

The Christian Leader

How can leaders keep faithful and keep growing? **Alison Morgan** offers five questions for leaders to ask themselves



A lot of our work with ReSource in this country and Rooted in Jesus in Africa is about leadership. Indeed a lot of life is about leadership – not just leadership at church, but leadership at home, leadership at work, leadership in the community. At one level or another, we are all leaders.

Last year I was asked to take a retreat for the men and women of the Diocese of Winchester who were to be ordained as deacons and priests in the church. As we stood afterwards in the ancient cathedral of King Alfred, one of the greatest leaders England has ever known, I remembered his summary of how he had understood his own calling as a leader:

Keep growing. Pay close attention to your own journey, for this is not only how you will survive yourself, it is how you will help others.

‘What I set out to do was virtuously and justly to administer the authority given to me, and to do it with wisdom, for without wisdom nothing is worthwhile. It’s always been my desire to live honourably, and to leave my descendants my memory in good works. For each man according to the measure of his intelligence must speak what he can speak and do what he can do.’

Alfred sought to speak what he could speak and do what he could do. Simple to say, and yet not so simple

to do. Alfred, like all of us, was an ordinary human being, subject to ordinary weakness and ordinary temptation. He, like we, loved God and loved the people of God; but he was not exempt from difficulty, from discouragement and from his own human inadequacy. And yet he pulled it off, emerging from the flooded land of Somerset (perhaps after a momentary lapse in concentration with some cakes) to defeat the Danes and create what was to become the kingdom of England. Alfred made the place we live; he was a great leader.

The writers of the New Testament are realistic about the pressures of leadership. Do not be afraid to minister, Jesus told the first church leaders; you have my spiritual authority. Pray for the sick, free the oppressed, proclaim the good news. Share the peace of God with those who have not yet experienced it; don’t worry if they reject you. Paul spelt it out in practical terms. Train yourself in godliness, he said to Timothy, the young leader whom he had appointed to oversee the church in Ephesus; set an example in speech and behaviour, in love, in faith, in purity. Keep growing. Pay close attention to your own journey, for this is not only how you will survive yourself, it is how you will help others.

So what about us, how do we keep faithful and keep growing as we seek to obey the call to leadership? A couple of years ago there was a helpful article in the *Church Times* by Simon Parke. Five things to bear in mind, Simon suggested, five questions



to ask of ourselves as leaders. I found them so helpful that I offered them, with my own reflections, to the men and women of Winchester. I offer them now to you.

1. Suffering

The first question concerns suffering. What have you done with your suffering? Suffering is a key part not just of the Christian life, but of any life, and particularly any life lived with passion – indeed, the very word passion means suffering. Suffering is not to be avoided, but embraced, for it is through suffering that we learn and grow. ‘My brothers and sisters,’ James wrote, ‘whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.’ Have you allowed your suffering to bring you closer to God, or has it taken you further away? Suffering offers you a choice: you can give up, or you can grow up. I do not say that lightly; I have learnt it through experience.

Rooted in Jesus is a discipleship programme for Africa, based on

scripture memory. How did you find the memory verses, I asked a group of Tanzanian leaders – was it hard learning them? Well, one woman said, one particular verse was a great challenge. At the time the harvest had failed, we were suffering from famine,

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and we only had one meal a day to give to our children. But the more I meditated on this verse, the more the Lord gave me peace. The verse? 'My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy . . .'

So what do you do with your suffering? Does it bring you closer to God, or does it take you further away? 'The deep things of God are learnt in the fiery furnace of the desert,' Simon Ponsoby has remarked; 'it is here that he digs deep wells of the Spirit into our life. We receive more of God's Spirit only as we empty out more of our self, and this takes place in the desert.' Do not be afraid of the desert. Make friends with your own sadness and pain; for if you do not you will simply pass it on to others. Hurt people hurt people, someone said. Healed people, we might add, heal people.

2. Disposition

The second question is about disposition, or character. Are you growing into the likeness of Christ, are you truly living the mission of Jesus – or just talking about it? How do people experience being with you? Do they grow and flourish through contact with you, or do they go away feeling they have been found wanting? The key to a person is what's in their heart, not what's in their words. What's in yours? Do you truly know how much God loves you, and does that love flow out of you towards others?

