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## maintaining relationship and direction in leadership

The role of an archdeacon involves oversight. Often that means dealing with the difficult stuff. Yet whether one is doing strategic planning for the future shape of mission and ministry or dealing with the leaking church roof or the problem with the accounts, it is always about relating to people and discerning where God is leading.

I've discovered a number of things that have helped me remain faithful to both people and the task in leadership.

### A heart that is fleshy

When I became an archdeacon I remember thinking that I'd need to toughen up, but then I heard God say that what I actually needed was a fleshy heart:

'A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'  
Ezekiel 36:26

Fleshy hearts love, and fleshy hearts experience pain and lament as well as joy.

The Church and the world don't need leaders who are tough. We need leaders who are committed to human 'being' (pun fully intended) and staying in relationship with people even in places of difference. That is about being resilient, which is very different from being tough.

'God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life '(John 3:16): We are created in the image of God who has relationship and purpose at his heart. The

challenge for me as a leader is ensuring I hold both relationship and task together. That means daring to have the difficult conversations and pose a challenge. It also means being committed to listening to people and daring to see and hear differently whilst not being constantly diverted and swayed by the last person who spoke to me.

### Shoes to walk in

I've learnt that I need my shoes to walk a clear path and not lose my nerve (and support bishops and others in not losing theirs!); whilst trying to ensure that there's relationship with and between those I lead.

I wonder if you've ever looked around at the different shoes people are wearing. If I'm a bit bored at a meeting or sitting on the underground, I find myself looking at what people are wearing on their feet and wondering why they chose those particular shoes or boots that day.

As an archdeacon I have learnt how important it is to try and imagine myself in other people's shoes and see things from their perspective.



Indeed that word appears ever more frequent in my vocabulary: for example 'Your perspective is very important and if Carol was here she'd have a different perspective' or 'From my perspective...'

I've also learnt how helpful it is to develop the art of curiosity rather than defence. Being curious about someone else's footwear is far more creative than simply pronouncing to everyone why you're wearing what you've chosen. Being curious about the views of others can often unlock a situation; for example 'I wonder why you think X' or 'I'm curious as to why you reacted like that to Y'. This is often far more effective than immediately justifying one's own decision in the light of opposition. Thus, as an archdeacon I've learnt to try and incorporate a little more 'wondering' into my leadership style.

Yet none of this is about procrastination or losing my sense of direction as leader or being deflected off task. Instead it is about keeping a fleshy heart as I seek to better understand the shoes others are walking in as I pursue the direction of travel in my own shoes. Part of that is being committed to ongoing discovery about who I am and how I'm comfortable in the shoes I've chosen. That's vital if I'm going to live resilient servant leadership.

### **A towel to wear**

The day I paused at John 3:13 was a day of new insight:

We are told that Jesus wrapped the towel around himself only after we are told that Jesus knew 'that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God'... Thus when Jesus knelt at his disciples' feet and took on the task of a slave, Jesus was not being a doormat. Jesus knew who he was. Jesus knew the Father's love. Jesus was sure of his calling.

Continual growth in self-awareness and a commitment to prayerful reflection with God is vital if I am to become the leader God has called me to be. There's nothing quite like an appointment in the diary with a work consultant

or spiritual director to ensure that I keep that in focus.

### **And so to communication**

In all of this I have learnt that a commitment to good communication and clear process are important.

It's not always straightforward making the decision about when and how to disseminate information and invite dialogue with the right people at the right time, because things often emerge organically and that's usually messy. However, I think it's important to check that I'm not unwittingly withholding information and rationale from people but rather that others are kept informed of what's going on and why. It builds trust and hopefully reduces fear and suspicion but it does mean that one has to keep a careful eye on process.

Once again it's about trying to stand in someone else's shoes and look at things from their perspective: which bit of the picture should they see but can't because I've failed to show them?

### **And finally ...**

Nurturing a fleshy heart, being aware of the shoes others are wearing, wrapping a towel, understanding and being committed to good communication and process can all be emotionally and mentally demanding. If one is to be resilient then the calm and gently confident exterior are very important.

I'd lie if I say I always achieve it, yet I have learnt that despite whatever is going on internally, the outward absence of anxiety is vital if one is to offer leadership amidst diversity where relationship is valued and yet in which one remains committed to fulfilling the task and maintaining direction. That can only grow from a place of daily dependence on God and knowing that we are God's people and not God (Psalm 100).

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### **For reflection**

- Most of us have a tendency towards either people or task. Which do you default to under pressure?
- What is the impact of this on those you lead?
- What would help you to adjust your leadership to maintain a healthy balance of people and task?

