



Collaborative  
MINISTRY

What it is, how it works and why

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Foreword by Bishop Colin Bennetts

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE CURRENT VIEW

At the time of writing, Collaborative Ministry (CM) is fast becoming a ‘buzz phrase’ in the church. It appears in ordination services, and is commonly used by churches when they advertise for a new minister. It is referred to by those who speak and write about leadership, the church and outreach. It is usually, however, mentioned in passing and rarely defined. That’s the problem with a buzz phrase: if it’s widely used, everyone thinks they know what it means, nods wisely when it’s used... and interprets it to mean just about anything! If this continues for any length of time, the buzz phrase turns into a bandwagon and, as a multitude of meanings leap on to it, the concept underlying the original phrase quietly collapses under the strain.

The current view is that CM is a good thing, and a solution to most of our problems. It is, allegedly, the answer to the declining numbers of clergy, ministers and church leaders, and will also solve the decline in church membership. Similarly, it is widely thought that large churches are doing fine—engaging in CM and getting on with being successful—while small churches need to get their act together and begin CM as soon as possible.

This book will not only consider CM but also define it and explore the theology and practice of this style of ‘being church’. In the process, it will question the current view, consider the implications for both large and small churches, and study the Bible to provide a secure foundation.

## A CURRENT ASSUMPTION

Added to the current view that CM is a good thing is the assumption that CM can be ‘bolted on’ to existing leadership structures. This may or may not be true: it all depends on the shape of the original structure and whether or not CM is compatible with it. If the two are incompatible, then simply adding CM may strain the existing leadership to the point of collapse. In practice, and in the local situation, this may mean that we can’t bolt CM on to what we already have: the choice is then either to leave well alone or to demolish and rebuild. Similarly, our leadership structures may be located in a culture that is no longer relevant to most people—perhaps only to a small minority. If this is the case, even sound, solidly built leadership structures will be isolated from the culture around us.

This book is written in three parts:

- Part One compares the CM approach with existing church leadership structures. This can be thought of as a structural survey.
- Part Two looks at the biblical themes of authority (leadership), acceptance (membership) and covenant (the relationship between the two). These Bible studies define CM and form a foundation on which it can be built.
- Part Three examines the practicalities of rebuilding a leadership structure.

It is not necessary to read this book in order. It is possible to go straight to Part Three, begin with Part Two, or read each section in parallel. As a general rule, though, it would be wise to read it as presented, in order. That way, the survey is considered first, which will give some idea of how extensive the job might be. Then the foundations are defined and attended to—and they might need underpinning, totally replacing or laying somewhere else. Finally, and only when ready, do we build.

There are questions for discussion at the end of each chapter in Part One. Also, questions for group study (relating to Chapters 5 to 11) are provided at the end. These may be freely reproduced for group discussion (or wider circulation) in a church considering the move towards a collaborative approach.

## IS COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY NEW?

In the 1990s, CM was called ‘enabling’. In the previous decade it was called ‘shared ministry’, before that ‘every-member ministry’ and before that ‘the priesthood of all believers’. Interestingly, what-ever it was called, it made little impact. This is probably because CM has always been regarded as a side issue or a bolt-on to the central task of leadership, the assumption being, ‘But we’re all doing this anyway... aren’t we?’ This book will examine not only CM but also what happens when it becomes central to a leadership structure.

In the church, most leadership models rely on delegation, and in recent years secular management techniques have shed some helpful light on these models. In the secular business world, ‘partner-ships’ are the closest models to CM, but the two are not identical. In the partnership model (for example, in a group of solicitors or general practitioners), each partner gets on with his or her own job and they only confer over points of difficulty. They meet to discuss policy and meetings are chaired by the senior partner, but on a day-to-day basis they trust each other to get on with the corporate task. In a church context, this kind of leadership structure could be termed Collaborative Leadership (CL) because ministers work in partnership and collaborate with each other. They do not, however, behave collaboratively with their members (any more than solicitors or doctors collaborate with their clients).

