

# ‘MY PEOPLE ARE TOO BUSY, I DON’T LIKE TO ASK THEM TO DO THINGS’

BY GRAHAM ARCHER

This is not an isolated quote. I have heard it on several occasions and suspect that there are a number of reasons why we hear ourselves say it. At one level it sounds caring and thoughtful, but blanket statements like these are rarely accurate and potentially play into the previous cry from the coalface that we profiled i.e. the tendency to control. Let us cut the statement into some bite-sized chunks and chew over the delegation dilemma. How do we invite people into ‘partnership in the gospel’ without simply being one more demand on already busy people?

## 1. MY PEOPLE?

Rather like the personal possessive phrases ‘my curate’ or ‘my ministry’, ‘my congregation’ or ‘my people’ might be useful shorthand, but theologically deflects us from the spiritual reality of ownership. ‘(Christ) is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy’ (Colossians 1).

The Church of England ordination service has a really lovely phrase to underline this.

Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ’s own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people.

As leadership involves stewarding people that belong to God, before we decide whether they can or can’t do something, we need to remember their vocation. When we think that Arthur might make a valuable contribution to the mission committee, we are asking him to consider before God what he is called to do, and though we might acknowledge that he is clearly already busy, it is between him and God to decide yes or no.

## 2. TOO BUSY?

Who is too busy? Clearly there are many busy people in the world, and a significant number are busy writing books on busyness, but let’s just recognise that although Stephen Cherry defines busyness as an illness, we aren’t all infected with it in the same way. Just last week a church leader in Norfolk told me of a small group of older men who had very little else in life



since they had retired, who loved ‘tinkering around on church things’.

Sometimes it is us that are too busy and we project that onto others. I once heard a cardigan described as an item of clothing that children wear when their mums are cold. When we decide that others are busy from a place of personally feeling overwhelmed, we forget that a significant number of people are busy, but managing their resources well. The right kind of opportunity in church can be quite refreshing if it is tuned to our passions and expertise. Recently I received an apologetic email from one of the leaders in my church (I have no formal role there) asking if I might help with the music, even though they know I am very busy. I absolutely love helping with the music, I find it really refreshing.

Sometimes busyness is genuinely a problem in the lives of people who attend our churches and this cannot simply be addressed by cutting them out of opportunities to serve their brothers and sisters. Alongside teaching on managing stress and pastoral support for those who are fighting for their career and family we can offer an honest conversation which says, ‘I don’t want to add to your burdens, but are there ways that you would like to serve in your church, that could fit your current mad lifestyle?’ In one of my parishes, I had a number of professors who would offer to wash up occasionally on an Alpha course. It was for them a way of serving and feeling connected without another regular and time-consuming demand.

### 3. I DON’T LIKE TO ASK...

Six years after I was ordained, some local churches organised some training on delegation. I found it fascinating. It was a concept I had never really come across as a jobbing scientist, but in ordained ministry I realised that my instinctive approach to delegation sometimes fell into three big traps:

- Trap number one was to ask people to help because I can’t manage it all. This trait in me was fed by an unhealthy undercurrent of aspirational omnicompetence. This kind of delegation leads to guilt, because really I should be able to cope and when I am managing better, I might take the role back again.
- Trap number two was to ask people to help because I don’t want to do it. The unhelpful consequence of this kind of delegation I realised was a distancing myself from it for fear of it coming back to me.
- Trap number three was to assume that in some cases, delegation meant it was no longer my responsibility and I could now ignore that area of the church’s life.

Yes, like many church leaders, most of my best learning has come from my worst mistakes!

I know of one young man who upon joining a large pharmaceutical company was enrolled on a course on delegation which was one day a week for SIX months. Asking well is an art, and there are many websites that will offer helpful advice on good delegation. The following seven tips are usually somewhere in the mix:

1. Know what you can’t delegate and what you can. Overall vision for the thing that you lead, defining and modelling the culture of the way things are done, and the criteria for participation are usually best not delegated, but there are many things that can be.
2. Ask in a way that allows someone the time to pray and the opportunity to say no without recrimination or guilt.
3. Ask in a way that makes clear why you are asking them. For example, ‘I’ve noticed that you have a real affinity with young people / passion for intercession / good organisation skills...’



