

On the Long Haul



Arrow Articles: these short articles aim to address common leadership issues with questions to aid reflection. The issues raised may form part of your conversation with your mentor or within your peer cell. **On the Long Haul** is adapted from a book by James Lawrence called *Growing Leaders* (BRF/CPAS April 2004) and considers the challenge of personal development in the leader as they transition into their thirties and forties, and includes a section on the common reasons for people leaving ministry.

Leadership today

Christian leadership can be tough. It is particularly tough at this time of change and transition within society and church, when many leaders are unsure of their role and feel inadequately trained to fulfil it. Reports such as *Affirmation and Accountability*, and *Leaders Under Pressure* highlight some of the current pressures experienced by church leaders.

- 3 in 10 have felt for a prolonged period like leaving Christian service
- 3 in 10 feel their family suffers because of their work
- 4 in 10 feel pressured by inadequate income
- Only 2 in 10 have received training in management or team building
- 7 in 10 church leaders feel heavily overworked
- 200 church leaders miss Sunday activities each week as a result of stress-related illnesses
- 1,500 church leaders quit over a ten-year period

Under these pressures it is easy to stagnate, opt out, or withdraw into what is familiar. If we are to see a growing all-age church, growing more leaders of every age, we will need more *growing* leaders, growing through the pressures and demands of leadership today. Without this, few people will catch a vision for leadership that inspires them to take up leadership responsibility within the Christian community, and few leaders

will proactively seek out others to grow in leadership.

The challenge

Those in the mid life years face a common issue in leadership: how to transition the middle years well. There is a well trodden path that many follow.

Gifted individuals in their twenties and thirties are often 'recognised' and find themselves in significant leadership positions by their mid-thirties. The energy of youth, the excitement of ministry, the motivation of high ideals and the encouragement of others are an intoxicating combination. Consequently, they invest little time and energy in corresponding character development to match the pace of their gift development and increased responsibilities. If this situation continues through their late thirties and on to their forties, they are likely to encounter well documented struggles. If these struggles aren't handled well they may prevent the person from continuing to grow in their leadership and reaching a point of maximum effectiveness in their fifties.

When I first came across this issue it made sense of two things in my own life. First my own experience as a thirty six year old leader who was just becoming aware of a range of questions that I had about my own development as a leader. Most of these things were vague and peripheral but I could sense that if I didn't take time to work out what was

going on I could easily fall victim to one of the scenarios outlined below. Second, it made sense of my experience of talking with leaders in their fifties and sixties, many of whom described their experience of leadership in terms of one of the scenarios below, even if they didn't articulate it using this terminology. The classic struggles are with:

Burn out

Busyness, over-commitment, and pressure take their inevitable toll. Often driven by either the external demands of success or the internal expectations to please, the leader can be fooled by ongoing fruitfulness. Emotional, physical, relational and spiritual depletion eventually lead to burn out, a clinical condition with a long and hard road to recovery.

Drop out

Unfulfilled dreams, discouragement and disillusionment lead either to the person literally leaving their area of 'ministry' to engage in a different occupation, or to people continuing in their ministry role but with little heart or energy for it, often finding personal fulfilment in a peripheral area of ministry that eventually becomes central. I recently met a church leader with responsibility for several churches, who actually spent most of his time developing his psychotherapy practice. Statistically this person was still a church leader, in reality they had long given up on that as their ministry.

Here are reasons given by people who've dropped out of ministry:

- Disappointment with ministry – the experience and the expectation do not match.
- Inter personal conflicts – remain unresolved.
- Senior leaders – prove to be a disappointment.
- Neglect ‘inner life’ growth – pressure to perform and achieve leads to little or no attention given to inner life.
- Preparation and training – inadequate for the actual job, or not continued beyond initial input so that new skills aren’t acquired as responsibilities increase or change.
- Leadership skills – failure to master the basics of leadership.
- Calling – lack of clarity about what they should be doing.

Level out

The person reaches a plateau, and for whatever reason stops growing as a leader. This may be due to an inability to resolve certain life issues and questions, circumstances preventing them from moving on, a loss of faith, or a number of other factors. They continue in ministry, but plateau. This is often subconscious, and the sense of dis-ease is hard to identify and diagnose.

Fall out

Fuelled by unmet emotional needs and over busyness, the leader succumbs to escapist sin in a desire to meet the increasing sense of hollowness within. Money, sex, power, and habitual substance abuse are the classic fallouts. Sometimes such activities are exposed for all to see, and the person leaves leadership in a blaze of destructive press coverage. Often they remain undiscovered, hidden behind the well-polished public image, but no less devastating in their impact as the leader grapples with the increasing divide between who they are in public and who they are in private.

Spread out

With a growing uncertainty about the focus of ministry, the leader dabbles in an ever widening array of activities. Often gifted in many areas s/he may be competent for most of the tasks,

but the lack of focus leaves a rising sense of dissatisfaction. Rather than following a path to greater clarity about God’s calling on their life as they enter their fifties, they spread themselves ever more thinly.

Sell out

The constant demands and pressures of church life lead the leader to be worn down, and eventually compromise their previously held convictions and dreams. They opt for the easy life, the easy road, the easy job. In some instances an unspoken agreement is made, where a silent agreement is reached between those led and their leader - ‘meet some of our expectations and we’ll go quiet on the others.’ Compromise is quick to follow, often leading to disillusionment.

Inevitably the list above is far too neat; the various scenarios are often interlinked in one person’s life, creating a complex web of concerns fuelled both by unresolved character issues and life circumstances. But they are descriptive of the symptoms of some of the mid life struggles.

Growing leadership involves helping mid life leaders through these transitions, with a particular focus on character and call issues. Today I spoke on the phone with a thirty seven year old minister. ‘James, I don’t know how I am going to survive. I am working twelve to fourteen hour days, I don’t see my family enough, and I feel constantly on the edge of burn out. I don’t feel trained for the job I do and I don’t know where to get help. I’m wearing so many hats. The church is growing, exciting things are happening, but if I look down the road of the next thirty years I know I am not going to make it.’

If this was a one off, it would be sad, but I’ve heard similar stories too many times. Growing leadership must include getting behind the skills based issues to the more fundamental ones of character and call.

The challenge for the church is to invest in mid-life leaders, to prevent them from succumbing to one of the classic problems of leadership in mid

life, and for such leaders to widen their vision to become leaders for the long haul.

Quote unquote

‘In this climate of secularisation, Christian leaders feel less and less relevant and more and more marginal. Many begin to wonder why they should stay in the ministry. Often they leave, develop a new competency, and join their contemporaries in their attempts to make relevant contributions to a better world.’

Henri Nouwen

Resources

See Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, Tyndale 1992, chapter 17 for an excellent analysis of the particular pressures upon ministers. See also Yvonne Warren, *The Cracked Pot*, Kevin Mayhew 2002. Statistics are taken from two reports:

- Carl Lee and Sarah Horsman, *Affirmation and Accountability*, The Society of Mary and Martha
- Colin Buckland and John Earwicker, *Leaders Under Pressure*, on behalf of the Evangelical Alliance, the Care for Pastors Network, Care for the Family, the Claybury Trust, CWR and InterHealth. See the Evangelical Alliance website for a helpful summary of their findings. www.eauk.org/contentmanager/content/careforpastors/research.cfm

For reflection

What would lead you to leave the work you’re currently doing?

How will you face this issue?

How will you continue to grow in your leadership gifts and responsibilities?

What is most likely to hinder your growth?