By contrast, CM is a structure that includes both ministers and members. This highlights the shortcomings of secular models: because existing church leadership structures have grown out of a particular

theology, it will not suffice simply to import a management philosophy into the church. CM is not a management technique. It is not a new way to run the same old leadership structure but a practical development of a theology of leadership, which rests on a particular theology of church. Therefore, it is helpful to consider the existing theology of leadership that underpins current practice and compare it with the theology of CM. Only then shall we appreciate why a CM structure looks different from a traditional leadership structure.

Unless the ‘why’ of CM (the theology) is understood, we shall imagine that we can engage in it without making any changes to fundamental attitudes. At that point, we can end up embracing the theory while disregarding the practice.

## WORKING WITH OTHERS

All human activity involving more than one person requires some kind of organization. Children quickly work out who is leading a game and who is following—and when there are different opinions about who is in charge (or arguments about the precise rules of the game) an interesting facet of human behaviour emerges. Without care, it’s possible to spend so much time organizing the leadership structure that no time is left to play the game. Growing up, we learn that organized leadership is better than anarchy and that there is an appropriate ratio of leaders to followers in most situations. When the group is small, only one leader is needed; when the group is large (perhaps a nation), a vast number may be necessary.

Whatever their size, organizations of human beings tend to fall under one of three different leadership styles:

- **Autocracy** accepts that one person holds power and makes decisions.
- **Delegation** expects this one person to share their power and decision-making with others.

- **Collaboration** recognizes that each person has power and the ability to make decisions—and expects each one to contribute to the whole.

Any of these three styles of leadership can be thought of as collaborative: even in an autocracy, the majority have to allow the top man to lead. If they refuse to do as he says, he is the leader of no one. Autocracy and collaboration are opposite approaches, however, because the former requires the many to accept the personal authority of the leader, while the latter requires the leader to accept the personal authority of the many. Somewhere between these two opposites is delegation—although its roots are in autocracy, not collaboration, because delegation looks to a hierarchical leader whereas collaboration does not.

### Three key aspects

In the church we may be familiar with a pattern of ministry that is autocratic, delegated or collaborative, but there are three key aspects that apply to every leadership structure.

- 1 **Authority:** Depending on the church tradition, the local church leader may be called a minister, priest, elder, vicar, apostle, prophet or some other descriptive title. Whatever the title, it means that this is the person who is in charge of the people described in ‘2’ below, and the person who holds authority.
- 2 **Acceptance:** Again, depending on tradition, the gathering of people in a local church may be called a congregation, fellowship, membership or some other descriptive title—meaning that these are the people who accept the authority of the person described in ‘1’ above.
- 3 **Covenant:** This is the relationship between the leader (‘1’) and the people (‘2’).

In terms of a theology of leadership, it matters whether the emphasis is placed on authority or acceptance. If a structure for leadership rests primarily on attitudes to the leaders, it will look very different from a structure that rests on ideas about the members. To use political systems as an example, a nation that emphasizes authority is at the fascist end of the spectrum while a nation that emphasizes acceptance is at the communist end.

In this book, these aspects of authority and acceptance are examined from a biblical perspective and it is suggested that CM describes an appropriate covenant for the church.

## TEACH IT; DO IT

Why am I writing about CM? Because the theology of CM has shaped my thinking and practice. I was ordained in 1979 and, as a curate, I joined a staff of six. When I moved, it was to an ecumenical team ministry of five clergy. My next move was to another team ministry, this time with (at its peak) eleven clergy. When I arrived in Halifax in 1997, there were six on the staff. In each of these places, the clergy worked together and, by many definitions of ministry, were collaborative—but it was CL, Collaborative Leadership. For the past 20 years, however, I have been engaged in a form of CM that is concerned with the whole church, where ordained, lay, accredited leaders and ‘ordinary’ members work and lead together.

Even the least observant reader will have spotted that I am a vicar in the Church of England and may be asking, ‘So is this book aimed at the Anglican Church?’ No. This book is about biblical principles, and it doesn’t matter which denomination our church is part of: the issues we face are the same. When I refer to church structures, they will be Anglican structures, but they can be considered as an example rather than as a pattern. Whichever denomination we belong to, there’s hope. After all, if CM can be done within the Church of England, then it can be pursued anywhere!

