

CAN FRIENDSHIP AND LEADERSHIP MIX?

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WHAT IS THE PLACE OF GENUINE FRIENDSHIP WITHIN THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER? ARE FRIENDS A NECESSITY, A LUXURY, OR AN ADDITIONAL COMPLICATION TO BE CAREFULLY AVOIDED?

In 1995, as a relatively young vicar, I was sent on a 'New Incumbents' training course in a neighbouring diocese. Within this I was told emphatically that church leaders, whilst needing to be friendly to everyone, can't have any personal friends within the parish or church community. Having been ordained we are 'set apart'. Despite my age at the time, I vigorously contested that perspective, possibly not as graciously as I should, arguing that, although there will be some inevitable complexities with friendships for church leaders, friendship is a sign of the kingdom and is a gift that the Lord wants leaders to treasure as much as anyone else. But, sadly, I believe it's a myth that persists. I wonder what your current view is?

JESUS' EXAMPLE

As we read the gospels we see that Jesus personally both wanted and needed close friends. 'He appointed twelve... that they might be with him' (Mark 3:13-15). His first strategic leadership step was to begin building a community of friends. Think of the importance of Bethany for Jesus, spending unhurried time with Lazarus, Martha and Mary, even in the midst of highly pressurised ministry demands. And his desire and need for close friends alongside him at significant moments

like 'The Transfiguration' and in desperation in the 'Garden of Gethsemane'. As part of his distilled final teaching to his disciples, Jesus added further dignity to the value of friendship, 'I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends' (John 15:15).

There are countless other biblical examples of cherished friendships: Ruth and Naomi, Jonathan and David, Paul and Timothy. The great nineteenth century church leader Charles Simeon once commented 'I love to view all my Christian friends as fuel...'



OUR HUMANITY

Andrei Rublev's icon of 'The Trinity' famously portrays love, close community and friendship flowing between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the outset of creation when God declared, 'Let us make humanity in our image...' (Genesis 1:26), we were formed with a legitimate need for loving community and friendship – leaders included! We weren't created for 'loneliness' or to 'travel alone'. It wasn't accidental that Jesus sent out his disciples 'two by two' (Mark 6:7).

Even in the most extreme contexts human fortitude has been strengthened by community and friendships. In reflecting on his years on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela wrote, 'The authorities' greatest mistake was to keep us together, for together our determination was reinforced. We supported each other and gained strength from each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared, and by sharing we multiplied whatever courage we had individually' (Long Walk to Freedom; Little Brown and Co., 1994).

LEADERSHIP CASUALTIES

Leadership casualties often have multiple-layers of causes behind them but, sadly, I've seen too many linked, in part, to a failure to build healthy mutual friendships. Some have over-spiritualised and denied their emotional needs; others have become isolated and overwhelming depression has seeped in; others haven't monitored their pace of life or guarded their heart and ended up falling into affairs; and in others their leadership style has become increasingly autocratic and de-humanising.

Henri Nouwen observed, 'Some leaders opt for power and control because they themselves have never learned to build genuine friendships'.

We all have these vulnerabilities. Genuine friends keep us grounded in our humanity, help us to laugh at ourselves and to take our calling but not ourselves too seriously.

BARRIERS TO GROWING HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS

Two summers ago, I was privileged to lead the Ordination Retreat in the same diocese where I had attended that course twenty-one years before. On this retreat, one of the themes I explored with the Ordinands was the importance of discovering and imbedding rhythms of solitude and authentic community to become fruitful and thriving in ministry. However, we also recognised that for church leaders many of the relationships we inhabit carry a mix of expectations, and genuine friendships in ministry can be complex. So, it's helpful to acknowledge that there can be barriers, whether perceived or real.

Here are five of the potential barriers we identified:

1. **Guilt** Because making those kinds of choices in a local church context can be difficult for a leader and, conceivably, there might be countless other church members or parishioners who would value our friendship.

Often unintentionally too, churches can function unhealthily as 'guilt factories'.

2. **Fear of vulnerability** If as leaders we share deep concerns from our hearts with friends we are hoping to trust, we may fear they won't be honoured or kept confidential.
3. **Concerns about favouritism** This might surface and generate unnecessary jealousies which cause additional problems in church communities.
4. **Pride** Genuine friends can puncture any misguided notions of superiority that can insidiously seep into our hearts as leaders. Too easily, we can become unfamiliar with and perhaps wary of relationships on an equal footing. There is the well-known story of the orphan who often stuck out his tongue at the emperor whenever he passed by. The kid drove the emperor mad. There must 'always be someone to remind you that your crown isn't on straight'.
5. **Time** For most leaders, diaries can easily become over-committed anyway, and the prospect of deepening and widening your circle of friends might seem exhausting.

Some of these barriers might resonate with you and, undoubtedly, you will identify others equally potent.

THE GIFT OF HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS

Of course, each of our needs will differ depending on family contexts and where we might find ourselves on the Introvert/Extrovert spectrum. However, healthy friendships have the potential to be a life-giving 'gift' for all leaders, and it is vital to invest in existing friendships and develop other layers of friendships, in a variety of contexts, rather like concentric circles.

In Gordon MacDonald's thought-provoking book *A Resilient Life* (Nelson, 2004), he focuses in his final section on 'Resilient People Run in the Company of a Happy Few'. Within this, he explores the value of lingering, avoiding the peril of the



solitary life and considers different kinds of friendship. He asks several pertinent questions which can be helpful to reflect on:

- Who shares your interests and plays with you?
- Who coaches you?
- Who stretches your mind?
- Who listens to your dreams and prays for you?
- Who challenges you and will protect you?
- Who laughs with you and shares your tears?
- Who seeks after the Lord with you?

In closing, perhaps the following quotation offers an additional incentive to try and overcome those barriers, pursue authentic community and a widening circle of genuine friendships, 'A good friend is someone who can sit beside you in the stillness and have no immediate plans for your improvement'.



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FOR REFLECTION

1. As a leader, in this season, how would you describe the quality and breadth of your circles of friendship? How will you become more intentional in investing in a deeper and wider circle of friends?
2. What are the primary barriers, internal and external, that inhibit your friendships from flourishing? What steps can you take to overcome or think differently about these barriers?
3. As you read through the questions Gordon MacDonald raises are there any that particularly generate a sense of longing in you? You would love a friendship that would offer that quality. Why not turn that longing to the Lord in prayer?