

MODEM
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“MOUNTAINS AND MOLEHILLS”

I chose the title ‘Mountains and Molehills’ because it carries a range of resonances about visionary leadership. This leadership needs clarity of perspective on the big issues and what they are. There is a time to focus on molehills – not least if the garden is filling up with them! – but leadership needs to see the big picture.

Mountains symbolise two different perspectives – an impossible task that will always be too much – or a peak to climb that can be conquered and will then bring a whole new view.

Leadership can have a bad press in some parts of the church. I was reading somebody sounding off recently about leadership as one of those dreadful modern management concepts that has crept into the church and helped the church move away from her core task. The implication was that the focus on leadership was yet one more of those activities which has led the church into chaos and decline and is best done away with.

I was interested therefore to read some of those comments in the last issue of ‘MODEM matters’ from the CRE when asked about leadership and management:

- ooh no, - given that up, thank you
- no thanks, I have enough trouble trying to manage myself
- I’ve muddled through for 37 years, it’s a bit late

And then one which I assumed was asked by a lay person rather than a bishop!

- no thanks – I leave that to the vicar

Reading these responses to the words leadership and management made me realise how far I am at the other end of the spectrum.

From my perspective, the dilemma for the church today is that there isn’t enough leadership – and that we could use better management for our diminishing physical resources.

I want to say something today about what I see as leadership, take a brief look at Jesus as a visionary leader, look at characteristics that are needed for visionary leadership to be in place today and factors that cut against visionary leadership. I do so from the perspective of having been a Synod Moderator in the United Reformed Church for over eleven years, and having during that time served for a year as Moderator of General Assembly.

What is visionary leadership?

I want to define it as follows, in three parts: its leadership that

- has a vision of where the future lies,
- a confidence that it's possible to get there
- and has an ability to take people along.

Visionary leadership sees the far distant mountain, is aware of the molehills on the way, but is aware that they are only molehills. Visionary leadership inspires others to travel the same journey, despite the difficulties and hardships along the way.

One of the dilemmas about leadership, for all the talk of whether it's innate or whether it can be learned, is that it can only really be judged by the results. And then we can learn from those who have achieved results.

I grew up in South Africa, in the days when Nelson Mandela was arrested, tried and imprisoned. I remember being glued to the TV when he was released – believing that I was seeing the unbelievable.

At that point, there was a question about what kind of leader would he be. He'd been imprisoned for so long, could he really lead the country forward. Would he have the confidence and trust of people? Could he hold black and white together, and address the multitude of enormously difficult issues that faced the country?

It was only as he achieved these tasks that the world could see what a visionary leader he was. If there had been a different outcome e.g. the country had descended in anarchy and civil war, he would not have been held in the high esteem he is today.

Or to give another example – will Avram Grant be seen as giving a good lead at Chelsea Football Club? On the evening before Chelsea's defeat to Manchester United in their first match after he took over, the commentators were all saying 'well, he'll be OK if Chelsea does nothing but win'. Then they lost and there was instant speculation about his successor. And there the issues of leadership are all tangled up in the debates between manager and owner and their respective roles.

I come across two frequently held arguments against leadership in the church: The first is that leaders 'tell people what to do' – with the implication that really leadership is the same as dictatorship. In contrast, Christian faith, so this line of argument goes, is about everyone having a say – because each one can know God for him or her self and each one can speak the words that the Holy Spirit gives to be said. Therefore having one person who is in a particularly defined role in relation to others becomes inappropriate.

The second is that leadership isn't biblical – because the Bible teaches about the first being last and about the value of servanthood. The implication is that leaders are upfront people who think of themselves first and others second,

people for whom any idea of not being in the centre of attention has disappeared over the horizon.

Some of the recent thinking and writing on leadership has qualified the word leadership in order to clarify what leadership in the Christian context is about.

Walter Wright's book 'Relational Leadership' focuses on the importance of the relationship between the leader and the people that are being led. If this relationship isn't well developed, with mutual respect and care, then leadership isn't what is happening.

He also highlights the phrase 'servant leadership'. This concept was developed, interestingly enough, in a secular context, by Robert Greenleaf when he worked for AT & T.

