

TRUE OR FALSE?

In a secular society just about everyone takes it for granted that Bishops and clergy are the leaders of the Church. Christ's Church is assumed to be like any other corporate enterprise.

This briefing challenges this assumption and asks:

Who are the leaders in Christ's Church?

FOLLOWERS GET THE LEADERS THEY DESERVE

Leadership has been defined as "A *transaction between leaders and followers*" (Warren Bennis – 'Learning to Lead'). Good leadership depends on good 'followership'.

"FATHER KNOWS BEST"

It has often been said that 'Every child needs a father'. The father figure is the one who exercises control, who leads the family and expects to be obeyed.

In many parts of the Church, for many centuries, parish clergy have been cast in the role of 'father'. Lay people, like children, accept that their own role is to do the 'clergyman's' bidding – and traditionally, of course, it was always a *man*. Like sheep behind a Middle Eastern shepherd, they must follow.

Those who follow this sort of leadership are responsive, trusting, loyal and reliable. But have they checked whether their leader is worthy of their trust?

"WE KNOW BETTER!"

The inevitable reaction to this innocent childishness is the adolescent cry, 'We know better!' As they grow up, children don't question the principle of parental or paternal authority; they just test its strength and validity.

For perhaps a couple of generations, especially in the Church of England, the first reaction of many

churchgoers to what their Vicar proposes has been to criticise or disagree. If pressed, they opt out of churchgoing – or wait quietly until the Vicar leaves!

It is a strange relationship between leader and followers when the followers demand 'strong leadership' and then do nothing but challenge it!

It is not long before this leads people into the consumer mindset which says, 'I'll go to the church that suits me and for what I can get out of it.'

Neither the juvenile nor the adolescent relationship between follower and leader seems worthy of those who are disciples of Jesus Christ.

So what would an adult relationship be?

And how can we achieve it?

Can the New Testament provide us with a different picture of leadership?

LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

On the whole, 'leaders' in the New Testament, whether Jewish authorities or emerging leaders in the new Christian communities, get a remarkably bad press.

Modern translations of the New Testament tend to use the word 'leader' where a whole range of other words are used in the original Greek, the most common of which is more precisely translated '*ruler*'. But whichever word is used, how these leaders operate seems less than ideal:

- The Jewish authorities ('*rulers*') are widely portrayed as failing to understand Jesus, and as being generally hostile and out to kill him.
- St Paul speaks quite disparagingly of the Church 'leaders' in Jerusalem, using a slightly derogatory term meaning '*people of repute*'. Paul makes it clear that their reputation counts for nothing. Peter and Paul were equally called by God, one to the Jews and the other to the Gentiles (Galatians 2 1-10).

- St John (3 John v9) is apparently quite scathing when he uses a single word to describe the church leader Diotrephes as *'enjoying seeing himself as number one'*.
- At a practical level, Jesus points out that it is little use if those who are blind are being escorted *'led down the road'* by others who are themselves blind (Mt 15.4 and Lk 6.39); and he mocks the lawyers and Pharisees – the religious leaders – as *'blind guides'* (Mt 23.16 and 23.24).
- Even when St Paul insists that his readers must not resist the lawful authorities, the secular rulers, it still seems to be something of an interim measure (Romans 13 1-10): In the very next verses Paul is pointing out that time is short. *'It is far on into the night; day is near'*.

In marked contrast to all this negativity, the true 'leader' ('guide') for Christ's Church is named: We are promised The Advocate – the Holy Spirit – 'who will lead you into all truth' (John 16.1).

- Again and again, throughout the Epistles, we then read of Christ's new followers being *'led by the Holy Spirit'*.
- Even when 'bishop' ('overseer') and 'presbyter' ('elder') are apparently beginning to be used as titles for formal positions within the emerging Church (e.g. 1 Tim 3), nowhere is there a description of their role.

THE LEADING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It turns out that any so-called 'leadership' within Christ's Church is really a type of followership. The church community has the primary responsibility for following the leading of the Holy Spirit. An individual designated as a 'leader' is there to contribute to enabling that responsibility to be fulfilled.

