

Fully revised and updated



# GROWING LEADERS

REFLECTIONS ON  
LEADERSHIP,  
LIFE AND JESUS



JAMES  
LAWRENCE

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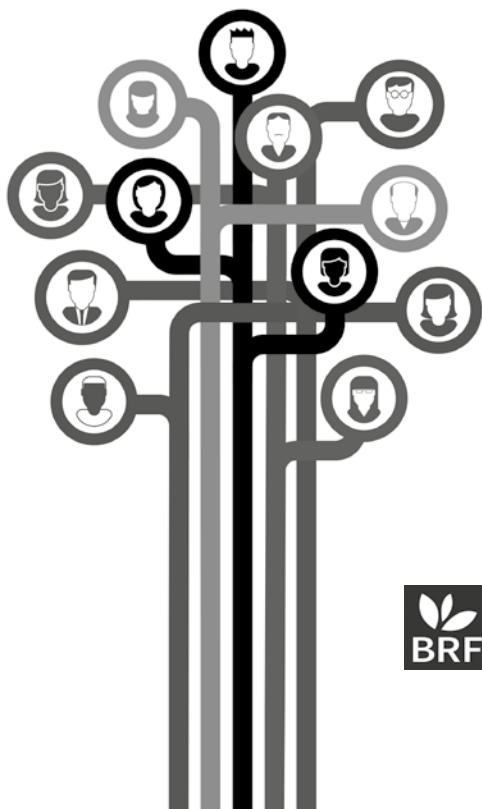
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**JAMES  
LAWRENCE**



To all those who have patiently grown me as a leader,  
too many to list, but all known to Him. Thank you.

To Rob, friend and companion on life's journey,  
thanks for everything. You're a star!

## Acknowledgements

As with any writing project, this is a joint effort. So many people have influenced and shaped this book, many without even knowing it. I think of the man who, when I was 13 years old and scared witless about reading a lesson in church, came up afterwards and offered a dozen words of encouragement. Because of you I preach today. I think of the teacher at school who carefully guided me through teenage years and gave me my first opportunity to lead. Because of you I am a leader. I think of a well-known Christian speaker who gave a precocious 19-year-old ten minutes to discuss some finer point of theology, and, despite my arrogance, encouraged me to think deeply about the issue. Because of you I am still thinking. To all who have grown me in faith and leadership, I dedicate this book with my deepest gratitude.

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Finally, thank you to Leighton Ford who kindly invited me on the Arrow Leadership Programme and opened up a whole new way of seeing leadership. Because of you I've written this book.

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# Foreword to the new edition

Bishop Graham Cray began his foreword to the first edition of *Growing Leaders* with these words: ‘This book is published at a challenging time for the church in Britain.’ Today, 16 years later, it would be very easy to begin this foreword to the new edition with the same words. It makes me wonder if there was ever an epoch in the history of the church that could not be described thus. In some senses much remains the same. The church today still faces many challenges, including those noted by Bishop Graham – loss of confidence in institutions, consumerism, competing spiritualities and ignorance about the Christian faith. They are joined, however, by a whole new set of challenges – faster declining and ageing congregations, a church rocked by the scandal of failures in safeguarding, the need to respond to the threat of global climate catastrophe. Sixteen years on, the church is finding its place in a whole new world.

And yet there is much to be hopeful about. Although younger generations in the church continue to decline, those who were only just born 16 years ago come with little of the de-churched baggage of their parents and seem more willing to discover and explore the faith claims of Jesus afresh. The rise in fresh expressions of church and their becoming more the accepted mainstream has re-awakened an awareness of the imperative of mission across the board. The church’s engagement with the tools and theories of the so-called secular world of business, leadership and management continues to mature; lessons have been learnt and, as a result, we are seeing

a church willing to sift the wheat from the chaff, to learn from the wisdom of the world while also becoming more confident in its kingdom distinctives.

Above all, I see an increased hunger in Christians to change things, a willingness to take Jesus at his word, an increased ambition to make a difference and a reluctance to settle for anything less than the complete transformation of the church, their communities and the world in Jesus' name. It's a high calling. Now more than ever the church needs leaders who know themselves to be called and loved, deeply investing in the formation of mature, Christlike character and highly competent to lead in community with others.

For all these reasons James Lawrence's *Growing Leaders* is as much needed today as it was then. I remember reading it when it first came out, just as I was moving on from my curacy, and finding it refreshing, invigorating and eye-opening that someone could so clearly describe the ways and means of church leadership according to the values and perspectives of Jesus. I have returned to its pages many times over the years. This latest edition of the book has been improved and has matured. Over the past 16 years James has lived and breathed gospel leadership, teaching, training, mentoring and supporting leaders at the coalface of ministry, and it shows in the additions and improvements that have been made to this edition. It is truly a book for our times. It was then and it is now.

My prayer is that as you read it and reflect on leadership, life and Jesus in your own ministry and context, you will be inspired to face with courage the challenges of the present with the eternity-focused perspectives of Christ and his kingdom.

*Rt Revd Dr Emma Ineson, Bishop of Penrith*



# Preface

It was 2004 when *Growing Leaders* was first published. This new edition is published 16 years later. I've learnt a lot in those years. Some of this learning has been at my desk, through books read and websites visited; some of it has been engaging with other leaders in training sessions and listening to their insights and struggles; and some of it has been at the leadership coalface, grappling with the challenges we've faced with my colleagues at CPAS. I am grateful for all these experiences that continually sharpen my own thinking and people who encourage me in my leadership development. I am also grateful to BRF for asking me to revisit *Growing Leaders*. Adding new material, changing certain sections in the light of new insights and renewing the notes has been a helpful way of reflecting on the past 16 years.

There are some new challenges that those in church leadership face today (for example, mission in a post-truth world, the rise of multi-parish responsibilities, the pressures of hyper-connectivity), but the principles outlined in *Growing Leaders* seem to stand the test of time. However, my own thinking has moved on over these 16 years, and this book reflects some of the different ways I now approach things. Some changes are nuances on what was written previously, others are substantial shifts in thinking, and others are new insights that have come through a mix of experience and research.

I think my more recent experiences have deepened in me a number of convictions.

- **Wisdom is the heart of good leadership.** When things are relatively clear and simple, when the choice is between something

obviously right or wrong, most people can make those choices. But when things are complex, difficult and unclear, those are the things that tend to land on a leader's desk. Then leaders need wisdom to discern the best way forward out of multiple options, because the decisions are rarely about right or wrong. They require nuance and care as we seek to discern the wisest way forward out of many options, rather than simply a 'right' way forward. Thankfully the Judeo-Christian tradition offers much wisdom for those who are prepared to mine its resources. Good leaders dig deep and ask God for his wisdom.

