



Developing leaders



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Why does the church need leaders? Some may think this a strange question to ask. However, there are plenty of people in the church today who question the language of leadership. Even those of us (like me) who are happy with the language of leadership still think more work needs to be done to achieve clarity and agreement about what our leaders are called to be and to do at this moment in history. Only then can we start to think about how to develop the leaders of the future.

In 2014 the Church of England published what has become known as *The Green Report*.¹ Chaired by Lord Green, the working group set out a new way of selecting candidates for senior leadership positions in the church. However, from the moment it was published the report was mired in controversy and heavily criticised as a business-shaped approach to developing leaders. At the same time, damaging reports about the ethical practices of the bank which Lord Green had once chaired were published in the press. Such was the focus on *The Green Report*, bloggers and the church press largely ignored a theological reflection on Senior Church Leadership prepared by the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, which was published separately in 2015.²

Many other denominations are having similar debates, which suggests to me that there is something of a crisis of understanding of ministry and mission in today's church. Some of this is about a loss of nerve – we hear so many stories of decline that we are quick to assume that we must be doing something wrong and quick to apportion blame. But some of it is about different understandings of church. Rowan Williams, the former

Archbishop of Canterbury, made it very clear which side of the debate he stood on:

*'it is about getting away from a view of the church that is very seductive and very damaging – and very popular. This is the view that the church is essentially a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith and get together to share it with each other and communicate it to other people "outside". It looks a harmless enough view at first, but it is a good way from what the New Testament encourages us to think about the church – which is that the church is first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters), and that what we have to do about the church is not first to organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape.'*³

So are these visions mutually exclusive? Should Christian leaders be trained in business schools or in monasteries? Or are the two approaches closer than we sometimes think? And what can local churches be doing to develop leaders in all parts of the church?

Here I offer a few reflections on the particular parts of the church's tradition which I believe need to come to the fore at this moment in our history and how we might develop leaders in these particular areas. The theme linking these reflections is what Pope Francis called 'a community of missionary disciples'⁴ – a church where everyone is involved in mission, shaped by the experience of community and led by wise stewards who follow God's lead.

Leaders of character who shape communities of character

Few would argue with the thought that spiritual maturity is foundational to Christian leadership. But perhaps more than anything else at this moment in our history, we need to re-emphasise the importance of leaders who set an example in life and character. Research into the characteristics that people look for and admire in leaders consistently shows that honesty, integrity and character come top of the list.⁵ Yes, we want our leaders to be inspiring, forward-looking and competent but all of these count for little if we don't believe our leaders match their words with actions.

So how do we develop leaders of honesty and integrity with the resilience to cope with change and keep going in ministry over many years? At its most basic level this is about Christian formation in community. Jean Vanier, founder of the l'Arche communities has written what I would regard at the basic textbook on how character is shaped and formed in community. *Community and Growth* is a set of reflections on his own experience of living with people with developmental disabilities:

*'Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people ... While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realize how incapable of loving we are ... As all the inner pains surface, we can discover too that community is a safe place ... we discover that we are loved by God in an incredible way. We are broken, but we are loved. We can grow to greater openness and compassion; we have a mission. Community becomes the place of liberation and growth.'*⁶

This deep and profound experience of love shapes us. It is the only way we can be secure in who we are (nurture our identity), and it is only when we know this security that we can reach out in love to others and have hope for the future. I believe this is why Luke speaks of the first Christian community in such gushing terms (Acts 2.42–47). He wants us to see this community as an enactment of all Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. The goal is not simply individuals saved "from this corrupt generation" (2.40) but individuals formed into a new community where they have space to become what God created them to be (to reiterate Rowan Williams words).

Many denominations have recognised this approach to forming leaders through residential training colleges. The experience of intense community, living alongside those you are also studying with, is deeply challenging but also rewarding. However, the problem comes when individuals are then launched into ministry in local churches where there is either no genuine expression of community, or the minister is put on a high pedestal and separated from other disciples. This approach to training implies that we can outgrow the need for community. We act as if the aim is to reach an idealised state of individual maturity, where the minister is given, in two or three years, all the resources needed to sustain them for the long-term.