This key New Testament insight is summed up in the statement from the Council in Jerusalem, *"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ..."* (Acts 15.28):

It follows that in Christian communities the buck stops with the community, not with any designated individual. Responsibility for serving God's mission is a corporate thing.

A community that exercises this responsibility will be engaged in a shared process of discovery; it will not be a matter of passing a majority vote in a meeting.

All this is clearly in marked contrast to how secular enterprises tend to operate – but this kind of shared responsibility is essential, for nothing must divert our attention from the leading of the Holy Spirit.

How can the whole Christian community be fired to accept the change and transformation that is led by the Holy Spirit?

LEADERSHIP AMONG ADULTS

Adult disciples - as opposed to the juvenile and adolescent followers described earlier – have their eyes open in their desire to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. They are not 'the blind being led by the blind'. There are three aspects to their commitment:

1. **Commitment as individuals to the vision** – God's Kingdom purposes
2. **Commitment to the team** – as members of one Body in Christ
3. **Commitment to the work in hand** – serving God's mission purposes in whatever way is appropriate according to their gifts and in their circumstances.

Years ago John Adair defined management as the holding together of exactly these three strands – team, individual and task.

In this sense any ongoing leadership within Christ's Church can be understood as a form of 'management' or 'co-ordination', provided it is recognised that:

- a) Those being managed are adult, autonomous (under God) and in the best sense of the word 'amateur'. They are not contractual employees – nor are they 'volunteers' filling in gaps when paid employees are not available.
- b) 'Managers' in this context are not authority figures; there is no special status attached (cf Luke 22 24-27).

A distorted version of the managerial role gets imposed on parish clergy when the congregation is regarded as a corporate enterprise engaged in mission projects of which the incumbent is expected to be the director.

Much of what is written about management (and indeed about leadership in general) is misleading because it presumes the contractual relationship between the employee and the organisation in which he or she is employed.

In any case, the best management theory today challenges any notion of the manager as 'the boss'. See, for example, Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science* (BERRETT-KOEHLER 1999). Amongst other things, she suggests that the life of the human community, even in the workplace, is essentially organic rather than organisational – and that a major task of those managing organisations is to smooth the path in the complexity of where these two dimensions interact.

MANAGEMENT IS NOT ENOUGH

However, as the Church community seeks to respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit, something more is needed. Management is not enough – certainly if it is only at the organisational level of re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic!

Archbishop Justin Welby, newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, makes two key points about church leaders in an interview at Trent Vineyard Church, Nottingham (*January 2013*):

"You have to be the one who is growing closer to Jesus. If you are not doing that, you are wasting your time."

"Great leadership is about changing the range of possibilities in people's minds. This enables their imagination to be captured by the Holy Spirit."

THE ROLE OF THE 'INTERMEDIARY'

It seems that some kind of spiritual intermediary is needed to help local church communities to remain focused on the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It may not be appropriate to call this role one of 'leadership' – and to speak of 'management' is clearly misleading.

This person is not a gate-keeper, restricting access only to certain channels that he or she approves. Instead this person needs to function more as a bridge-builder or connection maker.

This intermediate role does seem to be what is required of those called into ordained ministry, especially priests – whose very title is rooted in the word *'pontifex'*, meaning 'bridge-builder'.

Tensions are inevitable, but they do not have to be destructive. Tensions arise even within the most committed Christian communities for many

reasons, the most basic of which is down to our individual personalities. At its simplest it comes down to this: Some people are excited by the possibility of change; others fear it. Both groups need help with discernment: Is this change something into which the Holy Spirit is leading us?

A key role for parish clergy may be precisely to address the tensions between

a) Christian communities that are built on relationship, missionary creativity and enterprise (these communities are usually smaller than the average congregation and always in danger of being hi-jacked by powerful individuals) and

b) The legitimate requirements of the institutional structures and controlling systems that protect Christ's Church from hi-jack, but which can also smother what the Holy Spirit is calling people to do.