- **Courage is the backbone of good leadership.** Leaders consistently face tough situations. Without courage they will fall at each one. Courage is developed over time through daily choices to tackle tough things and not to avoid the potentially painful path. Courage is required and can be grown. Good leaders choose to face tough situations, and ask for God's courage.
- **Discipline is the foundation of good leadership.** The older I get, the more I realise that self-control, good old-fashioned discipline, is vital to consistency and caring in leadership. While it may not be popular or easy, discipline in discerning God's call, discipline in developing Christlike character, discipline in growing in leadership abilities, and above all discipline in the spiritual life are all foundational to healthy and helpful leadership. Good leaders exercise self-control, and seek God for grace to be a disciplined person.
- **Gratitude is the fuel of good leadership.** There are inherent dangers for those in leadership; they include cynicism, a critical spirit, a judgemental attitude, discouragement and weariness. Paul's injunctions not to 'lose heart' (2 Corinthians 4:1) or 'become weary in doing good' (Galatians 6:9) are helpful reminders. My hunch is that gratitude is vital to keep ourselves in a good place over the long haul as leaders – gratitude to God for all he has given to us and continues to give to us; gratitude to people for

their love and care, for their patience and long-suffering, for their service and help; gratitude to those closest to us, who put up with our failings and foibles, bear the brunt of our frustrations, and encourage us to keep on keeping on. Good leaders make it a daily discipline to be thankful.

- **Self-knowledge is the core of good leadership.** Those in the business world would call this emotional intelligence. I tend to think of it as healthy self-awareness – a leader who knows how people are responding to what they are doing; who is flexible enough to adjust their approach to suit different people; who understands their own strengths, gaps, limitations, weaknesses and flaws, and whose self-knowledge is rooted in their knowledge of God. Good leaders take time to stop, reflect and know themselves.

Wisdom, courage, discipline, gratitude and self-knowledge: these five things will serve us well as we seek to grow as leaders. I pray that God will grow you in these things, and that you will join in with all he is doing to shape you to be a leader more like Christ.

# Introduction

**‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.’**

JOHN 15:5

When I first wrote this book, four things fuelled my growing concern about leadership in the church. First, my own personal journey as a leader. I can't exactly remember when it started, but by the time I was a teenager I was leading a youth group in my home, completely untaught and without any real idea what I was doing. I longed for people to become Christians and, as there weren't many other Christian teenagers in the church I'd started attending, it seemed the sensible thing to do. Then a couple of Christian school teachers began to mentor me. They saw something in me I didn't see in myself, encouraged me, guided me and through the following years a number of other mentors continued to shape and steer me so that by the time I was 24 I was ordained. I loved being a minister within a local church, made lots of mistakes and learnt loads. In my early 30s I joined CPAS as an evangelist and I couldn't have been happier. Over the next ten years I was to experience the highs and lows of leadership. The main struggles were to do with things that needed attention within myself. This book is a personal reflection on what went wrong and God's gracious work in my life.

Second, in my role as an evangelist within two Christian organisations, CPAS and Springboard,<sup>1</sup> I worked with churches throughout the UK, and my experience confirmed all the research I'd read on church growth. One of the chief characteristics of healthy, growing churches is leadership. It isn't the only mark of a healthy church,<sup>2</sup>

but it is a vital one. Leaders shape the church for good or bad. Interestingly the initial research findings of the Natural Church Development Network indicated that ‘empowering leadership’ was consistently the lowest-graded characteristic in English churches.<sup>3</sup> It’s not that leadership is an end in itself, or that good leadership will definitely lead to church growth, but leadership is a key factor in the health of a growing church.

Third, as I started to read widely on the subject of leadership, I discovered authors saying similar things. Two examples will suffice. Leighton Ford, writing from a global perspective, said that ‘the world is undergoing a major leadership shift’ with a corresponding need for ‘a new kind of leadership’.<sup>4</sup> Chris Edmondson took ‘the temperature’ of the church and British society in his opening chapter of *Fit to Lead*, and concluded, ‘Fresh, imaginative leadership will be required and will need resourcing.’<sup>5</sup> These conclusions resonated with many in leadership at that time. Models of leadership, church and evangelism that had worked well in the past were under question. Many were rethinking such models in order to engage with a rapidly changing world.

Fourth, I had had the privilege of working alongside younger leaders. In 1998 I attended a leadership development programme in the United States called Arrow. It was a great experience. Arrow is an 18-month programme aimed at leaders aged 25 to 40, seeking to help them to be led more by Jesus, to lead more like Jesus, and to lead more to Jesus. We started an Arrow Leadership Programme in the UK, and at the time of the original *Growing Leaders* book had completed three programmes and discovered that many of those attending were grappling with similar issues. How do committed Christian leaders sustain their relationship with God, without succumbing to the tyranny of busyness and the urgent? How do they handle the multiple demands on their time and energy? How do they continue to grow as a Christian while encouraging others to grow? Where do they find resources to help them make sense of a changing world and changing church?

As a result of those four things, I was convinced of the need to resource leaders for what Chris Edmondson calls ‘fresh, imaginative leadership’ within the church. *Growing Leaders* was one small contribution to that task.

Since then three further factors have shaped my thinking about Christian leadership.

- **The shift to a post-truth world.** It would have been hard to predict the geopolitical landscape we inhabit today with any accuracy in 2004. There seems to be both an increased scepticism, cynicism even, about leadership and a naive assumption that somehow the ‘heroic’ leader is able to save the day.<sup>6</sup> Alongside this, the post-truth climate makes the sharing of the Christian faith challenging, with many losing either confidence in their ability to speak of Christian things or belief that the Christian faith has any relevance to people’s lives today.
- **The refocus on whole-life discipleship.** I am grateful to the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC)<sup>7</sup> for the excellent work they have done on helping the church think about whole-life disciples. They have sought to redress the balance from a focus on the gathered life of the church, what it does on a Sunday and perhaps a mid-week event or two, to the scattered life of the church, what it does Monday to Saturday as Christians are dispersed throughout workplaces and communities. This work was recently reflected in a Church of England report called *Setting God’s People Free*,<sup>8</sup> which has led to significant initiatives to help Anglican churches resource Christians better for their Monday-to-Saturday lives. As a church the call to resource people for living out their faith wherever they find themselves is one leaders need to embrace.
- **The changes in church leadership.** Within the Anglican Church in England over 71% of churches are now in what are called multi-parish benefices, where the vicar has responsibility for

multiple churches. It is increasingly common for this to be five or six churches, not uncommon for it to be ten to twelve churches, and in some instances it may even be as many as 20. Other denominations are facing similar challenges. The job we are recruiting people for is very different from the role when it was one church, one vicar. Alongside this, research among Fresh Expressions of church has revealed that large numbers of these are led by untrained, non-ordained people.<sup>9</sup> New people are being reached, new congregations are being formed and new leaders are emerging.

These three factors mean the need for growing Christian leaders is as important now as it has ever been. We need Christians who will lead in their home, community, school and workplace, modelling leadership that offers an example to the world that it is possible to lead well. We need Christians who will take increased responsibility in their local churches to shape the life of congregations around the person of Jesus and priorities of the kingdom, so that congregations may flourish and serve the contexts in which they are located with love, creativity and compassion. We need Christians who will pioneer new initiatives to connect the good news of Jesus with those increasingly distanced from Christian things, drawing others into those communities of faith so their lives may be transformed.

My own experience is primarily leadership within the life of the church gathered and Christian organisations, and therefore this book is written primarily from that perspective and for those exercising leadership within local congregations. However, I hope it will also be accessible and useful for those who are leading as Christians in other contexts, and I am convinced that one of the core responsibilities of leading well in gathered church life is to equip sisters and brothers in Christ to lead well wherever they find themselves.

