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## 'Abide in me.'

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for those of us in leadership is to maintain our followership of Jesus. With all the pressures and demands of leadership life, it is too easy to let our own relationship with Christ slip.

John 15 offers us some important insights into how the master gardener is at work to help us abide in Christ.

### Relationship

We may be a Bishop, Vicar, youth leader or PCC member and feel a real sense of 'call' to that position and have known God's blessing, but it is our relationship with the Jesus that forms the basis of who we are.

The phrase 'in Christ' has come to mean so much to me as I follow Jesus Christ each day and have done so since I was aged 13. We cannot become 'nostalgic' as leaders, thinking that past experiences will sustain us. They are part of our discipleship story but we must always look for personal prime time with the Lord in order that he may speak into our lives as well as the routine of our ministry. We have to choose to do some abiding, by ordering our lives around those things that help us keep connected to the vine.

### Pruning

When I was ordained I moved into the curate's house in Portadown, County Armagh to a semi-detached house with a garden at the back and front. I had always lived at home or in student accommodation, so for the first time in my life I had to think about looking after a garden.

In the small front garden there were rose bushes which were in full bloom with many beautiful colours. By autumn the blooms had wilted and looked pathetic. I was speaking to my neighbour about how to care for the rose bushes.

David made it sound so simple. I had to be ruthless and prune the rose bushes almost back to their stumps. I was unsure, but when the weather was mild I did as he directed. I then waited and watched. After some months the roses bloomed. Pruning brought life.



When Jesus speaks about 'pruning' in John 15 he is speaking of those who are in a relationship with him. Pruning occurs so that we may continue to bear fruit for the master. It can seem severe cutting off the old buds and cutting back the stems that are broken or withered, but it is essential in order that the rose bush is productive and gives life.

- Pruning may involve giving up personal dreams and that of our family in order to realise the opportunities for service in the name of Christ.
- Pruning may mean the challenge to take stock at the beginning of a new year or season as to how things are going and be honest and frank in the assessment. When things are going well and we feel the blessing

of the Lord there is much to celebrate, but we must always search and discern what the Lord requires in our ministry.

- Pruning may mean the need to be honest and self-critical when things aren't going so well. None of us find it easy when the Lord searches our hearts, when we sit down and evaluate our walk with him or our ministry, when something has gone wrong and we have sinned. Repentance, forgiveness and healing may be part of that pruning process.
- Pruning may be corporate. In a leadership team it can be difficult and cause tensions, but it has to be faced in order to bring new life. Taking a courageous decision to cease an area of ministry and begin a new focus may not be popular, but it is often necessary..
- Another aspect of 'pruning' has been more personal: those times when I have lost focus, but not my faith. Many things have contributed to this, but in particular the strain of pastoral care and the responsibilities of leading a large parish in changing social times. It has been personally painful when God has called me to refine my focus, and brought about much soul searching. But knowing God's pruning is a part of helping me to 'abide in Christ' has renewed and strengthened me in my walk with the Lord and my ministry, along with the love, support and encouragement of my wife, family, colleagues and close friends.

### Bearing fruit

I remember as a teenager being able to pick apples from trees in a nearby orchard and enjoy them in late summer. However, when I went to that same orchard in winter, there were no apples!

The call to bear fruit by Jesus isn't just when it takes our fancy. Each day is a 'season' to bear fruit for the Lord. It is a call to all believers which

starts with our relationship with him, knowing his grace and Spirit working in our lives. We hear so much today about our faith being 'compartmentalised' or 'private', yet this is not what Jesus speaks of.

Fruit does not appear without the right weather conditions, as well as wisdom and hard work by the farmer. The process of bearing fruit happens at many levels. But the good news is that those who abide in Christ will bear fruit, and that fruit will look different for each part of the vine. God has gifted us as leaders with different personalities and giftings to be an expression of his love in a needy world. We cooperate with the farmer as he works in us to 'bear much fruit' (John 15:8) that will be a blessing to others.

Finally, from the imagery of the vine in John 15 I believe there is also the collective bearing of fruit as God's people share their oneness in Christ and minister in his name in their local community. Many branches make up a vine and when we abide together in Christ, God is glorified.

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### For reflection

- What is helping you deepen your relationship with God at this time?
- What do you need to 'prune' in order to give life to your relationship with the Lord and in your ministry?
- If issues such as division, negativity and unclear goals hamper the Church in bearing fruit, what can be done to address these issues?