Also, if my brief history suggests that I have always ministered in 'large' churches, this would be a false impression. Two have been large, one had a congregation of fewer than 20, and the rest have been middle sized. In each one, though, we lived through change. In Halifax I am now the only full-time paid member of staff, but I minister in a collaborative structure with leaders generated from within the congregation (at the time of writing, two Ordained Local Ministers, two Readers, six people who hold the Bishop's Pastoral Certificate, lay leaders and group leaders). Similarly, the churches have been in rural, suburban and urban priority areas (or inner-city communities), and CM is appropriate to each.

In the following chapters, for simplicity, the word 'minister' will be used to describe the 'priest', 'vicar', 'church leader' and so on; also, for brevity, all leaders will be designated as male. This isn't because one term is correct or that only men should lead—it just means that we don't have to struggle through a whole list of titles or gender acknowledgment on each occasion.

## READ IT; DO IT

This book is not a blueprint; it's a contribution. It looks at some of the principles involved in being a collaborative church and offers ideas and tools to help with the process. It suggests a direction and points out some of the crossroad decisions, but this book will not make CM happen. If a church wishes to pursue CM, it must do the work itself.



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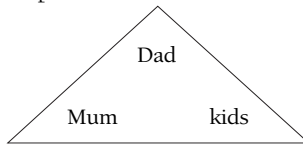
## Chapter 1

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# IN THE SHADOW OF PYRAMIDS

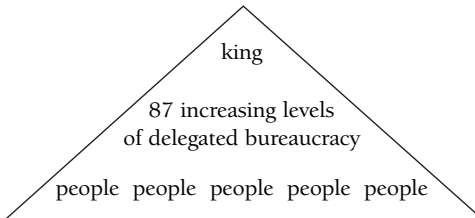
When it comes to leadership structures, the pyramid is the most common form. It can be seen in the family, the tribe, and the nation.

It can look very simple:



A PATRIARCHAL FAMILY

It can look very complicated:



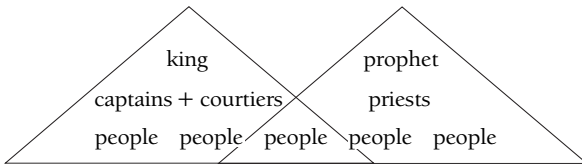
A KINGDOM

But whether it is simple or complex, whether it contains only one level of authority or hundreds, the shape is the same. There is only room for one person at the top and the shape of the top defines the shape of the whole, which makes it a 'top-down' structure.

We can find this sort of leadership configuration in every kind of culture. Whether we examine the government of the most powerful

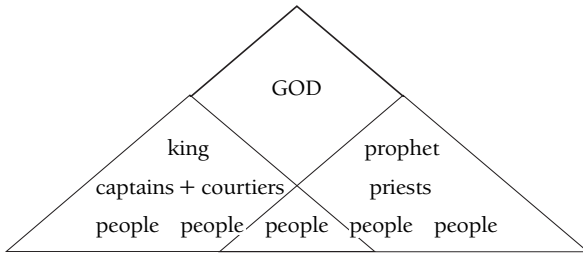
nation in the world or the leadership of the simplest, most isolated tribe in a rainforest clearing, a common structure can be found: a pyramid. Although different in scale, the leadership style is recognizable, and any criticisms will tend to stem from the fact that the person at the top is disliked for exercising authority in a cruel, totalitarian way, or that the way in which they got to the top is disliked as it wasn't by fair or democratic means.

