

LEAD ON

TEN YEARS ON: HOW HAS LEADERSHIP CHANGED?

BY CHARLES BURGESS

It's a big question. How has church leadership changed in the last ten years?

Have the fundamentals Jesus modelled changed?

- The imperative of a servant heart and love for people.
- The courage to move towards conflict and not turn away.
- The setting of a missional focus and a direction of travel.
- Communicating in a way which 'lands' with ordinary people.
- The investment in a few, and pressing towards shared leadership.
- Preaching hope while naming reality.
- Building trust while reshaping a kingdom culture.
- Provoking change and establishing priorities.
- And most fundamental of all, the deepest, intentional abiding with the Father, the relationship from which all else flows.

Well no, these ideals haven't changed, but the context in which they are worked out today has. And perhaps most tellingly, the degree to which Christian leadership has actually reflected these qualities has always been patchy.

Do our churches, for example, really reflect the interdependent, collaborative culture Paul clearly envisages as normative, in which all are aware of and own their God-given gifts (1 Corinthians 12)? Has the legacy of a skewed theology of priesthood, together with an oftentimes misplaced competitive instinct, put a decisive lid on the flourishing of lay ministry and genuine mind-and-heart

leadership collaboration within and between churches?

Nevertheless, the last ten years has seen a shift in leadership priorities and expectations, reflecting a longer-term direction of travel, arguably accelerated by the impact of the pandemic.

SEVEN THEMES

Here are seven change themes I have sensed, albeit with the caveat that the degree to which they are recognised across the breadth of traditions and missional contexts will inevitably vary.



1. LEADERSHIP AWARENESS

Ten years ago, the word leadership was viewed by many Anglican church ministers with deep suspicion, carrying overtones of unhelpful power dynamics and hierarchy. For some today, it still is. But there is less outright rejection and a much greater understanding and acceptance, not only that leadership skills are essential to clergy roles – and thereby healthy churches – but indeed that they are skills. For most of us they are not innate, and therefore require intentional training and ongoing nurturing.

The scope of this training has also increased. Ten years ago CPAS leadership training embraced perhaps ten core topics. Today there are over 30, with a particular focus on leading in evangelism.

2. LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES

Greater leadership awareness has been accompanied by a gradual shift in priorities. Historic and emerging expectations have meant incumbents have had to span two ministry models:

1. A traditional model (i.e. they themselves undertake most of the 'ministry'), probably for most still the primary operating model in terms of their time.
2. An emerging model, in which they become enablers of the wider gifts within the church body (requiring a more developed set of leadership skills).

Frankly, many have found this duality exhausting, particularly as they have also striven to manage an ever-expanding framework of administration and legal compliance, now embedded in their roles. Therefore, the transition to the emerging model has been slow but, nevertheless, steady.

It's spurred on by a number of factors: a stronger theology of Christian leadership; research correlating enabling leadership with healthy churches; sheer necessity, as numbers of multi-parish benefices have increased and stipendiary clergy numbers have decreased.