## The approach

There are two main strands to my approach. The first is that in the light of the changes above we need to grow *more* leaders. As reflection on theology and financial restrictions affect the role of the ordained leader within the church, we will need more people to take on leadership responsibilities within local congregations. For this reason the book speaks of leaders rather than ministers, presbyters or priests, recognising the diversity of leadership positions within local churches, trained and untrained, formal and informal, authorised and unauthorised. I also use male and female pronouns interchangeably.

Part of growing more leaders is to liberate the people of God to embrace leadership at every level. One of the common phrases I hear is ‘I’m not a leader. I just... take the children’s group... run Messy church... coordinate the home meeting...’ When I point out that they are indeed in a leadership position, they normally struggle to accept the term ‘leader’. Why? The reasons are partly internal – perhaps a lack of confidence in their own ability to lead or a misconception that only certain types of people are ‘leaders’ and they aren’t that type – and partly external – perhaps as a church we have overemphasised the role of the clergy and disempowered the people of God; perhaps those already in leadership haven’t been as proactive in nurturing others into leadership as we might.

What is clear is that we need a church where people are helped to take up leadership roles and equipped to carry them out with confidence and skill. We need a church where those in leadership in their Monday-to-Saturday lives don’t feel they have to leave all that behind when they enter the church building on Sunday. We need a church where we grow more leaders of every age – children, young people and adults.

Alongside this we need to grow more people to lead with greater confidence as Christians in their communities and workplaces. In each and every place where Christians find themselves Monday



to Saturday, they are ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:16–21). Those who have leadership responsibilities, be it of the parish council, a production line, a sports club, a business, a community action project, a home, can shape the environment in which they lead to be just a little more kingdom like. This is part of our role as church, to equip people to live out their faith in every context they find themselves, and that includes resourcing those exercising leadership to do it in a distinctly Christian way.

The second strand is a conviction that for us to grow more leaders, we need existing leaders to be *growing*. This is the primary focus of the book. Leadership of churches can be tough,<sup>10</sup> particularly at this time of change within society and church, when many leaders are unsure of their role and feel inadequately trained to fulfil it. Reports such as *Affirmation and Accountability*, *Leaders under Pressure* and *Living Ministry*<sup>11</sup> highlight some of the particular pressures experienced by church leaders.

- 3 in 10 have felt for a prolonged period like leaving Christian service.
- 3 in 10 feel that their family suffers because of their work.
- 4 in 10 feel pressured by inadequate income.
- Only 2 in 10 have received training in management or team building.
- 7 in 10 feel heavily overworked.
- 200 church leaders miss Sunday activities each week as a result of stress-related illnesses.
- 1,500 church leaders quit over a ten-year period.

Under these pressures it is easy to stagnate, opt out or withdraw into what is familiar. I know from my own experience how easy it is to stop growing as a leader, and for that reason I've decided to be fairly personal in this book. This runs the risk of suggesting that my way of coping with particular experiences is 'the' way of coping with them. I know that this is not the case. Each of us is wired differently, with different strengths, experiences and

passions. Each reader of *Growing Leaders* will need to interpret it through their own personality and experience. There are places in the book where I think we are dealing with principles that cross cultures, personalities and times, and there are places when I am simply sharing something of my own story. When I do the latter, my intention is to be illustrative, not prescriptive.

## An overview

The book is divided into six parts, based on the model for developing leaders at the heart of the Arrow Leadership Programme and the Growing Leaders courses.<sup>12</sup>

**Part I: Engage with today's context** explores the challenges we face in leadership today. Chapter 1 examines how we define leaders and leadership, with a particular look at the characteristics of Christian leadership. Chapter 2 considers some specific challenges for leaders related to stage of life, and identifies a model for developing leaders that provides the framework for the rest of the book.

**Part II: Know you're chosen** considers the starting point for any Christian leader – discipleship. Unless we know we are chosen, the children of a loving God, we may lead from an insecure place, constantly twisting the privilege of a leadership position to meet our own needs. Chapter 3 considers the cycles of grief and grace and how Jesus' life models for us the security of knowing who we are in him.

**Part III: Discern God's call** focuses on knowing what God wants for our lives. Chapter 4 introduces the concept of living in the 'red zone', where we constantly overstretch ourselves, damaging our relationships, health and effectiveness. Chapter 5 considers how God's call affects not simply the big picture of what he wants us to do with our lives, but also our daily decisions, thus helping us to move out of a 'red zone' lifestyle.

**Part IV: Develop Christlike character** reflects on the place of character in the leader's life. Chapter 6 acknowledges that who we are communicates as clearly as what we do. Many of the problems in leadership do not come from a lack of skills or knowledge in a particular area, but from the underlying character issues that affect how we relate to people. Chapter 7 asks how we can grow more like Christ. How much change can we expect this side of heaven? What tools can help us avoid stagnation and disillusionment?

**Part V: Cultivate core competencies** looks at four essential areas of leadership competence: leading yourself and those closest to you (Chapter 8), embodying kingdom values (Chapter 9), discerning God's direction (Chapter 10) and developing other leaders (Chapter 11).

**Part VI: Lead in community** reflects on leading well with others, recognising that leadership isn't a solo enterprise where individuals go it alone, but rather a communal enterprise where we draw on the diversity found in a group of people to enable us to lead well.

As you read the book, you'll notice that each part varies in length. This doesn't reflect the level of importance of any one part, for each part builds on the previous one, with areas of overlap and distinctiveness. Each chapter starts with a scenario or poem, and ends with some questions or exercises for personal reflection. Questions within the chapters and a resources section at the end of the book provide additional material for discussion and reflection. You may like to use the questions in conversation with someone else. The difficulty with answering them on our own is that many of us are either overly negative or naively optimistic about ourselves; few of us are good at objective reflection. Here is a simple way to establish an informal mentoring-type relationship. Invite a colleague or friend to read the book, and then meet after each chapter to chat over the content, using the questions as a starting point for your conversation.

## A personal comment

Any book that considers Jesus' leadership as a model for those who lead his people is going to be challenging. I want to stress at the outset that I can face that challenge only by understanding clearly that God's call on my life as a leader is within the context of a number of theological truths.

**First, my baptism.** Baptism is the ordination of God's people into a lifetime of service for Jesus. In baptism I am assured that I am a child of God and that my life in Christ is dependent on grace. When Paul encouraged Timothy to be 'strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 2:1), he was encouraging him to stand on a sure foundation that was not dependent on his performance, his abilities or his heritage. Baptism reminds us of this foundation. It provides solid ground for all that God calls us to.

**Second, the cross.** The cross makes clear that sin can be forgiven. I've done so many things wrong as a leader and struggle with many internal issues, yet at the cross I am reminded of the one who loves, forgives and offers a new start. The cross also reminds us of the place of suffering within the Christian life. The apostle Paul, reflecting on his faith, wrote, 'I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead' (Philippians 3:10–11). We are called to share in the fellowship of Christ's suffering. It shouldn't surprise us when suffering comes our way.

**Third, the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit.** I am not left on my own. Jesus is present with me through his Spirit, bringing about his transformation of my life. The process of change is not dependent solely on me, but on my willingness to be open to what God wants to do in my life. The good news is that he's been taking inadequate and ordinary people like us and using them in leadership for a long time. He is pretty good at it.