In the Bible, a similar leadership pyramid is clearly evident. In the early days of the patriarchs, Abraham and his descendants (Isaac, Jacob and so on) occupied the top spot (Genesis 12—50). Their word was law and their decisions were final. From the time of Moses onwards (Exodus), the leadership of the emerging nation shifted to the prophet. Moving on to the period of the Judges, the prophet remained at the top of the leadership pyramid, but when there was a war an individual (a judge) was chosen to lead the people militarily for a season. Interestingly, it was the people who became disgruntled with this arrangement and wanted a permanent king (1 Samuel 8). From the time of the first king, Saul (1 Samuel 10), there was an interesting and unusual development: the nation had a king, but the prophet remained. In terms of leadership, Israel looked something like this:



It was the king (with his captains and courtiers) who administered law and justice, engaged in international treaties and led the army. It was the prophet who advised on the law, considered the state of the nation and commented on the priesthood. In a secular nation, this twin-peaked leadership would spell disaster because there are two top spots. In Israel, it proved difficult because the prophet and

the king were often at loggerheads (for example, Elijah and Ahab: see 1 Kings 17 onwards), but the structure worked because the king, the prophet and the people all understood that their leadership structure in fact had only one peak, not two. In their understanding, it looked like this:



Neither the king nor the prophet was in charge; God was in charge. It was God who appointed and anointed both the prophet and the king, and they were equally responsible to God for their public roles and private lives. Therefore, the king was not allowed to behave as his kingly neighbours behaved, breaking the law when it suited him (2 Samuel 12:1–15), counting the nation as if he owned it (2 Samuel 24:1–25) or choosing his own religion (1 Kings 12:25–31). The bottom line was that if the leader behaved badly, he could be removed (1 Samuel 15:10–16:13), and the worst crime he could commit was to ignore God. Arguably, King David's behaviour was worse than King Saul's, but the difference between them was that David always repented.

So, whether looking back into history or across the world today, to religion or to secular practice, pyramid leadership is seen. Common wisdom says that the best possible person for the top job should be found, on the basis that if they are a good leader, then the whole pyramid benefits; if they are bad, then everyone else suffers. Therefore, in biblical terms, when there is a David (1 and 2 Samuel), a Solomon (1 Kings 1–11) or a Josiah (2 Kings 22–23) on the throne, the people experience a golden age; when there is an Ahab

(1 Kings 16—22) or a Herod (Matthew 2), then life is awful. This highlights the shortcomings of pyramid leadership, because in the whole history of the Hebrew people there was only ever one David, one Solomon and one Josiah.

## THE WORDS OF JESUS

*Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’*

MATTHEW 20:25–28

According to Jesus, his disciples should exercise leadership in a different way. This raises a few questions, the first of which is, ‘Jesus says that his disciples should not follow the pattern of the Gentiles, so does he mean that they should follow the pattern of the religious leaders of his day?’ Given that the leadership structure of the priesthood—the Pharisees, Sadducees and so forth—was identical to that of the Roman empire (a pyramid), this would be a baffling statement, especially considering Jesus’ opinion of the religious leaders of his people. He regarded them as hypocrites (Matthew 6:5–6), unclean sinners (15:10–14), bad yeast (16:5–6), thieves (21:12–17), blind guides who refused to enter the kingdom of God themselves and locked the door for others (23:13–14), and that’s taking his comments from just one Gospel. Although Jesus accepted the leadership pyramid (Matthew 23:1–3) his opinion of the king was low (Luke 13:31–32) and his opinion of religious leaders was even lower (Matthew 23:27–28, 33). Therefore, it’s pretty unlikely that Jesus is commending the religious structure of his day as a pattern for his disciples.

Perhaps, then, Jesus' focus is on his disciples as servants. Perhaps he means, 'Keep the structure, but turn it upside down.' After all, servants are at the bottom of the pyramid, so if leaders are to serve, then this means turning the pyramid upside down—doesn't it? The problem with this thinking is the assumption that the culture of Jesus' day resembles our contemporary culture (in which servants are at the bottom of the social pile and there is little differentiation between 'servant' and 'wage-slave'). In fact, in Jesus' time, aristocrats were at the top (no change there!), merchants were the next level down, servants were next—but below them were labourers, then slaves and, at the very bottom, those who because of an illness (lepers, for example) were outside society altogether. Servants were in the middle of society and, to make things even more complicated, their status depended upon whom they served. Thus, the king's servants occupied a very high status indeed and the chief servant of an important man had enormous influence (Luke 16:1–9).