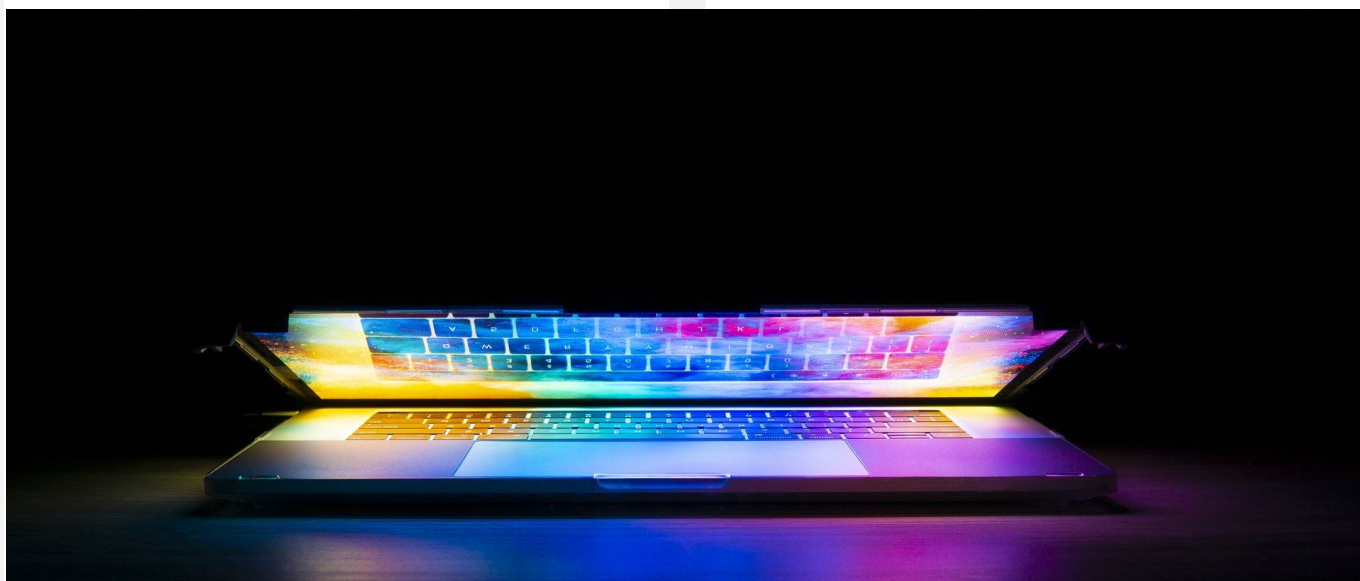
3. SELF LEADERSHIP

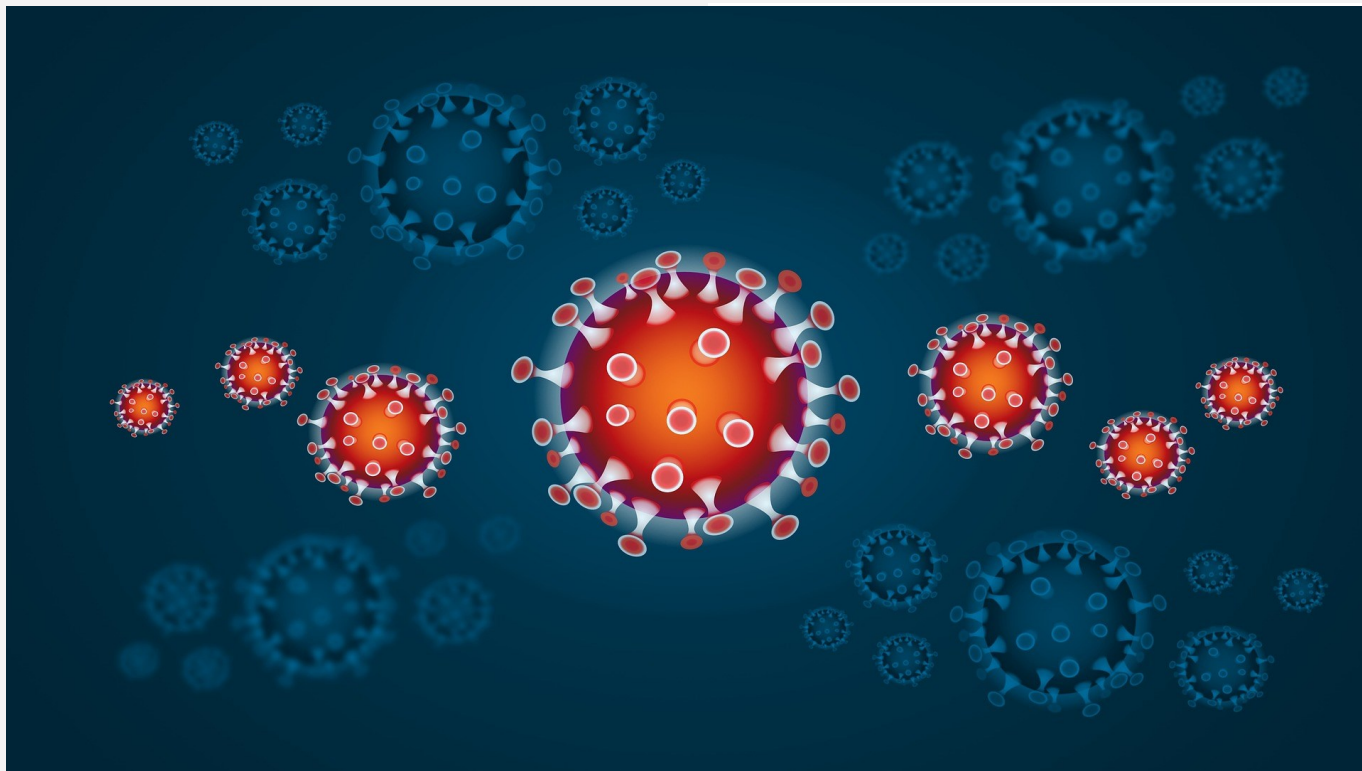
The last ten years have undoubtedly seen significantly more attention given to nurturing a sustainable ministry, including establishing networks of support, such as mentors. Accompanying this change has been a shift in the understanding of ordained ministry, from a sacrificial vocation to one with a stronger contractual emphasis and more defined boundaries. Anecdotal evidence alone relating to concerns around clergy health and well-being suggests that a measure of rebalancing is overdue, but is there a danger that the pendulum is swinging too far and that a theology around 'cost' in leadership is being lost?