"Servant-Leadership is a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Servant-leadership encourages collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment."

This phrase has been taken up in training material offered by the Oxford Diocese. A few years ago they developed courses for their clergy on servant leadership. These courses have spread further afield – we've run two in the West Midlands Synod and are planning to continue with them every two years. And they've been taken up by a number of other dioceses.

The title 'servant leadership' highlights the kind of leadership that is being offered. It's neither dictatorial nor unbiblical. It's about the right kind of quality offered in the role of leader, the person who has a particular role in service to other people. It's embodied in Jesus' living and his teaching.

I want to go on today to speak about 'visionary leadership.'
In a sense, qualifying 'leadership' with 'visionary' in itself puts another slant on leadership. Speaking of 'visionary leadership' carries with it the understanding that the starting point for leadership is the vision, rather than the thought of telling people what to do.

I want to start by looking at Jesus as a visionary leader.
Jesus had a vision of where the future lay, a confidence, or authority, that it was possible to get there and an ability to take people with him. He also embodied this vision in himself.

Jesus vision was of God and of God's Kingdom.

The familiarity of the Gospels can soften the impact of who Jesus was. How astonishing that this unknown young man could come out of seemingly nowhere and challenge the establishment of the day to look again at their faith

and at who they believed God to be. Jesus was undeterred in his overturning of what was often a comfortable way of thinking. He saw clearly what God was yet making possible for people.

His vision wasn't of the mystical kind contained in Daniel or the Book of Revelation. His vision was about seeing this world with God's eyes and seeing with an eternal perspective.

One aspect that struck me again in thinking about this, was how much Jesus was not one of those 'it can't be done because we've tried it before and it didn't work then' kind of people. Instead, he was the embodiment of God saying (to be just a little anthropomorphic!) 'I've tried it before and it didn't work and therefore I'll go on trying again'

Jesus was at the service of others, he knew where he was going, and he looked for people to follow him. What was striking was that people did follow, both the first disciples – initially not knowing where they might end up; and then countless generations of people over the centuries.

Visionary leadership isn't a modern concept which is leading the church astray. Visionary leadership is following in the footsteps of Jesus, in a journey that people have travelled over many centuries and still walk on today.

I want to go on to look at some of the characteristics and qualities that mark out visionary leadership.

Such leadership starts with a vision of God and what God makes possible in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's a vision rooted in the past, glimpsed in the present and fully to be realised in the future.

I've heard it said recently that we don't give enough attention to eschatology in the church today. It might sound a rather arcane area to be reflecting on as a priority, but I believe that there is some truth in this thought. Eschatology reminds us of the last things, of the faith that God has the world and both time and eternity in God's hands. Kingdoms may come and go, particular manifestations of the church may come and go, but at the end of the day our hope lies in the God who holds all things together and will draw all things to himself.

One of the dilemmas in the church in this country at present is the susceptibility to panic. "If we don't take some action, if we don't put things right immediately, all will fail." We share in the short-termism that afflicts public life with its search for instant results.

Visionary leadership in the church has an eschatological perspective, seeing the future in God's hands, and being able to see the molehills on the way for what they are – no more than molehills.

Visionary leadership has a number of characteristics and qualities. I'm going to look at these through a range of seven balances which enable such leadership to be developed.

1. Dreaming and realism.
2. Creativity and conflict.
3. Freedom and responsibility.
4. Affirmation and appraisal.
5. Short-term and long-term.
6. Space and structure
7. Insider and outsider.

1. Dreaming and realism. When I'm really busy, getting in late at night and getting up early in the morning to press on with what needs to be done, I stop dreaming while I sleep – or at the very least, stop remembering what I dream. What occupies me as I drop off and if I wake in the night, is the reality of what the past day has brought and what lies ahead of me in the next day. But then I miss out on the different perspectives that emerge in dreams (I tend to dream a lot!) and those odd new takes on events.

There is a role for dreaming dreams – of the fantastic and the impossible – of all the things that might yet be. But this needs to be held in balance with the realities of what's possible if it's not just to remain a dream. And if the realities are the only factors which are present, they can put an end to dreaming.