So if Jesus doesn't mean his disciples to be like the religious leaders of his day, and if he doesn't intend the pyramid to be turned upside down, what *does* he mean? The clue is in Matthew 23:8–11: 'But you are not to be called "Rabbi", for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth "father", for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called "teacher", for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant.' In this passage, Jesus points to the existing pyramidal structure of his day, where rabbis, teachers and fathers held authority. In each case, he reminds his disciples of the Old Testament model in which *God* was at the top of the pyramid. Servants and slaves were in the middle, so Jesus is saying, 'You should never occupy the top spot, because that belongs to God!' What this kind of leadership might look like in practice will be explored in subsequent chapters.

## CHRISTIAN PYRAMIDS

The history of Christian leadership is a history of pyramid leadership. More specifically, it has tended to take the Old Testament model of leadership and align itself with the state in a recognizable double-peak formation. From this position it has sought to point the monarch towards God as his or her authority. Some Christian thinkers deplore this concept of the 'established' church and lay all the problems of church corruption at the door of the Emperor Constantine (who died in AD377). They believe that when Christianity moved from opposition to government, it lost its spiritual edge. This view, however, ignores the missionary thrust of the church since the time of Constantine. Whether we look at Augustine (who brought Christianity to Kent and died in AD430), Birinus (who ministered in the Thames valley and died in AD650) or more contemporary missionaries, their mode of operation was the same. In a society that operated pyramid leadership, if the person at the top was converted to Christianity, then the rest of the people would follow. Therefore, when missionaries landed on the shores of a new country, they sought as a first priority to make contact with the king or queen. Because of this initial relationship, the Christian church in each successfully converted country tended to take its place within the shape of leadership that was in operation through that state when the first missionaries arrived. So the pyramid continued, but with an additional Christian voice.

In contemporary Britain, two elements are at work. On the one hand, the established church is losing power, and on the other, the disestablished churches and those who hold other faiths are increasingly sharing the religious voice of the nation. This makes the present national structure much more complex: it is no longer Church and State with their twin peaks; it is now multicultural, multireligious and multi-peaked. For Christians to behave as if one Christian denomination can provide the only religious peak is now untenable.

Leaving aside the national leadership of the church, however, and turning our attention to the leadership of the local church, an unsettling pattern begins to emerge. Increasingly, we find ourselves with leadership structures that no longer fit our culture, which drain us rather than empower us. We also find that whether we are part of the established church or not, whether our church is denominational or non-denominational, whether we are Christians or members of another religion, our leadership pyramid looks pretty much the same as everyone else's. So either leadership, by definition, has to be done the pyramidal way (in which case, what relevance do the words of Jesus in Matthew 20:25–28 have to the contemporary church?) or something is missing—and that 'something' is likely to be Collaborative Ministry.

*Collaborative Ministry* is fast becoming a 'buzz phrase' in the church, following on from phrases such as 'every member ministry' and 'the priesthood of all believers'. It appears in ordination services, and is used by churches advertising for a new minister. It is referred to by those who speak and write about leadership, the Church and outreach. It will, apparently, halt the decline in church leadership and also stimulate congregational growth. But what exactly does it mean? And does it fit with existing leadership structures?

This book sets out to define Collaborative Ministry. It comprehensively explores the theology and practice of this style of 'being church', considering the implications for churches both large and small. A central section provides foundational Bible studies, unpacking the themes of authority, acceptance and covenant, while an appendix of photocopiable group study material offers help for churches considering a collaborative approach.

David Robertson is vicar of St George's, Halifax. He has ministered in rural, suburban and urban deprived areas, developing collaborative ministry for the past 20 years in two very different parts of the country. He has also written *Marriage—restoring our vision* (BRF, 2005) and *Risking Romance—Again* (friendsfirst Publishing, 2006).

**'David Robertson takes us to the theological heart of the matter by reminding us that collaborative ministry, properly understood, is about grace'**

From the foreword by Bishop Colin Bennetts

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