**Fourth, Christ's return.** This is the hope I have as a leader, that one day all will be well, that the tragedy and suffering of this life is not the end. 'For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; "he will lead them to springs of living water." "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"' (Revelation 7:17). God is sovereign of his world; he will return. Until then I seek to be faithful to God's calling on my life as best I can, living and leading in the light of the hope of what is to come.

These four truths keep me going. If I stray too far from any of them I am tempted to collapse at the enormity of the task and the weakness of my character. Thank God that he is the one on whom I can depend, and thank God that he hasn't left me in this race on my own.

## Let's run the race together

A story is told of an event at the Paraplegic Games. It was late in the day, and the 400 metres sprint was about to start. Two young men lined up on the starting grid, as all the other competitors had dropped out. A hard-bitten *Time* magazine reporter gave his commentary on the radio, describing the scene as 'painful to watch'. The gun went off. The two men, both with cerebral palsy, lurched off the line. One of the coaches ran beside the track, coaxing his athlete on. 'Come on, Joey, you can win.' At the first corner Joey was leading by 25 metres. A subtle chant came from the crowd: 'Joey. Joey. Joey.' Going into the last turn, Joey's lead had stretched to 40 metres. The other competitor was weary and losing heart. Twenty-five metres from the finish, Joey suddenly stopped. He turned to his coach and smiled, acknowledged the crowd, and then turned back to the other young man and said, 'Come on, buddy.' Joey held out his hand until the man was alongside him, and then they ran across the line together. The crowd went berserk. The reporter was heard to utter, 'Make me more like Joey.' The coach was heard to stammer through his tear-lined face, 'Attaboy, Joey, you're a real winner.'

As a leader, I am around two thirds of the way through the race, so *Growing Leaders* is written looking ahead to those further on in the race, who will encourage me not simply to keep going but to develop and thrive in Christian leadership. It is written looking sideways at colleagues and companions, wanting to share the heady highs, the painful lows and the day-by-day endurance of Christian leadership. It is written looking back to those further down the track seeking to run the race set before them, offering a hand to help them run with verve, imagination and freshness. It is written looking around to the crowd who fill the heavenly stadium and cheer us all on the way; those who have completed their race, and have now received their crowns.

Above all, *Growing Leaders* is written looking up to Jesus, the one who is ‘the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’ (Hebrews 12:2), who alone is ‘able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy’ (Jude 24). My desire is that this book helps you to keep growing as a leader, to be led more by Jesus, to lead more like Jesus and to lead more to Jesus.

## For reflection

*Father,*

*I abandon myself into your hands.*

*Do with me what you will.*

*Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all.*

*Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.*

*I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend my soul.*

*I offer it to you*

*with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord,*

*and so need to give myself,*

*to surrender myself into your hands,*

*without reserve and with boundless confidence,*

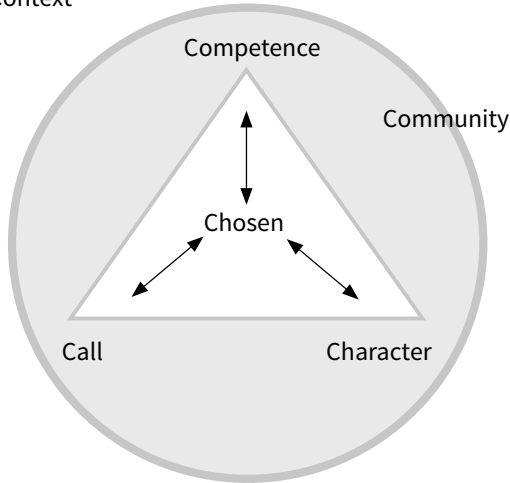
*for you are my Father.*

*Amen*

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

# Engage with today's context

Context



Part I explores the context for leadership today. Chapter 1 tries to untangle the web of how we define leaders and leadership, with a particular look at the distinctive characteristics of *Christian* leadership. Chapter 2 considers some specific challenges for leaders today, and identifies a model (see the diagram above) for developing leaders that provides the framework for the rest of the book.

---

## Nick (18), writing to his godfather

Dear Joe

Wow! Great Christmas pressie or what? Thanks! Exactly right. Thank you too for asking about what I'm doing when I finish school. It is all a bit scary. Only six months to go and then what? Not a clue. Except for something interesting that happened a few days ago.

In the Sunday service there was a quiet bit during the prayers. I kind of sensed God speaking to me. Nothing has ever happened like this before. But it was as if God spoke, not with a voice, but it came across like that. He said, 'I want you to be a leader in my church.' Then, after the service, Dad came up to me and said he'd been thinking about my future and wondered if I'd thought about doing something in the church. It was kind of spooky. What if it was really God? What if he really wants me to lead in his church? What do you think, Joe? I hope you don't mind me telling you all this.

My mate Ashanti and I were chatting last night about the future. She thinks I should take up an offer with Youth for Christ, and get some more experience of youth work. A year on one of their teams sounds fun. I've learnt a stack of stuff from leading the junior youth group here, but I've also got loads of questions. Like, God may be asking me to be a leader – but, hey, what is a leader, anyway? And how do you become one? I feel a little on my own with all this. Ashanti is a good mate, but we're both at the same stage asking the same questions. Who's going to help me think this through? Any advice?

Anyway, gotta shift. Stay cool. Thanks for the top prez – and for praying for me.

Nick

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## 1

# What is Christian leadership?

**Leadership for Christians is about God, not about us... We centre our soul in the hand of God – only then are we ready for leadership.**

WALTER WRIGHT<sup>1</sup>

There is no shortage of ideas about leadership and images of leaders. Occasionally when I am exploring Christian leadership with a group, I'll start a session by asking them to draw a picture of a leader. The results are fascinating. Inevitably, what they draw depends on their experience of being led and their understanding of leadership.

Some draw a picture of the typical 'strong natural leader'. We know the sort – jutting jaw, focused stare, determined brow. They walk with purpose, they talk with enthusiasm and they thrive on action. Nothing seems to shake their resolve; problems are always opportunities. No one stands in their way; people are a means to a greater end. They have endless energy; sleep is for wimps. Yes, a caricature admittedly, but one that often comes to mind when people are asked to draw a leader. And... they are normally male. Such a caricature leads us to perceive leadership in a monochrome way. For if this is our predominant image or experience of leadership, we assume all leaders must look like, even sound like, this type of 'strong natural leader'.

Others draw pictures of ineffectual leaders. The media is very adept at caricaturing such Christian leaders. I was TV channel-hopping the other night and stopped to watch a clergyperson on screen. I have no idea what the programme was, or the storyline, but those two minutes once again reinforced the image so many have of ministers – weak, ineffectual, out of touch with reality, ‘nice’ and unlikely to lead anyone anywhere. Those with this sort of image of church leaders often despair at what they perceive as the lack of leadership within the church and are in danger of looking for the stereotypical ‘strong natural leader’ to fill the vacuum.

Other group members struggle to draw anything at all, sometimes because their experience is too painful. Again the media provide sad insights into the minister who leaves his spouse and runs off with the choir mistress or embezzles church funds for her personal gain. More recently, high-profile cases of child abuse have heightened concern about those in leadership within the church, as well as other areas of life.

