

DRAMA, CRISES AND MELTDOWN

BY PAUL PERKIN, VICAR, ST MARK'S BATTERSEA RISE

The insurance company slogan 'We won't make a drama into a crisis' is one with which church leaders are familiar in their experience, or at least in their aspiration for ministry. But 'crisis' is the normal experience of everyday church leadership. For most of us it feels as if we lurch from crisis to crisis! Church leadership, and the pastoral oversight that goes with it, has been defined as a 'series of difficult conversations' – and not just conversations, but unforeseen circumstances as well as anticipated events.

So 'crises' are normal, and every church leader has to weather them, almost welcome them, and work through them on a regular, sometimes daily basis. Every morning the wise pastor greets the day with a prayer along the lines of 'Lord, whatever today brings, help me to face it with faith, love, courage, wisdom and patience; bring it on, Lord, and may we deal with it together'.

NORMAL CRISES

What are the 'normal' crises? A marriage in the congregation breaks down. That's a crisis for the family, but has extra dimensions if it's a long-standing member or even leader or staff member. A child suffers a life-changing accident, or is abused. That's a crisis, supremely for the child; but if it's on church premises, or during a church event, or by another church member, the crisis for us as church leader is intensified. A planning application is refused on a key church development project. It's a crisis, compounded if local parishioner pressure or the church's reputation in the community is involved.

A key leader dies in an untimely sudden illness or accident; a senior staff member writes a detailed complaint of their pay and conditions; a social media storm accuses us of homophobia; a member of staff has agreed to 'resign', but is now going to an employment tribunal for constructive dismissal; a senior lay leader is unreliable, or a staff member underperforming. All these are crises.

Our own child or our spouse is ill, physically or with depression; the eldership or PCC argued and are now divided over a key decision and are split down the middle on the way forward; a family leaves the church badly rather than quietly; a neighbouring church leader complains to the bishop about us; an official mentions us disparagingly in a leaked confidential paper; the organist or churchwarden resigns – or won't resign! One of our family has rebelled against the faith and the



Church, and has been cautioned by the police for driving over the limit, or in possession of a substance; the church boiler has broken irreparably; the annual membership or attendance or financial giving has gone down. Crises! And part of senior responsibility is to embrace these without running away from them.

ABNORMAL MELTDOWNS

However if 'crisis' is normal and in many, even if not all cases, unavoidable, what you might call 'meltdown' is abnormal, and every church leader has to avoid and avert this at all costs. Here the best equipment may be our running shoes, and the proper daily prayer is 'Lord, protect me from this, and provide for me a way of escape.'

What does a meltdown look like? The relationship between incumbent and curate breaks down irretrievably, and it has become widely known among the church congregation, with members taking sides in a schism; the PCC has passed a motion brought by the wardens censuring us as vicar, and requesting that we move on; we've succumbed to chemical addiction; it's becoming known by a few that the vicar has an alcohol problem; we've had an inappropriate relationship with a member of the church, or even an affair. All these are meltdown.

We are showing signs of exhaustion or even complete burnout, and it's impairing our performance, causing mistakes and errors of judgment; the bishop or archdeacon has had to be called in for a visitation following allegations of pastoral breakdown between incumbent and congregation; we are secretly addicted to pornography, the police have taken away our laptop, and are examining the hard drive; we are close to mental breakdown, and saying uncharacteristic things in public. These are all examples of meltdown.

We have lost faith in Christ, and are no longer sure what we believe; we have introduced and placed the congregation's trust in a 'spiritual' ministry and its leader, who has been charged and convicted of abuse, and is now in prison; we have paid for sex; we have stopped reading and teaching the Bible, and no longer pray; we have become isolated from all other Christians, and are not in any accountable relationship. These are all meltdown.



SOME STRATEGIES TO HELP

One factor emerges repeatedly in situations where normal crisis develops into abnormal meltdown – that is when the leader succumbs to the twin dangers of secrecy and isolation. Either on their own makes us dangerously vulnerable – the two together are a toxic combination for the church leader. But a few simple strategies, whilst not being foolproof, can at least mitigate some of the dangers.

1. A staff or volunteer team which meets regularly, even daily for those who can, and however briefly, but preferably at the start of the day, has a very different feel to one that meets for an exhausting four-hour business meeting once a week. Church leadership teams cohere on the basis not of administration but of relationship – sharing burdens, celebrating results, encouraging with good news stories, praying and praising together, and shouldering together some of the burdens and the knocks in ministry.
2. Where possible and if there is a staff team, whether they are full-time or part-time, paid or volunteer, consider working together, ideally in an open-plan room. Is it too unpopular to suggest that the vicarage study may be a necessary, secondary, and peripheral refuge for private prayer and personal preparation, but not a primary, central base for church operations? One vicar's study was nick-named 'the castle', an impregnable fortress protected from other people.
3. It is now common practice, certainly a healthy one, that church leaders should not counsel, hear the confessions of, or share the personal problems in private of members of the opposite sex. Intimate revelations in private easily slide into the sexual area, and are inappropriate, and prone to dangerous accusation, whether true or false. Of course some clergy will need to be aware of their vulnerability to sexual misconduct with those of their own gender.
4. A simple analysis of our lifestyle is to record on a template our activities over a typical week or fortnight, by half-hour periods, from the time we get up to the time we go to bed. An accurate record of all our movements and occupation can be both revealing and even tremendously reassuring. This can be analysed according to categories, and shared with staff or churchwardens for their feedback. It will reveal how much time is spent studying and preparing teaching, leading public ministry, praying and reading the Bible privately, doing emails, counselling individuals, leading groups; and of course time spent with family, relaxing, watching TV, sleeping, eating and taking exercise.
5. Church leaders with accountability to one or more others are far less vulnerable than those who have no person or group with whom they can be transparent and candid. While a group of peers in similar positions in other churches may be helpful, they don't actually see the manner, content and fruit of our ministry and even less so in a diocesan annual interview. Even with a group in our own church we can still hide or dissemble. No group is automatically successful without our complete honesty and willingness to self-disclose. One such group finishes by asking each in turn: 'What is the one question you don't want us to ask you?'