Surely it is time we rediscovered the lifelong importance of community and the importance of leaders in every area of church life being formed in character as well as skills and knowledge. Those involved in leadership in their workplace need this character formation, just as those leading community projects. It is foundational to our discipleship and leaders are first and foremost disciples.

Practically this means exploring what it means for local churches to be communities of character, shaped by the story of God as well as the experience of being known, loved and celebrated by others. This is hard. The commitment to meet regularly with others requires real determination and creativity in the midst of busy lives, but there is no substitute in the lifelong journey of character formation. Ministers must lead by example – if we are not prepared to find the time for formation in community, then there is little point preaching about it. To a certain degree a staff team or leadership team can be 'our community', but this then necessitates paying attention to community life, i.e. not spending all our time doing business; creating an atmosphere for open and honest sharing, disagreement and mutual learning; praying for one another and supporting one another practically.

Leaders in mission who train others in mission

Luke 9 is to my mind an extended study in training people for mission. It starts with the sending out of the twelve 'to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick' (v. 2), i.e. do the work they have seen Jesus doing. This is the apprenticeship model of training. The twelve are to travel light and stay only where they are welcomed (just as Jesus did). Luke then tells us of the first rumblings of opposition to Jesus' work (vv. 7–9). The feeding of the five thousand (vv. 10–17) is an enacted parable – the twelve have offered themselves to God (they think of their offering as small and weak) but God blesses the offering, multiplies it and give it back to them to distribute to others. Verses 18–27 show that Peter and the other disciples have not understood the full implications of calling Jesus Messiah but this is no obstacle to involvement in mission (if we wait until we have all the answers sorted, we will never go out in mission). The transfiguration is part of the process of their eyes being opened to the true glory of Jesus. But this is an ongoing process of learning – they still have much to grasp about faith (vv. 37–43), suffering (vv. 43–45), humility (vv. 46–48), partnership (vv. 49–50), power (vv. 51–56) and about what it really means to persevere as a follower of Jesus (vv. 57–62). These are all key to continuing the mission of Jesus. And now that the twelve have embarked on this journey of learning about mission, others can also be commissioned to multiply the work (10.1–24).

I think it is fair to say that we have yet to find a better way of training people for mission. Watching someone at work, having a go at it ourselves, reflecting on this experience with further input from the teacher – all of this correlates to what we now know about 'learning cycles' and faith development. But again this involves a degree of intentionality – apprenticeships require the

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1. *Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach*, available online at www.churchofengland.org/media/2130591/report.pdf

2. *Senior Church Leadership: A Resource for Reflection*, available online at www.churchofengland.org/media/2145175/senior%20church%20leadership%20faoc.pdf

3. R Williams, 'The Christian Priest Today', a lecture given on 24th May 2004, available online at <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org>

4. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). A PDF version of this apostolic exhortation can be downloaded from <http://w2.vatican.va>

5. JM Kouzes and BZ Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2002).

6. J Vanier, *Community and Growth* (2nd rev. edn; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), pp. 26–7.

7. See GA Arbuckle, *From Chaos to Mission: Refounding Religious Life Formation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1996), p. 18.

8. E.g. <http://leeabbey.org> or <http://missionalcommunities.co.uk>

leader to give time and attention to the learning process. They also involve an appetite for risk – the apprentice will make mistakes and therefore needs to know at the outset that this is acceptable.

At the core of an apprenticeship in mission is the development of the leaders' ability to read culture and context and discern where God's Spirit is at work. This is where divine and human agency come together – it is the work of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and often this happens as we observe our leaders and see them discerning God's leadership and following.