Thankfully, others draw a wonderful variety of people, all ages, both genders, different social and cultural backgrounds, leaders lay and ordained who’ve had a positive influence, shaping community groups or workplaces, impacting people’s lives and providing support, inspiration and encouragement in the Christian life.

A mixed response to the exercise is typical. The ensuing discussion tends to highlight a number of common themes. If we recognise that the caricatures are unhelpful, what is an appropriate model for a Christian leader? How do we respond to the challenges of leadership within a changing world and church? How do we help those in leadership grow and develop in a Christlike way? How can we encourage more people to take up leadership within the Christian community and help them grow in confidence as leaders? These are the issues that Part I of *Growing Leaders* addresses.

## Widely recognised leadership definitions

What is a leader? This is the proverbial \$64,000 question, but I would like to suggest that it is the wrong one. It immediately limits the answer to a narrow definition that doesn't reflect the complexities of leadership. Instead, let's ask, 'How might we define *leadership*?' Here are five categories, three of which are broadly recognised by writers on leadership, and two of which reflect a specifically Christian answer to the question.

### 1 Leadership is a function

Leadership is exercised whenever anyone influences another person. In this sense, nearly everyone exercises leadership, for good or bad. The older sibling who influences the younger one to do something naughty, the parent who helps a child to overcome a problem and the friend who encourages us to face a fear are all exercising leadership. The employee who helps the employer to see a situation differently is exercising leadership, and so is the child who persuades the parent to tell the truth. Whenever and wherever we influence another person, we are exercising leadership. This simple approach to leadership challenges many of the assumptions behind the caricatures of leaders. It highlights the importance of recognising the impact our lives have on other people. Defining leadership as a function addresses the question 'Am I a leader?' with another question: 'Are you influencing other people?' However, while defining leadership as influence is a helpful starting point, on its own it is an insufficient way of capturing the complexities of leadership.

### 2 Leadership is a position

Leadership is a position of responsibility given to an individual. Every organisation, from businesses to social clubs, appoints people to positions of leadership.<sup>2</sup> Some of these positions are salaried, with clear job descriptions, limits of authority and lines of accountability – like the businesswoman with a job in a multi-national consultancy

firm. Others are voluntary, but with clear expectations and lots of support – like the Sunday club leader overseeing 14 three- and four-year-olds. Still others are unclear and unsupported – like the coordinator of a local social group who didn't really want the role, and isn't sure what it is, but took it on out of a sense of loyalty to the group and gratitude for all that the group has meant for him over the last year. Each of these people is in a position of leadership but with very different expectations.

Holding a leadership position doesn't guarantee the ability to fulfil the role. In industry there is something called the 'Peter principle' – promotion to the point of incompetence. Someone who makes a wonderful salesperson doesn't necessarily make a great manager of salespeople. When the person accepts promotion to a new position of leadership, they flounder because they simply don't have the talent or skills for the new role. In the church it could be called the 'recruitment syndrome'. It is not unusual to find someone in a position of leadership that they accepted out of a sense of duty, or due to pressure from the minister desperate to fill a vacancy. I remember a children's group leader who'd faithfully led a group for five years. On getting to know me, he confessed that he didn't even like children. Every week it was a miserable experience for him, and it wasn't brilliant for the kids either. Just because a person has a position of leadership, it doesn't mean they are either competent for that role or called to that position.

Yet giving people a position of leadership is one way to help someone grow as a leader, to take on responsibility. A colleague of mine told me her earliest experience as a leader was in the Brownies when she was asked to be a 'sixer'. In schools and uniformed organisations we often encourage children and young people to take their first tentative steps in leadership by giving them a role.

### 3 Leadership is an ability

Leadership as an ability is made up of a number of different things. Research on leadership by Gallup makes a distinction between knowledge, skill and talent.<sup>3</sup> *Knowledge* is something you can acquire, be it factual or experiential. For example, I gain more knowledge about the people I lead by asking good questions and listening carefully to their responses. A *skill* is something you can learn through training. For example, you can be taught the skill of good agenda setting. *Talent* is defined by Gallup as ‘a recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behaviour that can be productively applied’.<sup>4</sup> It is not the same as skills or knowledge. Skills and knowledge are transferable from person to person, but they tend to be specific to the situation. Talents are transferable from situation to situation, but they are specific to the person. Talents are developed in our early years and are pretty much fully formed by the time we are an adult. It is technically possible to develop a new talent later in life, but it requires an enormous amount of effort to do so. The good news is that nearly everyone develops talents as they grow up, although sometimes they are a little harder to identify due to certain life experiences. Another way of thinking of these talents is that they aren’t what you can do, but what you can’t help yourself doing.

Gallup’s research identifies 20 common leadership talents, but points out that no one individual has all 20 talents necessary for leadership. Even exceptional leaders, like Nelson Mandela, have only a range of the leadership talents, so for leadership to be done well it helps to gather around us those who bring the talents (and skills and knowledge) we don’t have.

Lurking in the murky depths of leadership theory is a question we now need to address: are leaders born or made? At a time when ‘genes’ are found for every aspect of life, some think there is a ‘leadership gene’. You’ve either got it or you haven’t, and if you haven’t, you shouldn’t waste your time trying to get it. Such ‘gene’ theories have gained popular acceptance in a range of areas, but

leadership research places them under question. ‘There is as much proof that the leadership gene exists, as compelling evidence supporting belief in the unicorn,’ writes Paul Simpson.<sup>5</sup> Part of the difficulty is in the breadth of characteristics that make up good leadership. Attaching the full range of leadership skills to one gene is stretching the scientific theory to breaking point.

If there is a consensus, it is that leaders are born *and* made – born, because there are certain leadership traits that can be identified from an early age; made, because context and opportunity influence how a person develops. Talent is a combination of both. It is in the complex interaction of who we are (given to us through our genetic code) and how we develop (given to us through our context and experiences) that leadership talents develop.

\* \* \*

So leadership can be defined as a function, a position and an ability, and ideally we offer someone a position of leadership where they can exercise influence that fits their abilities (skills, knowledge and talents). As a leader grows they may be able to adjust the level at which they operate as a leader to take on greater responsibility and handle well the additional complexities involved at a different level of leadership. Leadership professor John Adair suggests that there are three levels of leadership within most organisations.<sup>6</sup>

- **Small group leader:** normally accountable for up to around 16 people – for example, leader of a nursing ward, home group/cell leader, youth group leader.
- **Area leader:** looks after significant parts or major functions of an organisation or church – for example a chief finance officer, a shift overseer, a coordinator of all the youth and children’s work in a larger church. This level tends not to exist in smaller organisational contexts.

- **Overall leader:** the person who has ultimate responsibility for steering an organisation or church – for example, chief executive officer, head teacher, minister of a church, executive director of a Christian charity.

Adair suggests that more people can lead well at the level of small group leader than overall leader. There are some who grow through the leadership levels, and others for whom this isn't appropriate. Bob was an excellent small group leader but, when asked to oversee the work of all the small groups in his local church, he said no. Slightly taken aback, the minister asked why. Bob replied, 'The talents required to coordinate the groups are the very ones I don't have. My talents are ideal for what I do.' He was right. Joan, also a small group leader, wasn't even thought of for the role. She was slightly shy and rarely noticed. In fact, her talents were ideal for the role. She made a better coordinator than small group leader. What she needed help with was confidence, not competence.

