

TAKING THE BRAKES OFF

BY JOHN DUNNETT, CPAS GENERAL DIRECTOR

My first ever car was a white Renault 6 – affectionately known as ‘The Popemobile’ by my (now) brother-in-law. It cost me very little – had a lot of rust on it – and necessitated many hours of maintenance. But at least it taught me how to change the oil and release sticking brake pistons (which gave a better MPG and a less smelly ride!).

During the last six years I have had the opportunity and privilege of meeting church leaders all over the UK and Ireland. Many are passionate about the gospel and committed to seeing local churches grow. However, some are being limited in their leadership by the failure to release certain ‘brakes’. In this article I want to offer you some suggestions as to what those brakes are, and how to avoid them being inadvertently applied in our own ministry.

THE BRAKE OF ‘UNDEFINED VISION’

If vision is the ‘stuff’ of leadership then that must include not just its discernment but also its dissemination. And it is here that I see leaders inadvertently leaving the brakes on! Much thought, prayer and passion is given to the challenge of vision discernment, after which brakes are often unintentionally reapplied by the failure to define and communicate what has been discerned.

Clear and communicated vision offers people a clear picture of what mission and ministry will look like (say) three years from now, inspires people as to the difference the proposed travel will make, and engages

people by answering the question ‘how can I be involved?’ Too many leaders leave the brakes on by failing to answer these issues.

THE BRAKE OF ‘PERIPHERALS’

The challenge to leaders of ‘keeping the main thing the main thing’ is as much about personal leadership as it is about corporate church life. In the last few years I have met dozens of church leaders who would claim that their main ministry is preaching/teaching but whose diary would not support the claim! There are others who give minimum time to clarifying and communicating vision, or who fail to intentionally nurture and develop leaders. The reason? All too often



it's because we've been side-tracked by the urgent as opposed to the important... the administrative rather than the developmental... the organisation rather than the kingdom. If I may be a little blunt simply to make the point... Jesus told us to 'make disciples' not to 'run churches'. From my own 18 years in parish ministry I know how challenging it is to stay focused on essentials. But I also know what a brake it is to the growth of the church when we allow ourselves to be continually side-tracked by peripherals.

THE BRAKE OF 'SELF-DISORGANISATION'

Imagine a visit to your GP in which: the GP turns up late, cannot find your notes, makes no record of your discussion and cannot find a prescription pad. But then – let's be honest – don't we forget to take our diaries, let emails build up before we get round to replying, turn up late too often and fail to do what we promised. All of this undermines both our capacity to lead and the confidence of others in our leadership. Efficient self-organisation is not an optional extra – rather an essential if we want to grow in our leadership. If this is something you find difficult – can I encourage you to seek help: from another leader in your church (PCC, warden or staff colleague), from an outside coach, from the Diocesan CME officer or elsewhere.

THE BRAKE OF 'NON-LEARNING'

There are two important questions for every Christian leader to reflect on: 'What have I learned about God in the last 12 months?', and 'What have I learned about myself/my leadership in the last 12 months?' The inability to answer either of these questions suggests that we have (at least temporarily) stopped learning and therefore growing. All of us who are involved in Christian leadership need to be continually learning – in matters of faith and self-understanding. Whatever your preferred learning style, the freshness and vitality your people need will only be secured by an intentional commitment to learning.

THE BRAKE OF 'NON-EXAMPLE'

Jesus' leadership was at its heart a leadership by example. And so when he issued the Great Commission it had authority and credibility. He had already been preaching the kingdom, releasing the captives, showing his love for the lost in word and deed. For those of us who are 'paid' to preach and teach, there is a real challenge here to practice mission before we preach it. If we cannot or do not get around to praying for our non-Christian neighbours and friends, inviting them to appropriate gospel events and to sharing our faith with them then we will struggle to release the 'brakes' on the church growth that we would love to see.

THE BRAKE OF 'POORLY FORMED QUESTIONS'

One of the unexpected brakes on Christian leadership is the inability to form and ask good questions. In preparing a sermon, the competent preacher asks sharp questions about the verses under study and the people who will be listening to the finished sermon. In discerning the mission dei of a church, the new minister will ask what God has already placed in the hearts of the people of this parish. In helping a PCC to embrace vision, an incumbent will need to ask 'what and how do we need to change around here to see the progress we pray for?' The leader trying to sort out why Sunday School attendance is falling will need to craft sensitive and yet searching questions to discover reasons for the downward trend. Good questions are the hallmark of good leadership.

THE BRAKE OF SELF-DEPENDENCE

I remember Robert Warren once saying to me that – if he had his incumbency time again – he would 'do less'. I suspect that he may have had in mind not just the need to be more focussed (remember the brake of 'peripherals'?), but also the need to allow more room for God to perform his works.

It is easier than we think to become self-dependent in our ministry: in the neglect of prayer, in over-busy-ing our diaries, in failing to nurture younger leaders and in our hesitancy to seek the in-breaking kingdom.

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us'.

Hebrews 12:1, TNIV

Maybe the writer of Hebrews knew all about the 'sticky brakes' of ministry!

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FOR REFLECTION

Can I invite you to choose one of the above brakes and to pray / work to see it released in your leadership – for His sake and the sake of His kingdom.