

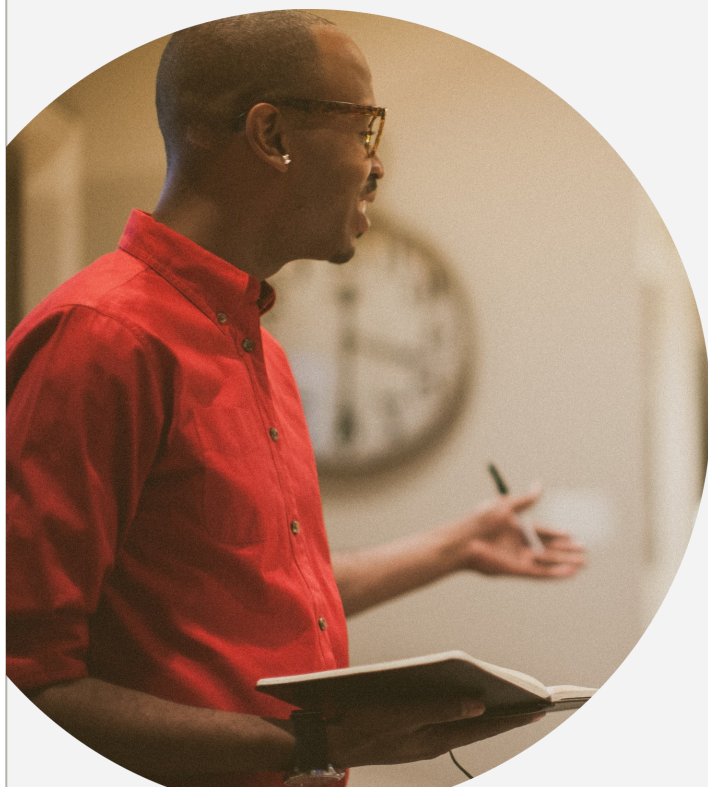
LEAD ON

RESPONDING WELL AS LEADERS

BY ROB MILES, CPAS PATRONAGE DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.



‘In season and out of season...’ As I write these words, the sun is shining, the leaves are on the trees, and the birds are singing. Finally! If you’re anything like me and not a big fan of winter, then spring and early summer is a great time of year, with the prospect of light and warmth stretching ahead after all the cold and darkness of the winter.

We also experience changes in season as Christian leaders. And sometimes it’s not easy to tell whether spring is breaking in, or whether it’s still the depths of winter.

SCENARIO ONE: WINTER OF DISCONTENT

On the one hand, rumour has it that it’s a terrible time to be a church leader, perhaps especially a vicar in the Church of England. In recent years it’s not been hard to find media stories about ageing, declining congregations, and the imminent demise of the Church. In my work with patronage churches, I hear stories of children’s and youth ministries being particularly hard-hit; and of the so-called ‘missing generation’ of 20s and 30s in the church. Famously, the percentage of people in the UK self-identifying as ‘Christian’ dropped below 50% for the first time in the 2021 census. And this is before we even mention the impact of cuts to clergy numbers, or the ongoing debates around the Prayers of Love and Faith. It sounds like the worst of times. And yet...

SCENARIO TWO: HERE COMES THE SUN

As we all know, this is not the whole story. Anecdotally, many churches and church leaders have been reporting a significant number of new people (especially young adults) just arriving at church, wanting to read the Bible, ask questions, and explore faith. This trend seems to be reflected in the Bible Society research published earlier this year in the report, [‘A Quiet](#)

Revival: 'Where once we saw ageing congregations and a steady decline in attendance, we see dramatic growth, led by the young', says the report. 'You may have heard the rumblings and the rumours emerging over the past few years... or it might have passed you by entirely – but this data shows that it is real.'



IN SEASON OR OUT OF SEASON?

So, what's the truth? Which of the two scenarios above seems more realistic to you? Is your own experience of leadership at the moment more reflective of the predictions of doom; or the seeds of new life? Part of the answer to that is likely to be down to what is happening in your own churches and ministry. Part of it may also be down to temperament: whether you're the type of person who leans into optimism and believes that growth is always just around the corner, or someone who responds to promises of revival with a note of caution, and maybe even scepticism. Either way, there are some dangers to avoid.