## Additional perspectives on leadership definitions

For Christians, however, these three categories don't reflect the whole picture. Two further insights help shape our understanding of leadership.

### 1 God gives a gift of leadership

In Romans 12:6–8, Paul writes, 'We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift... is to lead, do it diligently.' Listed among a variety of other gifts, leadership is one of those that Paul identifies as part of God's gifts to his people. The Greek word used can mean both 'to lead' and 'to care'. This gift of 'caring leadership', like all gifts God gives, is not a trophy for the mantelpiece but a tool for the job. Gifts aren't intended to build a person up and

make them look great; they are given through God's grace for the building of the body and the witness of the church in the world.

These gifts are given in the context of ongoing transformation into Christlikeness (Romans 12:1–2), genuine humility about ourselves (Romans 12:3) and recognition that we belong to the body and therefore need each other (Romans 12:4). Paul urges Christians to use God's gifts with wisdom, a servant heart, and a desire for the common good.

The language of gift encourages us humbly to receive something rather than to proudly boast that we have achieved something (1 Corinthians 4:7). This attitude is crucial to the way we use the gift of leadership: 'do it diligently' (Romans 12:8). The gift of leadership will benefit from hard work (zeal), ongoing reflection (earnestness), training (diligence) and maturity. As with all the gifts, disobedience, unresolved personal issues and immaturity will stifle it.

We need to be wary of building a comprehensive edifice on the foundation of a single verse that mentions leadership.<sup>7</sup> What we know, however, is that leadership was exercised in the early church, and that Paul speaks elsewhere of the gifts of the Spirit in terms of grace, service, workings, manifestations of the Spirit, and varieties (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). All these gifts are acts of God's power achieving his purposes and are the 'tangible expression of the active leadership of the Lord Jesus in a congregation'.<sup>8</sup> This is great news for the church, for, unlike other contexts where leadership is dependent on natural talents, Christians recognise that leadership does not depend solely on the abilities of a few exceptional individuals. God can give the gift of leadership to anyone. It is the expression of God's grace in ordinary people's lives. Often this is through the natural talents of an individual being taken by God, infused with his Spirit, to be used for his kingdom purposes.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes God simply gives a gift to someone for a specific purpose to help build a church, and everyone around them is surprised at what the person is able to do. Whichever, it is always a sign of grace, so that no one may boast.



## 2 God calls people to leadership roles

The Bible shows us that God calls people into leadership and his choice is sometimes surprising. The apostles were a mixed bunch of ordinary men, many of whom wouldn't have passed the psychological profiles and assessment inventories of our day. Yet despite their obvious weaknesses, Jesus called them to be with him and then to lead his church. When God calls, the Christian's responsibility is to obey, however surprised we may be by his choice, trusting that he provides all that is needed for us to fulfil the role to which he has called us. This calling may be for a particular situation or for a lifetime's ministry.

As we've identified, God can call people and gift them for particular things he wants them to do, despite their background and experience as well as because of it. Unlike behavioural psychologists and evolutionary biologists, we cannot close the 'born or made' circle without reference to God. God does seem to work with who we are and how we've grown, but he also works despite these things. God's calling and equipping are as important as natural ability (born) or positive development (made), and all these things bring Christian leaders to a sense of gratitude, humility and dependence on God.

\* \* \*

Leadership is therefore about function, position, ability, gift and call. When we restrict our understanding of leadership to just one of these areas, we automatically elevate one aspect of leadership above others and create an unhealthy environment for leadership to grow. The five aspects of leadership are best held in creative tension with one another. When you meet someone who is a naturally talented leader, with a clear call from God to a particular position, gifted by God with spiritual gifts to fulfil the call, and the maturity in personal development to continue growing in Christlikeness, it is a wonderful combination. There are leaders like that around, but not many. More

often we meet those for whom there is less clarity around these things, and what helps them grow as a leader is to have someone patiently walk alongside them on the journey to increased clarity about what God has called and gifted them to do.

## Distinctives of Christian leadership<sup>10</sup>

If these five aspects describe what leadership is, what makes the exercise of Christian leadership distinctive? I've been challenged by Steven Croft's<sup>11</sup> work on how much our leadership thinking is genuinely from a reflection on the scriptures and how much is simply a baptising of secular theories within the church. Of course, there is much to learn from secular insights into leadership, but Croft is concerned about the tendency of the church to respond to the latest fad or fashion. He suggests that truth is rarely found there, but rather in serious theological reflection. As the church looks for ways both to grow the faith of those already Christian (deepening their 'roots' in Jesus) and to help those outside the faith come to know Jesus (through a variety of 'routes' to him), it is all too easy to abandon what the Christian tradition has to offer on leadership and embrace the latest 'new thing' without a critical analysis of what is appropriate and what isn't.

Many ordained church leaders have an instinctive reaction to the word 'leader'. They sense that their calling was to be a priest, and they are unsure how the roles of priest and leader tie up. Fifteen years ago they may have wondered if interest in 'leadership' was just the next bandwagon to roll through the church, attracting its few followers who would quickly abandon it for the next bandwagon round the corner. It doesn't seem so. There continues to be a lot of work done on helping those in overall leadership think through what their role might look like in the context of a changing world and changing church.<sup>12</sup> And the criticisms levelled at the leadership discourse have been a helpful way of honing and refining our understanding of what should shape the way Christians exercise

leadership. I'd like to suggest several characteristics from the biblical tradition that mark out Christian leadership.

## 1 Christian leadership is derived from God

The first priority of every Christian leader is not to be a leader, but to be a follower. Only then are we 'safe' leaders to follow. In this sense there is only one leader, God, and all other leadership is derived from his.<sup>13</sup> Or to use a biblical metaphor, there is only one good shepherd, Jesus (John 10:11–18); all the rest of us are under-shepherds (1 Peter 5:1–4, where Peter is very clear it is 'God's flock', not ours). We are simply sharing in Christ's leadership. Maintaining our own relationship with God is therefore the first priority of Christian leaders. Our leadership is exercised out of the overflow of that relationship, as an expression of the grace of Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

It is a **result of grace** – Jesus' divine calling on our lives to follow him and lead others. We don't own this calling; we don't control where Jesus leads; we don't earn his blessing. He generously calls us out of love for people and a longing to fulfil his purposes in his world.

It is **shaped by God's love** – radical, risky, self-sacrificial, costly and forgiving. His love for us draws from us a love for him, and a love for people (1 John 4:7–12). This love goes the extra mile, takes a slap on the cheek and gives away a garment (Matthew 5:38–42). It is prepared to listen to the thousandth person who isn't yet a Christian give their argument against Christianity, an argument we've heard so many times before we actually know it better than they do, yet genuinely engages with this person as if they were the first person to ask the question. This love receives unfair criticism or unjustified attack and does not retaliate. It gives and keeps on giving, not demanding anything in return. This love aligns us with a young person who has just messed something up completely, rather than distancing ourselves through concern we may be criticised for their failure.