One of the questions that I hear frequently asked as I go around our churches is 'where are the young people?' Sometimes people go on to say, well we've lost teenagers, they just aren't interested in coming to church.

In one of our churches, the minister didn't believe that this was the case. They already had Boys Brigades and Girls Brigades, but not a strong link with the Sunday congregation. He felt that the next step was to open a youth group on a Friday evening – a group specifically aimed at teenagers. He recruited and trained leaders to help, and so they began. After several weeks the numbers started growing. They eventually reached 70 every Friday evening and were still growing. At this point there was an interesting twist to the dream becoming a reality. They had to cap the numbers and start excluding young people, because they had neither sufficient space nor sufficient leaders. The Youth Group has led on to a youth band, and young people involved in worship, both on Sunday mornings and evenings.

The minister had a dream and he had realism about what it would take to fulfil it and realism about the point at which it might have got out of hand.

The first marks of visionary leadership to be held in balance are dreaming and realism

2. The 2nd marks of visionary leadership are creativity and conflict.

On the rare occasions I go shopping for clothes, Marks and Spencer's is one of my first ports of call. So a few years ago, when there was all the talk of them being over the hill and no longer what people were looking for, I was a little dismayed. I had begun to have my own doubts. Every time for several years that I wanted to buy a blouse, I couldn't get one that buttoned up to the neck. They only had one kind of design, low cut and buttons starting half way down. It felt like they were stuck in a rut.

And then they brought in Stuart Rose. And gradually, all sorts of things started to happen – and the range of clothing has been transformed with a huge variety of possibilities.

But along the way, there were the struggles with external forces in terms of the issues of take over bids. And there were the conflicts with those inside, leading to staff turnover.

Being creative, developing new initiatives, being prepared to go in new directions, involved a certain amount of conflict along the way. What struck me was the way in which Stuart Rose stuck to his vision. He didn't let the conflicts deter him from the main goal.

The Christian faith is rooted in the creativity of God – a creativity that brought an immensely diverse creation into being, a creativity that acted in an unexpected way to offer his son, Jesus Christ, to offer new life to the world, and a creativity that in the power of the Holy Spirit offered gifts to God's people. This creativity has at its heart the conflict of the cross, and the conflict with those who found the way of the cross too difficult to contemplate.

The church is the place for the unleashing of creativity, in terms of seeing new possibilities, and in terms of releasing people to exercise gifts. But sometimes caution at the possibility of the conflict that can come in the wake of creativity means that creativity is diminished.

Visionary leadership happens in the holding together of creativity and conflict.

3. The third marks of visionary leadership are freedom and responsibility.

In the United Reformed church we've recently been going through a period of re-organisation. I was interested in the discussions about this within the Synod to hear two different views being expressed. On the one hand, people were saying 'why can't they just tell us what to do'. (which is unusual from the

dissenting tradition from I come!) On the other hand, people were saying 'we haven't been consulted enough, we need more time for discussion.' It culminated at one of our West Midlands Synod, when we had an impassioned plea from one minister saying that we need to refer the whole matter back, followed by an even more impassioned plea from another saying that we'd spent far too long on discussing it already. It was the latter view that won the day.

Leadership is about getting the balance between people having freedom to make decisions for themselves and people having a sense of responsibility that their decisions are not just for themselves but involve others.

4. Following on from this, the fourth pair of balances is affirmation and appraisal.

Appraisal can feel like one of those tricky topics that everyone agrees should happen, as long as it happens to someone else. This is often because people feel fearful they will be criticised or judged or found wanting. And yet good appraisal can help both the individual and the church to be more fruitful. It centres on the role played by affirmation.

It's a particular interesting area for the church in terms of the voluntary culture in which we live. Should not just the minister, but also the organist and the flower lady and the church warden be appraised?

I used to work in Milton Keynes at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone, a five-way LEP involving Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Methodist and members of the United Reformed Church. We had a paid staff of around 13 full and part-time and around 150 volunteers. It was a really interesting issue as to whether we both appraised and affirmed the volunteers. The tension was between being too critical and them leaving, or not saying anything and having the public upset.

