

WHEN FRIENDSHIP AND LEADERSHIP CLASH

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CAN LEADERS BE FRIENDS WITH THOSE THEY LEAD?

This was often a question that was asked throughout my training and well into my curacy and is one that continues to be asked amongst church leaders today. The answers to this question can be as numerous and as varied as those asking it, ranging from 'some of my best friends are in the church' to 'you can be friendly but not have close friends' to 'you can't afford to have friends in the parish; it will compromise your leadership'. Where you sit on this spectrum probably depends upon a variety of interlinked factors – your past experiences, leadership style, personality, how you define a friend and context you are leading in. What these range of responses demonstrate is that it is complex.

Increasingly we live in a culture where people are looking to leaders to be authentic and vulnerable rather than guarded and distant. Yet at the same time, with the increase of the professionalisation of roles, there is a rise in policies and procedures that need to be maintained.

For church leaders there is the added complexity of the blurring of work and personal life, when our work is also where we live. But it's more than that; the church is the community we're a part of and the congregation we seek to shape. This is particularly the case in missional communities and fresh expressions, which have grown out of community service or by building a network of relationships.

And yet being friends with those we lead can be fraught with difficulties. There are issues around

favouritism, trust, fear of being let down or even the risk of damaged friendships when decisions have to be made that people disagree about. No wonder many church leaders report feelings of isolation and loneliness. To let down our guard and be vulnerable enough to risk a friendship can seem too complex and costly.

So does this mean we should avoid friendships at all cost? To answer yes to this question would mean that we would be a poor imitation of what Jesus himself modelled and what is at the heart of Christian community. Jesus says 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you... I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you' (John 15:12, 15). Jesus over time became



friends with his disciples and it was this deepening relationship with him that brought about transformation in his closest followers. It brought about freedom and love which fosters affirmation and wholeness. Loving one another in this way is a sign of God's kingdom at work.

Bob Wells from Duke University Divinity School in the US, talks about 'holy friendships'. These are not the same as the world's model of friendships where intimacy is defined as sharing every detail of one's life by 'baring all' and saying anything or everything that pops into your head. 'Holy friendships' are about having a degree of loving censorship, but they are also about truth-telling, encouragement and accountability. They have a larger purpose beyond the friendship itself; they are about pointing us to God.

So how can we exercise appropriate friendships as church leaders? I want to offer a few suggestions that may help...

BE SELF-AWARE

It's important to recognise your own personality and be yourself. Some people will easily and quickly make friends with lots of people, whilst others prefer to make friends with just a few people and it takes a longer time. If you are someone who is quick to make friends you may like to ask yourself:

- Am I in danger of showing favouritism?
- Have I become too comfortable and so stopped challenging inappropriate behaviours and holding people accountable?
- Have others stopped doing the same with me?

If you like to keep a measure of distance, you may like to ask yourself:

- How am I modelling Jesus' command to 'love one another'?
- Can I afford to drop my guard a little to allow more mutuality of relationship?

BE BOUNDARY AWARE

When developing deeper relationships it is increasingly important to find comfortable boundaries. This becomes

tricky because people use the word friend to mean so many different things. For example, most people have a network of friends, people they might do social things with, that might be around 10-20 people in size. But they also have a few close friends who they would share with at a more intimate level. These may number only two or three. The type of friendship will influence the type of boundaries one might want in place. Boundaries may include making sure you keep confidentiality and avoiding the temptation to engage in gossip about others. Be clear as well about what is 'work' for you and what is 'time off', and therefore which topics are no-go in each area and find a way of gently reminding each other when boundaries are crossed.

Another important aspect to this is about distinguishing the relational aspects of leadership (for example enabling others, serving their needs, compassion and so on) with the decision-making and strategic aspects of leadership. Make sure that conversations about strategy, appointments and decisions are held in the appropriate places (for example at PCC or staff meetings and not over a meal with your friend the night before) so that others don't feel excluded or sense that decisions have been made before they even walk in the room. Always make sure that appointment processes are clear and transparent as well. If a friend applies for a key position, declare your interest and involve others in the decision making process.

BE POWER AWARE

There are some in our churches and the places that we lead who like to be 'friends with the minister'. For some it gives them a sense of status and self-worth; for others it can be about controlling what goes on. Either way it is important to be aware of the power dynamics that are at play and ensure the boundaries that are mentioned above are maintained.

I have been in a number of situations in the past where I have had to gently challenge excessive gift-giving and repeated invitations to meals from a member of the congregation. They were particularly vulnerable and what they wanted was exclusivity to someone they saw who had 'status' to validate



themselves. I did not always handle this well (avoiding phone calls, walking the other way when they appeared on the horizon and other such cowardly avoidance tactics!) but gradually I learnt that what they needed was loving acceptance and to feel part of community. So whenever church social events came up, I would make sure they had a personal invite and that they could get there, I would include them in conversations at the end of church and encourage others to do so as well.

Being a church or organisation that models 'holy friendship' doesn't mean that the leader has to be friends with everyone in that community, but it does mean they need to be the leader of a community where everyone can find and experience this.

BE PAIN AWARE

Friendships can be costly and painful. When we have a deep friendship with someone we share their joys and struggles. Friends can move, get divorced, have serious illnesses and die. We can invest in a friendship where trust is built and can then be hurt by a change of view or harsh words said or a trust that is broken. Jesus knew what it was to be betrayed by his friends – Peter denied him, James, John and Peter fell asleep at his most vulnerable moment and yet he still called them his friends.

Reflecting on how we will handle the costly, painful aspects of friendship, especially when some of that pain may have been generated through the exercise of our leadership, is a way of preparing ourselves for navigating the realities of when friendship and leadership clash.



FOR REFLECTION

1. What has been your experience of friendships as a leader both the joys and the challenges?
2. Are there any past hurts that you need to bring to God for healing and redemption? (Maybe a friend who has caused you hurt.) Could the situation have been avoided?
3. How does the church or organisation you lead foster an environment of 'holy friendship'?