

## Hit the Ground Kneeling: seeing leadership differently, Stephen Cottrell (CHP, 2008)

I count it among the many privileges of my ministry to have worked for a time alongside the author of this book, on a small committee. I so much benefited from his wisdom, his creativity, his rootedness in God and his slightly mischievous sense of humour.

All these gifts are on display in *Hit the Ground Kneeling*. It's a short book – less than 100 short pages; you can read it in under an hour. It does not say much that is new. But if it's simple, it's far from simplistic, and it brings together in a very readable way a collection of insights about leadership which I find profoundly refreshing, especially coming from a bishop!

The title hints at the focus of the book, which is a series of axioms or proverbs which Cottrell turns on their head. In a series of short chapters, he shows how letting the grass grow under your feet is a good thing, stating the obvious is a good thing, lots of cooks is a good thing, counting your chickens is a good thing, reinventing the wheel is – good for morale and for productivity!

At the heart of the book is the challenge to be contemplative rather than hurried: 'creativity is usually cultivated in the soil of contemplation. The ability to act decisively (and correctly!) often arises from a well of stillness.' When people hit the ground running, they appear busy and important. But 'the leader is sometimes the person who dares to do nothing.'

Two stories I particularly liked. One is of a church where the most regular church activities which involved the community were jumble sales, but where the author had managed to challenge the congregation about what this said to outsiders. Slowly the church changed focus, and eventually acquired two highly symbolic items, a notice board and a font. I found it profoundly encouraging that this was a church where Cottrell went as priest in charge. Too many stories in leadership books are about large churches and 'successful' ministries. And here is one bishop who does know about the challenges of the 'coal face'.

The second story is about big vision ('counting chickens'): how Jamie Oliver went about fulfilling his vision of transforming school dinners by both having an impossibly big vision, *and* working at the detail of making it happen. What Jamie did, Cottrell suggests, was to have 'one hand on the tiller and another in the hands of those who would go on to lead others', an eye both to vision and to developing gifts and skills in others.

The book is refreshingly free from gender bias. Language and illustrations are inclusive, and illustrations are drawn from a variety of contexts, from family life and parenting to the corporate world, from school sports teams to small businesses.

After exploring the things leaders *do*, Cottrell finally considers the question of *being*. Is a leader to be thick-skinned, as many people advise? Detachment is important, but leaders need to be able to feel the pain of those they lead, and maintain a heart of flesh. I've a feeling that more leadership of the kind Cottrell promotes would make the Church a better place. A book well worth reading and pondering.