When I was younger I used to feel that I was being judged and condemned. One morning I had a vision. I was in a courtroom, in the dock. Before me, the pointing fingers of my accusers. They



were real accusers, and I knew who they were. But in front of me, sitting at the bench, was God. I couldn't see him, but I knew it was him. And then, suddenly, a great hammer. I saw it go up. I saw it come down. And as it hit the bench, I heard the words, 'Not guilty!' I walked out of that vision free as a bird and full of love. I have no need to condemn other people, for I have been released from condemnation myself. We are people who have been chosen. We are people with overflowing hearts, people who share the love of God with others. Let us pray that we would be able to build one another up, that we would be a joy to be with.

3. Homesickness

The third question is an odd one. Do you make others feel homesick? The best art, philosophy and religion is concerned with a strange longing for home; with an inner flame we have glimpsed, but seen smothered along the way. How good are you at stirring embers, and helping others to recover that which they have lost?

Martin Cavender was speaking at a men's breakfast in the Cotswolds on 'The evidence for Jesus.' They were all high powered people down from their city jobs for the weekend, and one in particular challenged, questioned, and spent thirty minutes afterwards telling Martin why he was wrong. Then he said, 'thank you, that's been very helpful.' 'Oh good,' said Martin, scratching his head. 'The

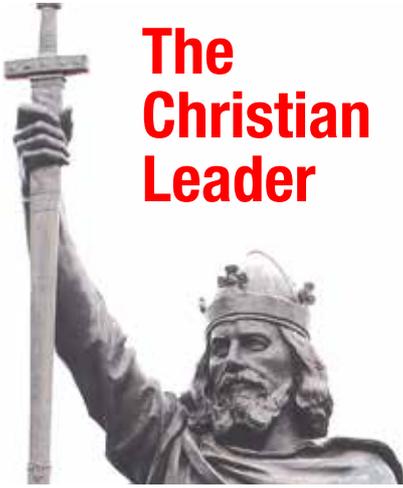
thing is,' continued the man, 'I want to believe Richard Dawkins – but he's not happy, and you are!' 'That's scarcely evidence,' said Martin, who used to be a lawyer. 'It'll do for now!' said the man. So what about you? Where does your heart live – and will others want to live there too?

4. Vision

The fourth thing we should think about, Simon Parke suggests, is vision. What is the nature of your vision? Can you see beyond the surface to a deeper reality? Can you see beyond what is to what might be? And have you learned how to engage in that vision-seeking process with others – for any God-given vision is likely to be a shared vision?

ReSource has a vision. We long to see a Church which is diverse, local, renewed in the Spirit and effective in mission. We want to see individuals coming to faith in Christ, we want to see confident, growing local churches of all types and sizes all over the country, and we want to see spiritual and practical consequences in the wider community as the love of God flows out from those churches. Where does all that start? Well, it starts with me. Vision always starts with you, with the individual – we can only create around us what we ourselves already are. One of our most frequent prayers is this: 'Lord, transform your world, renew your Church, and start with me.'

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5. Nonsense

The final question touches the heart of Christian leadership. Jesus washed the disciples' feet. 'Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them,' he said. The key to leadership is humility. Simon Parke puts it like this: 'Do you know that your words are a bright shade of nonsense, a collapsing staircase, a vanity of inaccuracy? Truth cannot be told in formulations, merely noticed in passing and greeted with a smile. You will not want anything built on your words; you will hope only that life will grow in the gaps in between.' Poet and priest RS Thomas warns, 'A preacher's temptation is the voice persuading he is his own message.'

I have a friend who used to work in Church House, in London. On the wall above his desk he'd pinned a card which said this: 'Angels can fly, because they take themselves lightly.' As leaders, we must take ourselves lightly. Your faith is serious. Your calling is serious. You yourself, you are just a child, a child of God; a clay vessel chosen temporarily to contain his treasure. 

Photos Page 4: Statue of Alfred the Great, Winchester photographed by Alison Morgan. Page 5: Ivory carving of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Photograph by Patrick Clenet, Wikimedia Commons.

about the writer

The Revd Dr Alison Morgan is ReSource's thinker and writer, and author of *The Wild Gospel*, *The Word on the Wind* and other publications. Alison also oversees ReSource's Rooted in Jesus programme in Africa.