Don't get blown by the wind. Sometimes we are encouraged, other times ministry is tough. Some of us tend towards overexcitement when things go well. Others easily become despondent when we are fighting a headwind. But Jesus is Lord of the storms. So the way to avoid being propelled this way and that is to be anchored in him.

Don't get distracted by the 'weather forecast' – whether it's predictions of sunny days to come, or a storm front on the horizon. All those predictions of the demise of the Church or of a great revival have happened before. We are not the first generation to have experienced decline – or to see the Holy Spirit at work transforming circumstances and culture. The truth is, we don't know what will come next. But Jesus does know. He is Lord of the future.

Don't worry about the weather elsewhere. The temptation to compare seems to be hardwired in many of us. When I go on holiday, it's hard not to wonder if

somewhere else would have been sunnier! And in ministry, it's so easy to swing between feeling great when ours is the ministry experiencing growth... and feeling inadequate when we hear of others' apparent success. But we each have a different call, to be faithful in the place where Jesus has led us; not to look at what is happening down the road.

The best way to avoid both overexcitement and gloom is to keep a clear focus on Jesus' priorities for us in leadership. I've been reflecting again recently on Paul's famous charge to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 4. Whatever our current circumstances, these verses encourage us to keep things in perspective, and on track. So here are seven takeaways from those verses:

1. AO1

AO1 stands for 'Audience of One'. It was popularised by some American Christian athletes a few years ago as a reminder that, however they perform before a cheering (or jeering) crowd, the only judge who really matters is Jesus. In 2 Timothy 4, it's easy to skip over verse 1 to get to the instructions. But these instructions only make sense 'in view of Jesus' appearing and his kingdom'. He is the one who will judge the living and the dead. And this is hugely freeing – it frees us from the need to compare ourselves to others, or to worry about the judgment of others. The only one whose views matter is Jesus: our ministry is for an 'audience of one'.

2. PREACH THE WORD, WHATEVER THE WEATHER

Of course it's obvious, but no less true. When we face apathy and even decline, the temptation is to try to make what we preach more attractive, and yet the great



need is to keep on holding out the gospel. When there is the encouragement of people arriving in church, hungry for faith, we always need to be ready to offer them real sustenance: 'food that will not spoil'. In many ways, it doesn't matter whether we are 'in season or out of season'. The call is the same: Preach the Word!

3. BUILD UP OTHERS IN LEADERSHIP

'Correct, rebuke, and encourage' is a reminder of the importance of feedback in leadership. And that being a leader includes guiding others and helping them to stay on track, whether it's with words of approval, or of remedy. 'With great patience and careful instruction' is a reminder that this is a long-term task, not a quick fix...

4. IT'S CLARITY NOT POPULARITY

... and vs 3 and 4 give us the reason why numbers 2 and 3 above are so necessary! 'The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine...' It sounds so twenty-first century – but the reality in every age is that there will be people who don't want to hear what Jesus says (both inside and outside the Church). That's why the clarity of speaking the truth is so important in all our ministries. Sometimes we may be thanked for it, other times not so much. But (remembering v1), popularity is not our main goal.

5. DON'T PANIC!

If you are prone to be (over-)excitable, or easily spooked, then maybe v5 is a verse for you. When things look so bad that you can't see the hope; or, when things are so exciting, it's hard to keep grounded: 'But you, keep your head in all situations...' Pause. Consider. Take counsel. Most of all, pray.

6. BE READY FOR THE TOUGH TIMES

'Endure hardship' is one of those commands we prefer not to hear, but if you've been a leader for a while, you will know that it will soon come along in one form or another. The key is to be ready. If we expect leadership and ministry to be easy, then we will be shaken when it is not. If we know it's likely to have significant downs as well as ups, that won't make it easy – but it will make us prepared.

7. KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

'Do the work of an evangelist...' Back to where we started: none of us knows what the future holds – whether we are on the brink of revival, or facing decline. But we know what we are here to do. Hold out the good news of Jesus to people who need his love, and who need his life. That's our work, 'in season and

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- Which aspect of Paul's charge to Timothy resonates most with you at the present time?
- Whose approval do you naturally look for in your leadership and ministry?
- What helps you to 'keep your head' in leadership? To pause, take counsel, and to pray?
- What is most likely to get in the way of your 'doing the work of an evangelist'?

