

June 2014

maintaining the spiritual life

'Leadership is a lonely place' said the head teacher of a large school to me recently. They were reflecting on the perceived isolation that comes with heavy responsibility, the need to take decisions, and the task of holding others to account. In ministry, leadership can be similarly isolating and sometimes more so, because of the fuzziness surrounding work/life boundaries. All this can take its toll on a leader's spiritual life.

All too often a leader who fronts the vision forming, strategy planning and delivery management of a church can actually in private admit to feeling spiritually dry, emotionally used up and physically drained. This is not a good place to be! So what principles can form a robust and positive development of the spiritual life throughout a lifetime of service? Here are a few guides.

Disciple

Daily recalling a decision to follow Christ and live a life following his example is fundamental to the Christian life. The good shepherd should be ever before us. This is an ongoing decision that



requires the Holy Spirit's lead. To go on being filled with the Holy Spirit is an active command that never fades. Being a disciple takes intentional effort just like any relationship and we need to be realistic about the time we actually devote to spiritual growth. It so easily gets squeezed out and, before we know what has happened, we are spiritually 'running on empty' simply because we have not taken time to properly fill the tank! Diary realistic and balanced space for your spiritual life and give yourself permission to do so.

Read

Private devotional reading often falls by the wayside, particularly of the Scriptures. Plan a reading programme each quarter and try and stick to it. Use notes, a commentary, or a website to guide your devotions and recognise the best time of the day for you to do this. Do it away from your normal workspace and guard it from interruptions like the smartphone. Archbishop Michael Ramsay tried to set aside the hour before lunch most weekdays for devotional reading. His is a good example to follow.

Pray

It is obvious, but we need to pray and set time aside for it. We also need to be self-aware about how we best pray. Some introverts actually pray better with other people than on their own, so knowing what helps us pray and what our temperament is like can really be useful.

There are lots of models for devotional prayer. Whether we write and use a journal for prayer, or whether we say the daily offices with committed discipline, each model has its positives and can be useful at different stages of



life. Whatever the model you use, make prayer happen and be creative and enjoy it.

Prayer is ultimately about relationship and cannot be forced, but it usually requires a bit of personal self-discipline and it does need time. It is always good to make prayer part of our life and conversation with others so that we can encourage them with answered prayers and the knowledge that we do pray for them.

Retreat

Every turn of the year, or start of the academic one, look out for, and diary, a three or four day retreat away from home. You might join an organised event, or take a privately guided retreat, or just get away to focus on prayer and study. Unless it is organised it won't happen! Be creative and try new things.

In addition think of planning a quiet day each term, or month, where you can step back, reflect and take time to think and pray. It is better to step away from your normal routine and place of work to do this.

The retreat association journal is a good guide to what retreats are available and there is a good website at www.retreats.org.uk. Often you can access funds from a diocese, or the church, to pay for a retreat so cost is not a drain on personal finances.

Learn

Most leaders are used to ongoing training in the modern age. Life-long learning is an accepted part of our personal development and we should have the grace and humility to refresh our knowledge even when we think we know the subject already. There is always something new to learn, or a fresh perspective to hear, so regard training as a development opportunity for your spiritual life and readily take part in it.

New things open our horizons to new possibilities so make sure, like with a retreat, you

actively plan for training and make it part of your annual cycle.

Journey

Consider having a spiritual soul friend, advisor, director, or prayer partner (there are various terms) that you meet with two or three times a year. This should be more than a cosy chat! It is space to allow you to talk about and reflect on your spiritual journey and be challenged.

Most spiritual accompaniers will say of clergy that it is incredibly difficult to get them off the subject of work and onto the subject of their own spiritual journey! This is because identity is so caught up with work that most clergy neglect the self-care they need to exercise over their spiritual journey. The good news is they at least take the time to talk with someone! Most dioceses now have a system for putting leaders in touch with those trained to provide spiritual accompaniment. If you have not done so why not try taking part in such a scheme.

Support

Recognise that there are times when life events are challenging and we will feel spiritually dry. There are seasons when phases of life (for example a new marriage, or illness, or retirement looming) dictate adjustments to our routine and the way we think about our spiritual life. It is important that we go with the natural flow and listen to our bodies and circumstances.

Our spiritual life is organic and changes with time. Receiving advice and support at particular times of stress is very important. Forming that small network of two or three trusted advisers is really useful for such times and will pay dividends spiritually.

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For reflection

- Is there one action you can take today which might refresh your spiritual journey?
- Who is/are your trusted advisor/s spiritually? When did you last review, or make a change to these relationships, and how useful are they now? (Be honest!)

