

I CAN'T FIND PEOPLE TO HELP

BY CHARLES BURGESS

It is now eight years since we ran the very first year-long diocesan leadership course and I remember well the comment of one participant as we talked about developing others in leadership. His point was that he would long to have people who were 'able, available and stable' who would be willing to help, whom he could invest in. It was a perceptive insight and one that many clergy will identify with.

The Impact of Culture

NAME REALITY

Ageing congregations, a wider societal reluctance to commit to institutions including the Church, competition from other Sunday activities and patchy levels of attendance, all serve to exacerbate the issue. Sometimes, the socio-economic context in the parish, fosters a wider climate of disempowerment and lack of engagement. Arguably – and more contentious – the Church of England over hundreds of years has afforded significant prominence to ordained ministry without a commensurate investment and celebration of lay ministry, whether authorised or not. Thus, the 'power of the collar' or the 'curse of clericalism' are not simply pejorative labels but rather describe a tangible and often powerful driver of a culture which can serve to disengage and undermine confidence in lay members. Any church leader seeking to nurture a more permissive and empowered culture will need to invest a lot of energy in overcoming this mind-set.

CONTROL

Nothing will quench an empowered culture more effectively than the leader who exercises an inappropriately excessive level of control. Superficially the life of the church may feel stable and ordered, but dig a little deeper and in truth things are sterile, bland

and risk averse; creativity is suppressed and, gradually, any sense of expectation and life ebbs away. Almost always the root of this is a character issue and for health to be restored, both to the leader and the church, it's imperative that the leader seeks help to address this trait.

THE SAVIOUR SYNDROME

In these churches virtually everything is done by one or two individuals, often churchwardens, who exercise a



hugely dominant influence over all aspects of the church's life. Superficially it feels like a vicar's dream but in reality, the subliminal message perceived by others is that the commitment bar is set so high, they feel completely ill-equipped, perhaps even intimidated, to get involved. Unless the overall leader addresses this – usually starting with an honest and courageous conversation – then what is being modelled can be a serious turn-off to the involvement of others.

LACK OF SAFETY

Many churchgoers lack the confidence to get involved anyway, but this is exacerbated if the culture doesn't feel a safe place for making mistakes as part of personal development. A church with perfectionist aspirations or a toxic, critical culture or a vocal but influential bully will all deter people from coming forwards.

FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT

Many people will hold back if they sense they are not going to be actively supported; will there be someone they can turn to for help and does the role include a meaningful review point? Or in reality are their concerns reinforced by watching Mary, whom they see struggling week-in, week-out with little active help?

A Practical Response

So what happens when the culture is on the whole healthy and yet still there is a lack of able, stable and available people?

ASKING WHO DO WE HAVE?

A great starting question to ask is who has God given us? Yes it would be wonderful to start a parent and tots group or a messy church, commence an informal service or commit to a new activity within the local community. But, given the resources, including people that exist, is this realistic?

I meet many leaders who feel as though they have the world on their shoulders but sometimes the root of the problems lie in their initiating many different activities and programmes, without counting the personal cost and gaining bottom-up buy-in. Far better to do a few things which align with the passions and skills God has given the church, and do them really well. People may feel stretched but not under strain, and then confidence and enthusiasm rises.

PCCs thus need to be hard-headedly clear and realistic about their priorities and indeed the overall vision, particularly if a church leader innately hates to say no to new ideas; its where accountable collaboration can work well offering a wise check to unbounded overreach.

OVERCOMING THE CONFIDENCE THRESHOLD

Someone's unavailability can be a consequence of their personal priorities but so often lack of personal confidence also plays a large part. Thus, looking for opportunities to nudge people into sharing a role, participating in an activity and generally getting involved, however modest, can be a critical and empowering first step.

INVOLVE OTHERS

For an overall leader to be aware of the skills, passions and gifts of all church members is a tall order even in a moderately sized church. Harnessing the insight of even one or two other trusted leaders can help.

LOWER THE BAR

Create time-bounded roles which in the requisite demands of time, energy and skills are realistic and more attractive even if it means carving up existing roles into more manageable chunks.



BE FLEXIBLE

Do you really need someone who is able, available and stable? For some significant roles yes, but for others one or two of these attributes will do. Arguably the key issue is character (stable!) and a good heart. Once someone has taken that first step of commitment, however tentative, to a certain role, often a deeper level of commitment (available) and skills (able) will follow.

ASK

Most people need to be personally asked to consider a role and even then will only agree after two or three requests. Effective leadership demands we prise ourselves away from the laptop and spend time investing directly with people. Moreover, seeking to align gifts and passions with the practical needs in a church while not always possible, in the long run almost always yields better fruit than seeking simply to fill a hole.

ONGOING SUPPORT

There can be a strong temptation to let the most committed get on with it because there is always so much else to do but in truth they are the ones who need the active support and time of leaders.

GROUPED CHURCHES

Last week I met an older couple who, in direct response to a request and sense of calling they had felt, left a large, lively church they felt very settled in, to join a smaller struggling church in the same benefice. Initially it had been very tough but their faces spoke of the joy and blessing they had experienced through their costly obedience. As leaders, is there more we can do to facilitate sharing of resources across churches?

DOING THE BASICS WELL

A clear theme I have observed in visiting many churches is that those which set high expectations in the deepening of personal discipleship, with attendant teaching, preaching and ministries to facilitate this, tend to enjoy a higher levels of commitment in filling roles.

SET A CLEAR VISION

A clear compelling vision together with a shared sense of anticipation and excitement of where the church is heading will almost always elicit a higher level of support and involvement.

PRAY

If there was just one response allowed then this would be it. If all ministry is exercised in concert with the Holy Spirit, then what could be more fundamental than seeking his help in sending a church the people with the requisite gifts. And unsurprisingly there are countless stories of very specific answers to such prayers.



FOR REFLECTION:

1. To what degree is your leadership style actively permission-giving and what could you do to increase your capacity and resilience in managing the inevitable 'messiness' that arises from empowering others?
2. What courageous conversations may you need to have to facilitate a more empowered culture and an environment where it feels safe for people to try something new?
3. How well does the overall vision of the church and its various ministries align with the gifts, skills and passions of its members?

