

## SQUARE PEGS, ROUND HOLES

BY CHARLES BURGESS

A common refrain expressed by my former RAF and industry colleagues, was that while the bigger financial or logistic decisions were never a breeze, it was the difficult and more personal 'people-related' issues that caused the fitful night's sleep. Well if that's true of a robust military culture with paid employees how much more challenging is it for leaders in a church?

Passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Romans 12:3-8 which focus on the attitude we should have to one another, and infer that God has given each and every person gifts and skills. All of these are of value and in a healthy church, gifts and skills are to be actively nurtured and then harnessed interdependently for the flourishing of the body. So while, to quote Paul 'The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"', neither is he suggesting that the hand can, or indeed should, do the job of the eye. Matching holes and pegs is a key responsibility of leadership.

### A few realities

Maybe it's helpful to name four realities upfront.

**If only** Some may read the title of this article and think, if only in our church we did have the luxury of 'matching pegs and holes'; it's a struggle to find a churchwarden. But even in this situation, there is likely to be some 'wobble room' for a leader. Perhaps it is simply ensuring the gifts and skills of the one or two committed people align well with their roles within the church.

**Good enough** A second reality is, I suggest, that in most cases we are seeking a 'good enough' fit rather than a perfect fit. Over time and in God's grace people grow into roles.

**It's important** Thirdly, this stuff matters. Square pegs in round holes can demoralise and drain the life out of a church and its leaders. Conversely, flourishing churches almost always have at least a few committed people – often lay leaders – whose gifts, skills and passion dovetail with the demands of their roles within the church. Their passion is caught by others and a sense of momentum is created. The big win for the overall leader is not a life of ease – if anything the opposite is true because passion also raises expectations – but more of their available time and energy can be focused where it's needed in working towards the wider vision of the church.

**Tensions** Leaders have responsibilities for the care and oversight of the wider flock (e.g. John 10:1-16) but equally there is the clear presumption, supported by the whole grain of Scripture, they are also to care for the individual sheep. And particularly in square peg-round holes scenarios these responsibilities can be in tension. Specifically, the leader has to balance their pastoral concerns for the individual against the potential for wider harm to the flock if the situation is not addressed. And leaders who are themselves wired up with a strong pastoral bias will feel this tension most acutely.

## Practical responses

So given these realities, how practically should a leader hold these tensions and approach the problem of someone filling an important role within the church for which they are ill-suited?

### PRAY

Although prayer in Christian leadership should be a given, in square peg-round hole situations, the stakes are usually high and so prayerful discernment becomes particularly important.

### KNOW YOURSELF

Is Injit really inappropriate for his role? How do you know? Personal bias can give a false perspective and others may feel he is doing a good job. Maybe he has simply become tired or lost a sense of direction and enthusiasm? Be slow to come to judgement.

### INVOLVE OTHERS

Don't work alone. If possible and appropriate, involve others in decisions and processes which are rarely straightforward, often complicated, and sometimes toxic. Include those who share leadership with you (for example elders or churchwardens), and where necessary those in leadership over you (for example archdeacons) to harness the wisdom available and share responsibility for the decision.

### IDENTIFY REASONS

Why isn't Karen right for the job? Is it an issue of faith or is it related to character, competence or something else? Can it be addressed by training or an honest, albeit difficult, conversation. Pre-Pentecost, Peter would have been judged more square than round peg and a healthy church will always seek to facilitate the development of an individual's character, gifts and skills.

### HOLDING CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

If Windsor really is a square peg in a round hole, create a climate for an honest review where the issues can be explored. If he himself can come to see and accept the mismatch – and far more often than not he will already be well aware of it – it's so much easier to suggest a more

appropriate role for him, particularly if he is also helped to understand how much more fruitful his ministry could be.

### IS THERE A MIDDLE ROAD?

Can Maria be encouraged to consider another role more suited to her gifts? Or can she be offered an advisory role to her replacement? Can the role itself be reconfigured, with the element she is least capable and confident in being undertaken by someone else? Or can a shift in roles be made to feel less personal by incorporating it within a wider review of roles and responsibilities? Or can the role be shared with someone whose skills are more suited to its demands... providing they do not become frustrated? Any one or a combination of these and other middle-road options can help facilitate change.

### TAKE TIME

People matter and deserve to be treated carefully, sensitively and with respect. Others will be watching, and the way a situation is handled will, for better or worse, shape the culture within the church. Sometimes a more prudent response – provided it's undertaken purposefully rather than by neglect – may be to accept a compromise in efficiency if removing someone from a role would destroy relationships.

### PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

Most of us are not in a start-up situation; we inherit people and roles. Nevertheless actively foster a culture of review, support and feedback for all key roles in the church, so it becomes normative and not specific to any one individual. Regular review points (perhaps formalised within a role specification), time-limited roles and the provision of mentoring support are some of the ways emerging problems can be caught and addressed early.

### TAKE ACTION... AND COURAGE!

Moving someone on from a role for which they are not suited can take courage. But not acting risks hurting others with, once again, wider implications for the church's culture. Over time, commitment almost always declines when people sense leaders shirk tough decisions. So just ignoring a clear problem is not an option. There are times when a leader simply has to do what is required, and to pray for love, grace and wisdom as they do it.



### FOR REFLECTION

1. As you consider a possible mismatch situation in your context and whether you need to act, ask yourself: 'Even if this were a role which really needed filling, would we appoint this person again? Or if they had already told you they were resigning, would you feel terribly disappointed or secretly relieved? Why?'
2. What one thing could you do to find the courage to have that crucial conversation?
3. What one or two practical next steps could be implemented in the church to move towards a culture of review and feedback?