

# LEAD ON

## WHAT KIND OF LEADER ARE YOU?

BY KAT GIBSON

Peter, the Vicar of a rural church I visited last year, had one of those magnetic personalities that draws people in, sparks curiosity and energises the church. His sermon was eloquent and captivating, theologically rich yet accessible to the unchurched – and fun, too.

He said brave and challenging things throughout the service, made people laugh and ponder, and drew people nearer to one another and to God. The service was fantastic, and the church was full of people of a wide range of ages including several surprisingly enthusiastic teenagers, and an equal number of men and women. It was wonderful.

Throughout that afternoon I found myself feeling deflated and irritable, and eventually sat down and asked myself why. What emerged was a somewhat grumpy prayer asking God why he hadn't just made me more like Peter – surely that would have been so much more productive for the kingdom.

The question surprised me.

Am I really so insecure, so envious, comparing myself to others in this way? Even after leading countless reflections and prayer activities that relate to being who God has called each of us to be, and celebrating one another's unique God-given gifts, do I still struggle with my own identity as a leader in God's church?

What other unhelpful mindsets or tendencies might be hindering my leadership that I'm completely unaware of?

### OMNICOMPETENCE AND BROKENNESS

Questions of what it means to be a 'good' church leader likely plague all of us in different seasons. None of us are perfect, and we all have different strengths and passions in relation to what God is calling us to do and

be in the contexts where he's placed us.

These questions arose in me from a backdrop of hitting burnout point the previous year and suddenly finding myself feeling broken and vulnerable, no longer able to be the omni-competent and ever-resilient leader that I'd always tried to be (and led people to believe I was) before. I wasn't prepared for the sense of emptiness and depletion that ensued for about eight months after burnout 'happened'. I couldn't shake the sense of guilt either, that I hadn't been wise enough or sensible enough to prevent it – that I'd considered myself effectively indestructible and hadn't heeded the warning signs that had been increasingly going off in



me for some time. I now felt stupid, small, and weak, and ashamed of it, and had to continue hobbling along attempting to lead a church.

I'd assumed that God would always sustain me for what he was calling me to, even when I pour myself out (as a living sacrifice?) beyond what seemed healthy – because that's the nature of the calling, right? This is something many in leadership can relate to.

As is so often the case with God, it was in that place of vulnerability and brokenness that he started teaching me things I'd been aching to learn for years, and knew I needed but couldn't figure out. It felt embarrassing to have to re-learn some more basic things too, as if I were an infant that needed to learn to walk again and no longer knew how to put a sentence together.

My own sense of strength and competence was smashed. My own 'wisdom' could not sustain me. I had to lean on others and ask for help, and that was hard for someone who was used to feeling self-sufficient and had feared coming across as weak, wasteful, unproductive or incapable.

In modern Western culture it is normal for people to derive a sense of worth from their work – perhaps particularly in vocational work with a pastoral focus. For so many of us our sense of value can be caught up in what we do or how well we do it. It's the old cliché of being 'human doings' rather than 'human beings'.

We have so much to learn from other cultures in which the priority is more on relationships or community wholeness, over individual success. What's more, in ministry there is a widespread tendency to try to be all things to all people; to be the fount of all knowledge and capacity; to try to be omniscient as that is often what our churches seem to need and expect. It strikes me that that's not at all what God intended for his people.

Jesus came in vulnerability, dependent on other people's generosity and hospitality, other people's care and provision. He naturally recognised his very real human limitations and made space for prayer and rest, for friendship and enjoyment, even amid the chaos of a bewilderingly short and world-changing three years of ministry on which the rest of history would hang. And he equipped and resourced those around him to share in and continue his work.

### IMAGINE

I wonder what this might look like in our contexts. I wonder what God's Church might look like if we, its leaders, were to value and pursue fruitfulness over productivity, wholeness over frazzle, depth over multitasking.

What might church ministry be like if we were to offer our limits to him to work with, rather than so often trying to be limitless.

I wonder what might be different if church leaders were brave enough to be open about our areas of brokenness – allowing people even to tread on the holy ground within – and to lead with honesty from a place of holy vulnerability as well as from the God-given strength that people happily depend upon.

It may be risky, but I wonder what our communal worship and church life might look like if we were to be more open about the realities that we are not perfect and will all fail, all break a little bit at times – if we were to embody a life of bringing God our areas of need or pain, and letting him turn the rot into compost and bring new life in us.

I wonder what might be different in attitudes towards church if we as leaders were to really and visibly believe that God cares just as much for our own hearts as for other people's and is more passionate about



producing fruit in us than how productive we are or how successful church projects and initiatives are.

I wonder what ministry could look like if it were normal for church leaders to build in the kinds of rhythms that enable us to have the brain-space to listen deeply to others and attend to what God is doing in them, and to notice and make space for what he might be wanting to do in our own souls too.

We can only imagine – but I have a feeling it could make quite a profound and beautiful difference to our worship and to the discipleship of those in our congregations and communities.

So I wonder what it might take for us as leaders of God's Church to become so attentive to our own needs, fears, drives, wounds and mindsets that we can allow God to unravel us into what he is calling us to, into being even more fruitful and even more alive. What could it mean for the Church if all of us were able to learn how to straddle our pastoral and leadership responsibilities (making decisions and making disciples), alongside equipping and resourcing those around us to share in it?

What would it take for us to increasingly notice and invest in the God-given gifts of those in our congregations and in our communities, and equip others to notice and join in with God's work in those

around them too – such that our churches naturally become places of holiness, growth, healing, flourishing and worship, without us as ministers needing to always do it all?

What might it look like for our boundaries to be life-giving and good for our relationships, not put a strain on them? How do we catalyse leadership capacity in others and resource them for it, so that we no longer need to be seen as the strong one who holds it all together, but can depend on one another?

Obviously the answers to all of this will vary immensely – but if the questions themselves enable some of us to dream, and spark something holy within us, then perhaps God is indeed doing something new and beautiful in his Church.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What kind of leader is God calling you to be?
- What do you need to grow and thrive?
- What comes to mind when you imagine the sort of church (and the sort of leaders) described? What might it take for this dream to become more of a reality in your context?