4. Be clear on what is being asked and if possible say what the timescale, expectations and final aim of their involvement will look like.
5. Be really clear about what authority is being given and what accountability is expected. For example, 'in order to make this happen the church council has set aside £500 and at our monthly meetings we will review progress and expenditure'.
6. Match the support to the needs of the person you are asking. If you are asking someone to do something well within their competency, then direction and encouragement are appropriate, but if you are asking someone to rise to a challenge that will stretch them, then some training or mentoring might be necessary.
7. Be clear about how the thing you are asking will come to an end, for example after the event has taken place, after the money has run out, or when they feel that they have done what was asked.

#### 4. TO DO THINGS

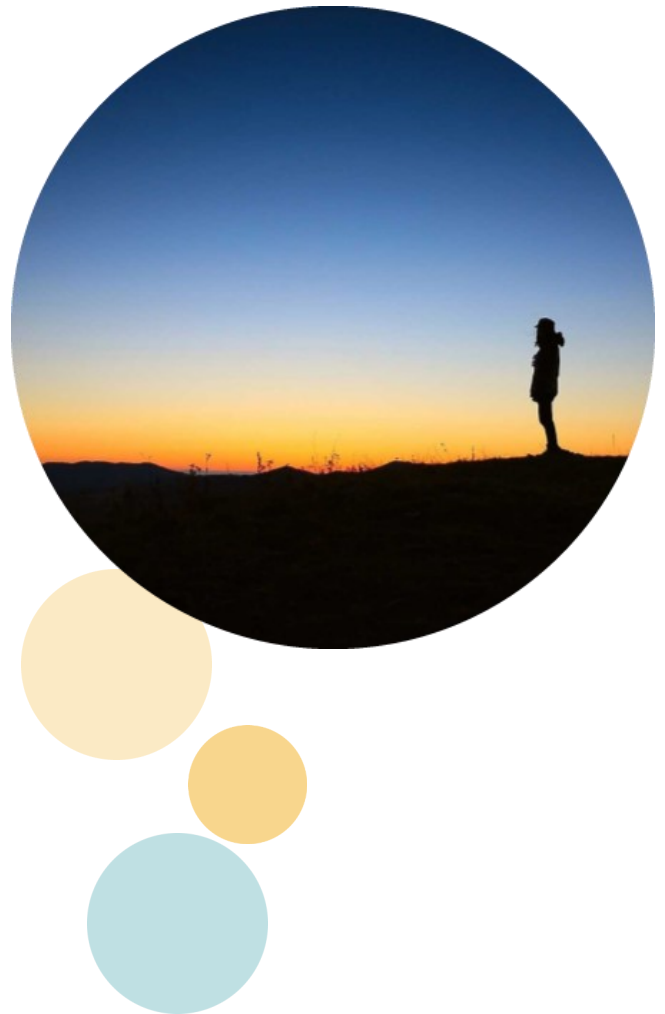
Discipleship begins with the realisation that Christ has done it all and our efforts cannot earn God's love. Stillness before God is possible and eternal rest is part of our inheritance. Our discipleship develops as we work alongside Jesus in all areas of life.

The classic text in Ephesians 2 which reminds us that we are brought alive by grace, enriched by grace and saved by grace lands on verse 10, 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'

I have learnt over the years that the majority of people actually love to be asked to help; it is very affirming to be noticed and approached. Some hate to watch their leaders struggling with things that they could do if only they were asked. Many people don't know how to offer and put themselves forward especially if their leaders appear to want to be in control.

For some of us, the main focus of our discipleship calling might be the frontlines of our work, home or neighbourhood, but the local church was never designed to be a place of passive consumption while the anointed or appointed leader demonstrates their areas of competence and incompetence. It is a body of gifted and interdependent people of all ages with complementary skills and insights. It may be that some of them are pretty busy, but you don't know until you ask.

So ask.



#### FOR REFLECTION:

1. Is our reluctance to ask in any way related to a negative experience in the past e.g. we asked someone and they reacted badly or took something on and made a mess of it?
2. How would you map the busyness profile of your brothers and sisters?
3. Are there some very busy people in your church who need some support, and to be given the opportunity to reduce what they do?