It is **dependent on the Holy Spirit** to empower and equip individuals to play their part in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–13). In his body, no one individual has all that is necessary for the body to function, but each person has their part to play and is a valuable and vital part of the body. We are all ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession’ (1 Peter 2:9). It is the Holy Spirit who takes our strengths and weaknesses and transforms them, using them for God’s purposes and for his glory.

## 2 Christian leadership is rooted in the Bible and directed by the Spirit

Christian leaders seek to be faithful to the Bible in all that they do because it is God’s word, ‘useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Christian leaders seek to be open to the Holy Spirit because the Spirit of Jesus within guides and leads us into all truth (John 16:13–15). Faithfulness to the Bible and openness to the Spirit of God are like the two spotlights at a theatre. When they come together on one spot, they bring focus and illumination.

The Bible and the Spirit help us as leaders to see *our part in God’s bigger story*, the salvation history of the world. This perspective prevents us from getting stuck in our own limited context. It reminds us of both the global church and the historical church of which we are a part, and it assures us that, no matter what we face, God is working his purposes out. The temptation to become disheartened or disillusioned is countered by a healthy understanding of the bigger story of what God is doing, whose focus is on his kingdom. If leaders focus anywhere else, they end up following something or someone other than Christ, and they end up serving an agenda other than the kingdom of God’s agenda. Christian leaders are kingdom-seekers not empire-builders.<sup>14</sup>

The Bible and the Spirit also help us to *take seriously divine sovereignty and human responsibility*. We will not be surprised by the constant mess the world is in and the waywardness of people or, if we are honest, the tendency for ourselves to be wayward. As we daily confront the realities of a fallen world, we place ourselves in the hands of a sovereign God, who offers forgiveness and the possibility of change.

### 3 Christian leadership is marked by servanthood

Service is a normal part of Christian discipleship, and so too for Christian leadership. Jesus expects those who lead to continue serving. This challenged everything about the accepted models of leadership in Jesus' day. It was revolutionary, and I want to consider this particular distinctive in detail.

In Luke 22, Jesus shares the last supper with his closest friends. He outlines his eagerness to spend these last hours with them before he suffers (v. 15) and then breaks bread and shares wine (vv. 19–20). He speaks honestly about his impending betrayal by one of those closest to him (v. 22). At this moment of intense significance and personal vulnerability, the disciples start having an argument about who is the greatest. It is hard to imagine how Jesus must have felt, but his response embodies the very value he longs for them to adopt:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.

vv. 25–26

*'You are not to be like that.'* Don't 'lord it over them': don't make use of position or power to wield authority in an arrogant way. Don't think of yourself as a 'benefactor': don't decide when to give and when to keep back. *'You are not to be like that.'* The greatest should

have an attitude of humility, a willingness to value others above themselves.<sup>15</sup> The one who rules should be like the one who serves, willing to help others fulfil their dreams.

Jesus isn't saying, 'Avoid leadership.' He is saying that the way we lead needs to be marked by servanthood: 'But I am among you as one who serves' (v. 27). Striving for greatness<sup>16</sup> was a mark of leaders of the day. Striving to serve is to be the mark of Christian leaders. Jesus says that it isn't about status or position, 'For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table?' (v. 27). Yes, in the eyes of many, those who sit at the table are 'greater', but we are to see things differently. Neither success nor status defines Christian leaders; service defines a Christian leader. We may do a nice job of deferring to others, but all too quickly we are like the disciples disputing about who is the greatest. We may not do it verbally, but we do it internally in a legion of subtle ways – concern with how we look, who we associate with, which jobs we get, who listens to us, who we know. *'You are not to be like that.'*

Many years ago, the minister and I were once again the last people putting chairs away late at night after yet another church meeting. I made some quip about needing to be trained by Pickfords (a large removal company), and he responded, with a smile, 'Once a deacon, always a deacon.' He was right. Steven Croft has developed this theme in *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, exploring the threefold nature of leadership in the early church:

Diakonia, the ministry of a servant, is the most important of the three dimensions if ministry and leadership are to be truly Christian and Christlike... the principles of diakonia ought therefore to be the controlling and guiding principles of all Christian ministry.<sup>17</sup>

For many of us, this sets up a tension in our lives between being a servant and a leader. Obviously the word 'servant' does not imply

grovelling servitude, nor does ‘leader’ mean dogmatic dictator. However, am I called to give up my own agenda to serve others in fulfilling theirs? I’ve heard people debate on both sides, and am unconvinced by either, for surely the question involves a false assumption, that either my or the other person’s agenda is the priority. The servant leader is called first to serve Christ. His agenda must be preeminent over all other agendas. That’s why there are times when a servant leader rightly stands against the flow, prepared to challenge, confront and change things, because Christ’s agenda is the priority. For example, if a congregation wants to maintain the church as an exclusive club for those who belong, the servant leader doesn’t bow to their wishes and help them do a better job at excluding others. The servant leader knows that her first priority is to serve Christ. She goes before God before she goes before the people. But how she engages with the people will need to reflect a servant heart – a willingness to listen, a love for people, an ability to adapt, a humble attitude. The servant leader is a servant of God first, called to serve God’s people in leadership. As Graham Cray reflects, ‘The controlling principle of local church leadership is that Jesus is the active leader of each congregation.’<sup>18</sup> Thus servant leadership isn’t about serving people; it is about serving God and through our service of God serving people: a subtle but significant difference. If we serve people, we all too easily become a *doormat*, doing what others ask of us; but if we serve God first and through our serving God serve people, then we become a *doorway* into the priorities of the king and purposes of his kingdom.

External and internal expectations can easily undermine this fundamental priority. I was in a rural context where the vicar told me that he constantly heard, ‘Ah, vicar, but the last vicar...’ I asked him how long he’d been there, expecting an answer of a few months. ‘Twenty-five years’ was the reply. External expectations can exert significant pressures, but many of us in leadership find the internal expectations even harder to handle. These are fuelled by many factors, such as the need to be liked and therefore the tendency to try to please others. We’ll explore this further in Chapter 4.

Rather than being moulded by external or internal expectations, shaped by secular leadership models and formed by inappropriate experiences of leadership in the past, we need to be transformed by the Spirit of Christ and the renewing of our minds so that we live out Jesus' words, *'You are not to be like that.'*

Christ served his father and through this served people; Christian leadership is marked by servanthood. As Stacy Rinehart comments in his thought-provoking book *Upside Down: The paradox of servant leadership*:

Servant leadership is not an impossible ideal in our day. Rather, it should be the foundational cornerstone of our thinking about spiritual leadership. Christ lived, taught and modelled it for us, and it is our true distinctive as believers.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4 Christian leadership is shaped by the cross and resurrection**

The pattern of cross and resurrection, of suffering and new life, is the paradigm that will shape Christian leaders. Many younger leaders are surprised or even shocked when suffering comes as a result of leadership, yet Jesus both teaches that this will be the path for all who follow him (Matthew 5:11; Mark 10:38–39) and models the reality of it in his own life. This isn't suffering because we've been naive or arrogant or plain stupid. This is suffering because we are engaged in 'gospel ministry', and the gospel is offensive; it does divide people. In 2 Timothy Paul writes of suffering in a variety of ways because he wants Timothy to understand the inevitability of suffering in leadership.

