Contextual Issues for the Parish Church

The Context of the Parish Church

Parishes exist within a wider social and institutional setting that includes cultural, political and economic forces that may be regional, national or global. They operate within a larger organizational framework that comes from being part of a diocese, the national church and the Anglican Communion. One way of picturing the situation is:

	WIDER SETTING	LOCAL SETTING
SOCIAL CONTEXT	Social, economic, political and cultural forces on a national/global scale	+The impact of wider contextual forces on the region +Forces that are peculiar to the region
ORGANIZATIONAL	Forces coming from the wider organizational context, i.e., diocese, the national church and the Anglican Communion. This may include policies, resources, the organizational culture, national reputation, etc.	*The Parish* The goals, structures, culture, people, size, leadership and dynamics of a particular parish. The strengths and weaknesses. It's gifts and blindside. How it relates and adapts to the forces of its social and organizational context.

Contextual Issues: Factors Shaping Organizational Life

Wider Social Context
1. Long term changes in the culture -- changes in our understanding of the "common good" or civic life which include shifts in our understanding about commitments from being broad, public, and long term to market driven, private and short term; movement from an organic, integrated society to a fragmented society; shifts in political alignments, trends regarding religious interest and practice, etc.
2. Current political, social and economic changes.
3. Generational groupings -- cohorts that share a history and whose view of values, thought patterns, the "way things are" is shaped by that history.
4. Values groupings -- segments of the population that share overlapping values

Local Social Context
1. The local expression of and response to broader cultural forces.
2. Regional culture -- the values, attitudes, climate of this particular neighborhood, city, region of the country, etc.
3. The region's responsiveness to the religious institutions and practice. The impact of regional news on religious institutions.

Wider Church Organizational Factors

This may include forces that effect the local parish because of its being part a diocese, national church, Anglican Communion.
1. The policies, values and vision of the larger group.
2. The resources provided to the parish from the diocese, national church.
3. The reputation of the diocese, Episcopal Church, Anglican Communion in the region of the parish.

The Local Organization

1. System assessment factors such as: Apostolic strength at the center and climate of acceptance of people at all stages; operational understanding of the primary tasks of a parish church; productivity, innovation, quality of life in the parish; information flow and response time, usefulness and accuracy; quality of work life for parish staff; organizational culture; ability to set direction and navigate toward it, oversight/leadership strength.
2. Size and the dynamics related to size.
3. Leadership style-range, adaptability, fit with the parish culture and needs of the moment
4. Primary psychological contracts – around liturgy and music, formation of adults and children, community life, relationship with the rector, the building, parish history, etc.
5. Parish self-definition.
6. Dominant strength.
7. Dominant parish pathology.

Leadership in Dealing with Contextual Issues

Assumptions

- Social context and wider organization forces have a potent bearing on the local parish's life. The influence is increased: the more the parish is itself part of mainstream culture (as Episcopal Churches are likely to be); the more it is in relationship with or shares in the mission, vision and values of the wider diocese; and when it is small or has a weak self-definition.

- The extent of the parish's ability to control or influence social context forces is very limited. There may be more ability to influence the wider organization (diocese) in the forces it creates which effect the parish.

- The parish typically thinks it has more control over external forces than it really does.

- Low influence and the failure to see and accept that reality, may set loose a cycle of fear and blaming. This is often directed at the parish's leaders. While energy is being consumed in the fear and blame cycle the organization is unable to effectively engage its own renewal.

Goal and Objectives

The long-term goal is to increase the parish's capacity for self-revitalization; to increase its ability to adapt to new conditions, to keep itself grounded in the best of its strengths and gifts, to solve problems and pick up on opportunities, and learn from experience.

- To keep the parish in touch with its own purpose, identity, vision, and values. And to keep all that rooted in the best of the Anglican tradition.
- To help the parish maintain core processes/habits of operating that are closely related to its purpose, identity, vision and values.

- To create processes and structures in the parish so it can see, understand and appropriately respond to the forces effecting its life.

A Process

1. Identify the active forces in the social context and the wider organization that have or may have influence on the parish. What is impacting the parish now?
2. Identify the degree to which the parish has control over or can significantly impact these forces.
3. Identify what the parish may do to adapt to the forces, in a manner that advances or protects the parish's mission, vision and values.
4. Help others in the parish do the same three steps. Seek a common understanding.

WORKSHEET

Please fill in the worksheet two steps --
1. In "brainstorm" fashion, list forces, in each box, that are having an effect on your parish.
2. Focus on the *Social Context* and *Wider Setting Organization* boxes. Circle the forces that you think are having the most impact on your parish.

	WIDER SETTING	**LOCAL SETTING**
SOCIAL CONTEXT		
ORGANIZATIONAL		