Those who cling on to a leadership role beyond what others find acceptable are guilty of hi-jacking. The risk of hi-jack is greatly reduced in smaller communities when different tasks usually associated with leadership are shared across the community and are then regularly re-distributed. See *'Seeds of the Word'* by Peter Price (DLT 1996).

CORE RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PARISH CLERGY

If Christian communities are to grow in adult discipleship and respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it seems that parish clergy have three core responsibilities:

- A core **pastoral** role – ensuring that those coping with the stresses and strains of engaging in God's mission purposes remain connected with God's grace.
- A core **nurturing** role – building up the confidence and maturity of those who are still on their way to 'owning' their faith as adults.
- A core **bridge-building** role – brokering the relationships between all those who have different responsibilities in relation to God's mission purposes (including bishops, diocesan administrators and local lay people), so that those who prefer order and those who prefer adventure understand and cherish each other and learn to attend together to what the Holy Spirit is doing.

A priest who by God's grace is accepting these roles as a consequence of his or her commitment to "grow closer to Jesus" (Justin Welby's phrase) is then the right person to

accept responsibility as president, on behalf of the bishop, at celebrations of Holy Communion.

Anything else – preaching, teaching, working wonders with children and young people, pioneering new work, speaking out on social issues etc – is a bonus, to be engaged in if it is that person's individual gift.

ARE CLERGY LEADERS?

Clergy, by virtue of their ordination, are not 'leaders' in any sense recognised by the secular world. They may be called out as 'first among equals' by reason of their individual gifts; but any status is not theirs by right.

In a local church community what clergy contribute will always be pivotal. As intermediaries, they are working to help Christ's people to live creatively with diversity, rather than enforcing conformity; they are making 'organic' connections rather than oiling a machine. Above all they are there to enable Christ's disciples to draw closer to God through Christ.

THE BLESSINGS OF POWERLESSNESS

All this means that ordained leadership in Christ's Church is only true to its calling when it accepts that it is powerless.

This is a particular problem for the Church of England, which appears to expect more from its clergy than almost any other Christian tradition.

Excessively high or misplaced expectations of clergy will always be matched by inappropriately low expectations of laity – aggravated by the Church of England's historic culture of deference.

If clergy try to meet these expectations, the unfortunate result is that they take all power and responsibility into their own hands. Responsible lay people are disabled and forced back into juvenility or adolescence. Congregations that collude with this will never grow up.

Even local ministry schemes can reinforce this misappropriation of power. Many of the day to day tasks that parish clergy see as part of their ministry could be and should be properly seen as the shared responsibility of the whole local Church community,

lay and ordained. Local ministers are not volunteers, deputising for the clergyperson.

There is an inevitable human tendency for individuals to accumulate power when others let them take over responsibilities that should be accepted by the community as a whole. It is very obvious in government, even when lip-service is paid to the democratic 'will of the people'.

The same tendency is equally observable in the Church; but there is an important difference: In Christ's Church we are called to surrender the power associated with leadership in favour not of the will of the people but of the leading of the Holy Spirit. The whole idea of having Synods was to enable the whole people of God, lay and ordained, to discern together the leading of the Holy Spirit. The current heavily politicised synodical process in the Church of England seems a long way from fulfilling this.

Whoever is given specific responsibilities towards building purposeful community must constantly reassess the extent to which he or she is accumulating power – and then do whatever is necessary to give it back to God.

Paradoxically, it is one of the titles given to the Pope – whose power within his tradition seems almost limitless – that sums up leadership in Christ's Church: **Church leaders (lay or ordained) are simply 'servants of the servants of God'.**

Helping the Church of England to 'Re-imagine Ministry'

This briefing on leadership follows up the '**Manifesto for Taking Lay Ministry Seriously**', published in Autumn 2012 by Parish & People.

Visit www.parishandpeople.org.uk for the Manifesto and other follow-up material. See especially:

'Re-imagining Ministry is not enough' (Deanery Exchange EXTRA - 2013) with its 'Charter for Total Ministry'. Please add your support to our campaign!

FOR MORE ON 'Leadership in the Local Church'

including a reading list and resources for church groups, visit:

www.parishandpeople.org.uk/docs/leadershipresources.pdf