

## RESOURCING LEADERSHIP AMONG GROWING DISCIPLES

BY SAM CORLEY

‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ asks Jesus, perhaps as he tosses some of the scraps of fish leftover from breakfast onto the charcoal fire burning on the beach next to the lake. ‘Yes Lord, you know that I love you’ replies a dripping wet, shivering Peter who, hurt by the question, is wondering where all this is heading. ‘Feed my sheep’ are the next words from Jesus in that passage from John 21; words I suspect Peter was not expecting to hear.

What is this all about? Discipleship? Leadership? Both? Is there a difference?

As an overall leader on one of the CPAS Venture holidays, I have often reflected on this passage and the challenges it offers to my own leadership and the vision of what we are trying to achieve as a leadership team during those precious few days away each summer (here’s hoping for summer 2021). It is clearly an encounter all about discipleship: the injunction ‘Follow me’ is only a few verses away, once again issuing a call to Peter to leave behind his nets and follow Jesus. But it is also about leadership and service: the Good Shepherd himself holds out the yoke of his own vocation and invites Peter to share in it with him.

Now, of course, it is a right and proper discipline that, as leaders, we return often to focus on our discipleship and all that fuels and sustains our own following of the risen Christ. But when it comes to discipling others, I wonder whether we are disciplined enough about flipping it around so that we weave in experiences of leadership right from the start? In my experience, enabling stretching experiences of leadership at an early stage in discipleship is the most effective way of growing disciples who are willing to get stuck in with the mission of God to the world through his Church.



‘Are you sure he is really a Christian?’ asked one of the other leaders about a teenager I had asked to work with me on a seminar on the meaning of the cross. ‘I am not sure he fully gets it,’ added the leader.

Well the seminar went well, I did most of the work, especially when it came to leading the discussion and fielding questions from the young people. But in the middle of the seminar I asked the young person to explain to the others his understanding of the cross. We had spent some time talking it through beforehand, we had put together a few notes, he had run through it with another leader. And, when it came to the seminar, he did a brilliant job.

A few years on, two people still look back on that seminar as a significant moment in their journey to accepting Christ for themselves. And one of them was the guy who explained the meaning of the cross: ‘It was only when I had to try and put it into words for others that I fully realised what it was all about for myself.’

On a different Venture, a young leader was being hugged by a pal as she wept in the shade of a tree having just finished running a game on the field. ‘I loved it!’ said the young adult as I approached. ‘It worked so much better than last time: I can do this!’ she exclaimed. The tears were tears of joy.

For a few years this person had struggled with anxiety. Her love of people had warred with her fear of big groups and so church had never been easy. But over time the strength of knowing Christ as her rock had enabled this person to take small steps forwards and she was now exploring becoming a teacher when she finished university.

When we first suggested she lead an outdoor activity she was terrified, but we knew that the young people trusted and respected her and that they would listen to her. The first experience with the whistle and stopwatch was a bit clunky; on a couple of occasions another leader stepped in to reset things and the final round was led by someone else. But this time around it had been a thorough success – the confidence matched the desire and enthusiasm, and put the nerves well and truly in their place.

As I write this, that person will be getting ready for afternoon lessons in the school where they now teach.

What two decades of leading on Ventures have taught me is the simple lesson that discipleship isn’t a stepping-stone to leadership. Just as we can never leave discipleship behind, nor is there a point that a person exploring following Christ has to reach before they can explore leadership.

What I have come to appreciate is the ways in which they connect with and reinforce one another in all kinds of ways – just as they did for Peter in that story from John’s Gospel. So here are four things I try and focus on in my oversight of those disciples I lead alongside.

## 1. STRIKING THE TONE ALONGSIDE SETTING THE COMPASS

The interaction between leadership and discipleship reminds us that how we do things matters as much, if not more, than as what we are planning to do. Too often the end is prized over the means. With Jesus it is almost completely the other way around.

Part of that relates to the limits and boundaries we put in place – the lines on the pitch that don’t just contain the game, but also enable it to be played at all. Too often we think of safeguards negatively, but they enable flourishing and participation, they set culture and they fuel focus, confidence and unity.

## 2. SCAFFOLDING

Breaking down a role or task helps to provide different entry points for people at different stages. Role descriptions, guidelines and check-lists can really help people get a handle on and feel confident about what they are being asked to do and how it fits into the overall vision.

Involving as many people as possible





in planning beforehand and then in regular review and evaluation afterwards is always time well-spent, not least in helping people understand what goes on under the bonnet. Pairing people to work together on a task is not just a great way of pooling wisdom and experience, it also models something powerful to our individualistic society about our need of others and the inherent value of everyone's contribution.

### 3. SECURITY

People grow best when they are confident that plans are in place for when things go wrong, and that the culture is one of grace and learning, rather than fault-finding and blame.

The perfectionist in me finds this difficult, and yet in my own life I know that failure has been one of my best teachers. A positive response to failure is counter-cultural, especially for young people who are continually being assessed against targets. Time and again I am inspired by the grace I encounter in the one who met Peter on the beach that morning and chose not to relegate him to making the tea or handing out the notice sheets, but restored him to the calling shaped specifically for him.

### 4. STRETCH

Each year we have people new to leadership and people who have been leading for years on our Ventures. Whatever stage people are at I, want everyone – including myself – to be stretched.

That might involve doing something new for the first time, it might be about doing something in a different way, it might be about involving or handing on something to a different

person, it might be about doing a task I don't enjoy or working closely with someone I find tricky, it might be about not being involved in something at all so that someone else can have a go.

I am a novice in all of this, but that is what I find so stimulating – there is always something new to explore and learn. So may the risen Christ bless and equip you as you seek to follow him and lead on.



### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



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1. How has your own experience of leadership impacted your discipleship? What might need to change?
2. Where does an invitation into leadership feature in your evangelism and in your nurture of new Christians?
3. In the teams you lead, how healthy is the tone? What needs to be adjusted?
4. What scaffolding are you already providing for others? How could this be improved or how might it be extended to others?
5. How does your team handle failure? What thoughts and emotions do others in your team experience when things go wrong? How do you know? How might you work together to deepen a culture of grace and learning that dispels fear and blame?
6. When was the last time you were stretched?
7. What needs to happen so those you lead can be stretched in their discipleship and those you disciple can be stretched in leadership?