The monastic communities provide an interesting model for this. Gerald Arbuckle points out that different religious communities have had different approaches to formation in community.⁷ He contrasts communities which were cloistered, where the focus is on predictability and stability, with the approach of friars who were formed 'in context', e.g. Franciscans who work among the poor, are formed in community with the poor. Novitiates work alongside friars in education, community projects and local churches. Such communities have years of learning about these 'formal apprenticeships' and the wider church needs to pick up on this.

These first two themes – character and mission – have been interwoven in our own day, in a variety of approaches to 'missional communities'.⁸ These are small groups that shape their life around intentional community and witness to those around them. I have been privileged to see how extraordinarily effective such missional communities are in developing new leaders. They provide a safe space for exploration and development of gifts as well as growth in knowledge and understanding.

However, this vision of a 'community of missionary disciples' is very different to the settled pastoral image of church of yesteryear and the question arises: how do we move from where we are now, to where we want to be? I believe this requires a particular approach to leadership and to the developing of new leaders.

Leaders as wise stewards who enable others to steward God's gifts

I find the imagery of stewardship the most helpful resource for a biblical approach to leadership (1 Cor. 4.1). We are custodians, not owners; God is the primary leader of the church and the core task of leadership is discerning God's call, walking 'in step with the Spirit' (Gal. 5.25) and equipping, resourcing, supporting and encouraging others to respond to that call (Eph. 4.12).

The language of stewardship, like all the language used in the New Testament about ministry, is borrowed from elsewhere. It implies good planning and management of resources. So we must search out wisdom and commit ourselves to the task of learning good stewardship. Some of this wisdom will lie in the world of management studies, business studies and other related fields. The process of learning will, of course, be a process of assimilation and transformation, where everything is critically assessed in the light of God's leadership of the church. Jesus himself did this (Lk. 22.24–27).

Let me give two examples of my own engagement with leadership studies. First, whole systems working where writers such as Margaret Wheatley have taught me that, while we cannot know what the future will bring, we can prepare for it. We do this by attending to relationships – gathering people, involving them in decision-making, holding the attendant diversity and complexity, being prepared to live with a degree of messiness. These are all key skills if we are to build trust and so discern together how God is shaping the church of the future. Attending to relationships fits well with a Christian approach to community, while helping us deal with some of the resistance to close relationships. Its weakness arguably lies in playing down the role of sin and 'the powers' (collective decisions shaped by unhealthy group dynamics) and failing to address the limits of diversity.

Secondly, the field of risk analysis has taught me that any organisation needs to assess its appetite for risk in different areas of its work. So the church will have zero appetite for risk when it comes to protecting the vulnerable (core to our mission); but increasingly we need to have a high appetite for risk in the area of re-imagining the structures of the church (which are neutral to our mission). So how do we shape the culture of the church such that we develop this appetite for risk in key areas? What are the critical shifts in behaviour which would bring about this cultural change? How do we measure and monitor such cultural evolution? We need leaders who are confident in addressing these questions.

Some of my learning in these areas has come through formal training courses. There are now a wide variety of such courses on offer, from short courses to postgraduate studies. The best of these equip leaders with the necessary skills to critically engage with learning from a variety of fields, reflect on their own experience of leading and being led, and so develop the ability to be stewards of God's church.

However, much of my own learning has also come from spending time with leaders working in other areas. I have often chosen mentors and coaches who are not church leaders but are mature Christians exercising leadership in other fields. For a number of years I met weekly with a school head-teacher and a business leader to compare and contrast our leadership contexts and learn from one another. I would like to think that my own approach to leadership in the church has helped to shape their work as leaders in the world, as much as they have shaped me.

So I wonder if the vision of the church as a community of missionary disciples might provide three key strands of church leadership: character, mission and stewardship, which in turn allows us to think creatively about how we develop leaders. The process of development will focus on character shaped in community, mission apprenticeships and stewardship learnt through critical engagement with wider leadership studies. Holding these different strands together will be a complex task, but that in itself should place us where we need to be: on our knees in prayer and dependence on God.