“The role of local boards is a question many are grappling with. The answers they are coming up with may look different in the detail, but the general trend seems to be away from local governance towards first greater centralisation, The growing pains and debate this is prompting within MATs should never lose sight of the need to focus on the best outcomes for children.” (Chhatwal, 2016).

Church schools might also add a second (or should it be first?) focus that is described in the *Church of England Collect For Grace* which includes the words:

“that all our doings may be ordered by thy governance, to do always that is righteous in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Archbishops’ Council 2016)

or in an injunction by St Paul that must surely resonate with the role of a director/trustee/member/governor,

“...chase after justice, faith, love and peace; you’ll be in the company of all who call on the Lord from a pure heart.... And the Lord’s servant mustn’t be a fighter, but must be gentle to all people, able to teach, able to bear evil without resentment, able to correct opponents with a meek spirit...” 2 Timothy 2 verses 22-25 (Wright, 2011).

PROPOSED STRATEGIC LEVERS

As governance in its various forms develops there will be many pressures and motivations that will drive innovation and development. Ever present will be government policy, the experience and vision of the people involved, financial considerations and the performance and assessment priorities. They will set the direction of travel. Crucially Church school

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governance ought to seek a distinctively Christian approach to these and an overarching moral purpose. The proposed strategic levers to achieve this might include:

1. The development of governance (Members, Trustees, Directors, Local governing Bodies) as a significant stream in the new Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership..
2. An understanding of a theological underpinning of governance and its role in education not least because,

“Theology is not only about understanding the world; it is about mending the world.” (Fuller Seminary and Volf, 2014).
3. The establishing of a clear and theologically argued case for considering governance as a lay ministry within the Church of England.
4. Reflective and formative training, support and development in governance that is as much about developing the individual as a spiritual person as it is in the practices of good governance without qualifications in governance becoming and end in their own right.
5. A nationally available toolkit to equip governing boards that are distinctively Christian including a Code of Conduct; Skills and Strengths Audit; Self Evaluation pro forma (these are already developed by the author); Peer Review; theologically defined virtues (see below) to impact governance of MATs; to name but a few.
6. Creating specific and distinctive training along with a national or regional network for chairs of directors/trustees of church school led MATs and DMATs.
7. Ensure that the role of parent consultation is obligatory and Ofsted and/or the SIAMS framework judge the effectiveness of the engagement of parents and church community.
8. A case be made for the Ofsted Framework relating to Leadership and Governance to be developed and amended to take better account of new approaches to governance.
9. Expedite the debate on enabling MATs to provide appropriate and modest remuneration for chairs in order to enable a broader demographic of people who are enabled to give significant time in order to provide the best leadership possible.

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Finally, one group of church school headteachers working with a governance consultant, as they contemplated developing an model of interdependence, became committed to the following five virtues:

Koinonia – quality of relationships, fellowship, union, partnership

Hope - sustaining energy particularly through difficult times

Justice – giving all what is right and deserved

Honesty – essential to human life and at the heart of all relationships

Service – a servant attitude at the heart of how we work together.

Perhaps these characteristics are the best levers of all to enable a form of governance in the future that is marked by belief and worked out in practice. In other words,

“Instead of independence it is much healthier to live interdependently..... We walk through life together rather than on our own. We build bridges to each other's islands. We learn from each other, we encourage each other, we support each other, we care for each other, we have fun together, we build memories together and we help each other to grow. We realise we are stronger and better as two or more than we are on our own.” (Christian Today and Abell, 2014).

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