4. LEADERSHIP AND MISSION

Even ten years on, the wider missional context feels very different and census results, particularly the rise of the 'nones', confirm deep-rooted changes in belief and falling church attendance patterns. Secularism has gathered pace, and our society feels yet more divided and polarised, with various foundational pillars, inherited from a Judaeo-Christian history, now firmly under scrutiny, including issues around human identity, sexuality and family.

Social media usage has expanded exponentially, and more recently race and historic social and economic injustices have gained wide prominence.





Of course there is nothing new about social change, but sociologists seem to agree the rate of change is accelerating and provoking high levels of anxiety and mental health issues, particularly among young people.

This backdrop has also provoked new missional initiatives within the Church of England and a flurry of wider initiatives – nurturing ‘missionary disciples’ is one example – captured in the Archbishops’ vision for the Church of England to become humbler, simpler, bolder. See [Vision and Strategy | The Church of England](#)

Taken together, for most church leaders this has made for a deeply uncertain and complex missional climate, eliciting a wide breadth of response, from simply hunkering down at one extreme to actively seeking to engage and discern new opportunities at the other.

5. LEADERSHIP AND THE PANDEMIC

Patently, the pandemic had a profound and immediate impact on church leadership, though it is probably still too early to definitively discern longer-term outcomes. The rise of the online church – and indeed the increased accessibility that now exists – have offered missional opportunities that few would have predicted ten years ago.

Looking forwards, online church has also raised theological and ecclesiological questions around what is meant by ‘church’, carries the risk of nominal

attendance, and has made leadership more complicated still. How this technology is embraced or rejected by church leaders could be a defining issue in the years ahead.

6. LEADERSHIP AND TRADITIONS

The last ten years has seen a continuation in a longer-term shift for leaders to embrace and engage with symbols and spiritual disciplines drawn from other traditions than their own. This includes music, service styles, language and spiritual practices. In some quarters the dividing lines between traditions feel more porous, with a willingness to embrace a breadth of Christian spirituality.

7. LEADERSHIP STYLE

My sense is that the last ten years is part of an ongoing, gradual shift from a more directive style to one with a stronger relational emphasis in which vulnerability and empathy are key in connecting well and building trust. In large, part this reflects a wider societal shift, but the language and tone also reflects a changing missional climate in which ‘the givens’ of the past – basic biblical and Christian knowledge, for example – have changed significantly, even among Christians.

AND THE NEXT TEN YEARS?

History suggests that predicting the future is fraught with risk, but here are five qualities I think may be particularly required in leaders of the future.

1. ROOTED LEADERS

Given the challenges of the next ten years, fruitful church leadership will likely be even more demanding. It will require leaders who, first and foremost, walk closely with Christ. They will also have a missional heart and mind, which flows out of a deep, personal rootedness in Christ, and a healthy rhythm of spiritual disciplines, able to discern the leading of the Spirit. They will also need to be fed and sustained by a good support network, with a measure of resilience in the face of disappointments and criticism.

2. ADAPTIVE LEADERS

The complexity of the future missional environment has already been mentioned, but in addition some dioceses are exploring different ministry structures, including Focal and Oversight ministry. This environment will require leaders energised rather than cowed by uncertainties, the courage to take risks, a willingness to lead significant culture change within churches, and comfortable with – and creative in – thinking outside of traditional models of mission.

3. SKILLED LEADERS WITH A PASTORAL HEART

An observation from working in depth with many church leaders is that, assuming Godly character, those who are both genuinely adept as leaders, skilled particularly in enabling change, and who are also wise pastors, emotionally intelligent and with a deep love for people, make very effective church

leaders. However, many clergy innately default to the pastoral rather than the leadership element, and I wonder, therefore, whether there remains a key challenge around recruitment profiles and training, particularly if stipendiary clergy are required to increasingly exercise Oversight roles.

4. THEOLOGICALLY ADEPT LEADERS

In the future, the ongoing blurring of tradition boundaries, together with a more complex missional climate, may demand a stronger emphasis on theological reflection, and particularly the ability to engage with and listen to different perspectives, both within and without the Church. Part of this emphasis will be an accompanying need for keen apologetic and communication skills, able to articulate the relevance of Christian truths in what for many may be confusing times.

5. COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

A mixed economy model will probably become even more essential. However, whatever their role within this, leaders will need to be deeply relational, and skilled in creating a culture within churches where everyday faith is a living reality for most Christians, and not simply a slogan. This will demand leaders who are innately collaborative – again, a mind and heart reality rather than a slogan – secure in their own calling, devoid of an inflated ego and unthreatened by nurturing and releasing the wider gifts within the church body.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Which single leadership skill has made the most significant difference in your own ministry?
- Which one other leadership skill would you most like to improve in the year ahead? How may you enable this to happen?
- What one change could you make to your ministry which would enable a 10% increase in the time/energy to be spent in enabling leadership functions?