- Gospel-specific suffering that comes as a result of faithfulness to the gospel message (2 Timothy 1:8, 11–12; 2:9–10).
- 'Hardship' of an ongoing nature (2 Timothy 2:3; 4:5).
- Suffering that comes at the hands of the church (2 Timothy 2:1–18).



- Suffering at the hands of Satan (2 Timothy 2:26).
- Suffering that comes from living in a fallen world (2 Timothy 3:1–9).
- Persecution from living a godly life (2 Timothy 3:12).

The cross is central to our experience of suffering, as the place of comfort, forgiveness, empathy, reconciliation and a new start.<sup>20</sup>

We will also experience resurrection – glorious new life in the midst of doubt, decay and despair. We will witness the new life of a child deciding to follow Jesus, a young person deciding to resist temptation or an adult breaking a destructive habit; the new life of a church slowly growing in confidence in God’s love for them and his love for others, a community gradually being changed by the salt and light of God’s people, a country discovering God’s ways are best. We will experience the new life of personal transformation through death to self and resurrection to Christ.

The reality of Christ’s resurrection and return fuel hope in a world where hopelessness seems endemic. As I write, global conflicts continue to make the headlines. Standards in health provision and education seem to be on the decline. Global warming and the timescale we have to address its impact on the environment is passing quickly. The suicide rate continues its relentless drive upwards, especially among young men, with increasing levels of mental health issues among younger people, while church attendance continues its relentless drive downwards. Depravity is celebrated as freedom, consumerism as choice, self-fulfilment as spirituality. How does the Christian leader sustain a positive outlook at times such as this? Only through belief in the resurrection and placing our hope in God. Eschatology, the doctrine of the end times, reminds us that we live between the first and second coming of Jesus, in the ‘now but not yet’ times of God’s kingdom. This fuels our hope for the future and sustains us through the long dark nights of apparent hopelessness, drawing from us the prayer ‘Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.’

## 5 Christian leadership is sustained by prayer

Prayer is central to the Christian life, and therefore central to Christian leadership. Prayer expresses our dependence on God in response to what he is doing in our lives and is the spiritual energy of our relationship with God. Without it, we shrivel and begin to exercise leadership in our own strength, utilising only our own resources.

A healthy prayer life includes the following ingredients: it is more than language, but includes language; it is done in both the ‘hidden place’ and in everyday life; it is conducted within the context of the universal family of God and is individual; it manifests itself in growing from being childish to becoming childlike; and it involves a right balance between structure and spontaneity. Patterns of praying vary from person-to-person, but without prayerful dependence on God we risk losing intimacy based on relationship, humility based on gratitude, wisdom based on God’s perception and courage based on his strength to keep going even when things are tough. Other leaders may grit their teeth and keep going through sheer determination and self-belief, congratulating themselves when they succeed. Christian leaders will draw on God in prayer, seek to discern his direction and trust in his ways.

## 6 Christian leadership is lived out personally as part of the community of the church

In the incarnation Jesus entered time and space, giving up heaven to become one of us (Philippians 2:1–11). We too are called to be fully incarnated in our context. We do not operate as consultants for a people we don’t know. Surely one of the great strengths of the Anglican parish system (and I know it has weaknesses) is that it invites ministers within that denomination to live this principle out. Talking with a friend of mine working on a very rough estate, I asked him what was difficult for him about ordained ministry there. He replied, ‘Living here.’ I could see why. I’d had to take my car off the road and park it behind locked gates in the middle of the day,

otherwise it would have been stolen by the time we'd finished lunch. The streets were unsafe during the day, and positively threatening at night. The school was struggling to cope with huge social problems. The burnt-out cars and squalor on the street reflected a far greater level of poverty and squalor in some of the homes. It was very tough.

I went on to ask him what was good about ordained ministry in that context. He replied, 'Living here' – for he was the only professional who did. All the others commuted in from outside to do their jobs, returning home in the evening, whereas he shared something of the local life, and was present in his community. Ordained ministry at a distance, be it physical or relational, is really not an option for Christian leadership. Jesus became one of us; we are called to the costly work of integrating our lives with the people we lead, to be fully present.

It is possible to be physically present but relationally absent. When they were little, my kids recognised this all too well. My middle one knew when I was not really present. When I was cooking and not really listening to what he was saying, he got himself between the kitchen cupboard and my legs. He placed his hands on my knees, his back against the cupboard and pushed with all his strength until I had to back up. He kept pushing until he saw me looking down at him. When he got eye contact he would stop, smile and continue what he was saying. Leaders too can be physically present but relationally absent. The constant knocks and carping criticism, the betrayed trust, broken promises and failed dreams, the draining pastoral situations, the shredding gossip, all become bricks in the wall of defence that gradually builds over the years. Eventually the Christian leader becomes insulated from further damage but also isolated from others. Understandable as this position is, Christian leadership is about being relationally present, not allowing the wall of protection to grow to the point where we are cut off from the very people we are called to serve.

Another aspect of Christian leadership lived out personally is a healthy embracing of who we are and how God has made us. Each of us is unique, wired up in different and specific ways, working in different contexts. Both our unique shape and our unique context will influence how we lead in any one place. Two of the crippling diseases among those in leadership are comparison and competition. Both can lead to pride ('I'm doing better than them') or discouragement ('I'm not doing as well as them'). Peter's question to Jesus in John 21:21 – 'Lord, what about him?' – is a good example of someone looking over his shoulder. Jesus responds, 'What is that to you? You must follow me.' Christian leadership involves accepting our uniqueness and celebrating the uniqueness of others. This is where research into leadership styles is useful, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of varying leadership styles, allowing us to recognise the effect our leadership style has on others and the importance of building leadership that reflects a variety of styles.<sup>21</sup>

Although Christian leaders are to live out their leadership in a personal way, they are not meant to be solo operators but part of a community. Not all the gifts are given to any one individual, so we need one another to exercise leadership within the Christian community. Accountability and vulnerability are a part of this process. For many of us, everything within shies away from this type of leadership context. Pride says, 'I can do it on my own.' Protectionism says, 'I don't want to get hurt.' Power says, 'I want total control.' But the New Testament will not allow us this position; together we work for kingdom purposes, living out all those 'one another' verses of the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> Viv Thomas captures this well: 'Great leaders are usually part of great communities.'<sup>23</sup>

\* \* \*

The six characteristics outlined above are some of the distinctive marks of Christian leadership. It is a daunting list, and one that challenges us to a deeper life of prayer and godliness. Thankfully, the golden thread that runs throughout these characteristics is

grace. Without it we would give up in despair, but because of God's grace we dare to believe that he continues to call and equip ordinary people like us to take up leadership. How do we grow in this sort of leadership in a situation of constant change? What are the challenges we face? What are the practical tools that can help us? That is the theme of our next chapter.

## For reflection

- How do I see leadership? Why do I see it in that way?
- How do I see myself as a leader? How do others see me?
- In what ways does my leadership currently reflect the six distinctives of Christian leadership?
- What one thing could I do to develop in one of the characteristics over the next few months that would make a difference?



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**James Lawrence is CPAS's leadership principal. He is an ordained Anglican minister and has written the companion course for this book (CPAS, 2018). He is passionate about resourcing the local church to be well led and mission focused.**



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