Effective leadership, which takes people along, needs to be attentive to both affirmation and appraisal.

5. The fifth pair of balances is short-term and long-term.

Visionary leadership needs to have clear the big picture, the long term goal, the eternal perspective. It's an area in which the church can give a helpful counter-balance to some of the short-termism that afflicts our society e.g. in those companies for whom the end of year figures are all that matters, rather than the long term goal of investing for the future.

However, if we think only of the long-term, we can indeed in that old phrase 'become so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use'.

One initiative we've taken in the West Midlands Synod in terms of the structural re-organisation that is going on, is for the Synod officers to visit all of our churches, over the period between Easter and summer in 2007. In September we're on target to have visited all but about 15 of our 140 churches. We felt that, as well as saying that the re-structuring is going to take a while to work through, we need to be encouraging our churches and to be putting before them the bigger picture of the vision that underlies the structure. It's been a hectic period for the Synod officers, but my hope is that it's laid the foundation in the short-term for what we're seeking in the long term.

Visionary leadership works on balancing the short-term and the long-term aims.

6. The sixth pair of balances is space and structure, both personally and organisationally.

One aspect of our society that has been much written about is stress. More people are more stressed than they have ever been, so recent reports say. Stress has gone beyond the point where it is a necessary motivator for action. It has become overwhelming and is causing people to take more time off work.

Not surprisingly, as we aren't immune from the society in which we live, stress creeps into the church.

More of the clergy are having time off because of stress; members of congregations are having to balance busy working lives, looking after family – whether the younger or the older generation, and playing their part in the a church which can be struggling with declining numbers or buildings in need of repair.

There needs to be a balance between space and structure. Space involves time for God – in prayer and worship and contemplation and conversation – in both solitary and shared activities. Structure involves factoring in the time need for space alongside the time needed for all the other demands in life. Being attentive to structure, whether personally or organisationally can also mean being able to recognise and say no to the things that are too much rather than trying to juggle everything at once.

7. The seventh and final in my list, is insider and outsider.

Visionary leadership is attentive to balancing the contribution of the insider and the outsider.

I've worked previously for twenty years in LEP's. One aspect of this that struck me was the way in which each tradition would carry as an implicit understanding the thought which ran along the following lines 'ecumenism is a good thing, it's something we should be involved in, and it will all work well - as long as everyone else becomes like us'!

There are times when in the life of a congregation, a newcomer appears and it feels like the same thing is happening. They're given a warm welcome, but there's a hidden sub-text – 'you'll be OK here as long as you become like us'.

Affirming the existing life of the church while being open to the new possibilities that the outside brings releases visionary leadership.

In the United Reformed Church nationally we have a particular concern for being multi-cultural (something that's running into disfavour at present). When we looked for someone to take this area of work forward for us, we recruited a person from Tonga. She's lively and gifted and has brought a whole new perspective to our church. Unsurprisingly, she's also brought some angst and a certain amount of challenge. But she's achieved for us in a few years something that might have been difficult for someone who was already part of us to do.

Being a visionary leader can mean in itself being an outsider. It does mean being attentive to the contribution of the outsider.

I've mentioned seven pairs of balances that make up visionary leadership.

I want to finish by mentioning briefly five factors that cut against visionary leadership.

1. Only being able to look backward – when memories hold us in the past rather than release us for the future.
2. only being able to look inward – I've known churches that close because they refuse to look outwards – to their communities, the churches of other traditions, to the wider church of their own tradition
3. a lack of expectation about what might be possible – 'we've tried this before and it didn't work then'
4. only seeing the negative – and decline in the church can breed negativity – by the ordained of the lay or by the lay of the ordained, by the congregation of the world, by the world of the church
5. panic – and rushing into action without thinking what kind of action

Do we make mountains out of molehills or are we inspired by the far peak?

The Mount of Transfiguration was the place of encounter with God. Yet the disciples were fearful, wanted to do the wrong thing and went down the mountain to a conflict.

Visionary leadership in the church needs perseverance and commitment, and above all that sense of the God who sustains and supports and challenges and whose son Jesus Christ died to make new life possible.

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