

LEAD ON

FIVE THINGS I LEARNED IN 20 YEARS OF PARISH MINISTRY

BY JON SCAMMAN, CEO, CPAS

The phone call inviting me to CPAS came as a total surprise. I'd been in church leadership for twenty years (curate, associate vicar, incumbent), and was all set to do twenty more. I now live in a vicarage in the Lancashire village where my wife is the vicar, but these past two years at CPAS have given me the chance to reflect on my years in parish ministry. Here are five things I learned.

1. REMEMBER WHO THE LEADER REALLY IS

When I first became a vicar, every room I walked into, every meeting I was in, everyone looked to me to lead. It all felt incredibly different after being a second chair leader for eight years. But as I prayed about this, I felt that Jesus was saying to me very clearly, 'You are not the leader of this church – I am.'



The implications were profound. When I remember that I am first and foremost a follower of Jesus before I am a leader, the burden of leadership passes to His much broader shoulders. To help us remember this, we put up a sign in the vicarage kitchen: 'There is a Saviour and you are not Him.' The relief that brings is palpable. My job is to stay as close to Jesus as I can, and follow His lead.

But on the other hand, it means that I don't always call the shots. God has called other people to leadership in the church too, and has gifted and equipped them for ministry as well. Leadership in the New Testament is always plural. Though there is a distinct role for the senior leader; at its best it is a facilitating and empowering role to release the ministry of the whole church. If Jesus is the leader of the Church, then my job is to call others to follow His leadership too.

2. LEARN TO LOVE THE PEOPLE GOD HAS GIVEN YOU

There's a beautiful line in the ordination service that catches me every time:

'Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of His blood on the cross. It is to Him that you will render account for your stewardship of His people.'

These people you have been entrusted to lead, warts and all, have been bought with Christ's blood on the cross. They are to be treasured, even when they frustrate you enormously.

For me, this meant prioritising relationship building, and not just with an inner circle of the influential few. The Jesus I follow had just three years to save the world, yet he made time to heal a blind beggar by the side of the road, and a woman who touched him in the

crowd. What did that look like in practice?

- In our first term, we invited 20 home groups over, two groups at a time, for ten Friday nights in a row, for drinks and refreshments, just to get to know people, learning to love the people God gave us.
- When we did vision-casting, we worked not just with the PCC and the staff team, but invited the whole church to come speak to us – and many did.
- At the church door, Sunday by Sunday, I tried to demonstrate respect for, and interest in, each person I spoke to, even when we disagreed. And when that was hard, I kept muttering under my breath, ‘the treasure entrusted to me is Christ’s flock...’

3. KEEP MISSION AS THE PRIMARY FOCUS

In my first week as a vicar, I climbed a hill behind our house to look out over the city. In that moment, I felt that God was saying to me, ‘I have called you not just to run a church but to reach a city.’

If I’m honest, I found that a constant challenge, because a busy church takes a lot of running. It’s so easy to get completely absorbed by the tens or even hundreds of people in front of us, and forget to prioritise the thousands who are not in our churches.

For me, there was no single initiative that exemplified this message, but it ran like a thread through everything we did.

- We re-shaped our congregations (and planted new ones), and developed new missional communities, to create multiple points of entry and multiple ways of belonging.
- We developed discipleship pathways, with clear stepping stones to faith for people at different life stages – and sometimes, people even followed them!
- Reaching the city was a theme that inspired our ‘Heart of the City’ building project. Our new church centre was built to become a hub of Christian hospitality for the city, hosting asylum-seeker drop-ins, and English language classes, and youth and children’s groups, and a Family Life Centre.
- And for me personally, it meant making sure I always had my own missional frontline – school assemblies in the local community primary school, hosting groups on the Alpha course twice a year, setting up a men’s group to reach the men who didn’t attend church with their families and so on.

4. CULTIVATE A LIFE-LONG LEARNING MENTALITY

How many times have we heard vicars say, with an air of resentment, ‘They never taught me this at college.’ But realistically, how can two to three years of theological



education teach us as much as two to three decades of ordained ministry? Surely, we should be learning ten times as much in ordained ministry as we do in pre-ordination training.

I always led at my best when I was in a learning environment. Every few years, I benefitted from signing up for a leadership course – whether that was the CPAS Arrow Leadership Programme, or a Lead Academy learning community, or just making sure I got regular input from the New Wine Leadership conferences.

One of my regrets is that I didn't read more. At times, I booked regular study days into my diary, but often had to cancel them under pressure of work. I remember a run of five months when a funeral booked into every single study day I had planned. But when I did get a study / prayer / retreat day, they were very often landmark moments. Podcasts and Audible books make day-to-day learning much more accessible now, but regular time out for study, prayer, and retreat is so valuable.

But there's also so much technically that we have to learn to do the job. If I had it all to do again, I would have got better training in HR at the start. Financial procedures, health and safety, safeguarding – if we get these wrong, they can undo all our hard work. Getting them right is part of gospel ministry. So we need to continuously be learning, or finding people who have strengths in these areas to support us.

5. BE PREPARED TO FAIL

This is almost a leadership truism, but it needs some unpacking. There are certain kinds of failure that are toxic to healthy leadership – moral failures, coercive leadership, lack of integrity. I am not recommending being prepared to fail in these ways. These kinds of failures can creep up on any leader under pressure, and we need open and accountable relationships to help protect us from ourselves in these areas.

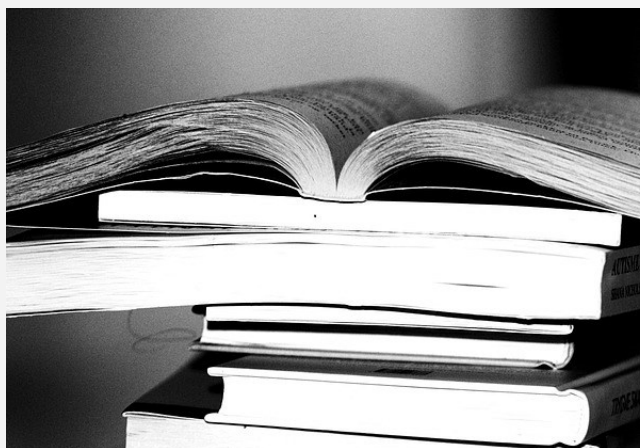
But fear of other kinds of failure can cripple our courage in leadership. If we start a risky initiative, and it doesn't work, we fear losing face, losing credibility, and ending up once bitten, twice shy.

As I look back, I don't think I risked enough, and God really had to work on this with me. I remember losing sleep for months over an inter-church regional event I was chairing which looked likely to lose £10,000. But then everyone booked in at the last minute, and the event went well and made a small surplus. Through that process, God refined in me a greater willingness to risk failure to step out in faith. So when it came to a much bigger building project, which carried a deficit of hundreds of thousands of pounds over several years – until the very end when all the money came in – I found I was able to walk much more in faith that God would provide.

I have come to love the example of Peter. If I'd stepped out of the boat, and nearly drowned in the wind and waves, I think I'd have been sitting in the bottom of the boat afterwards, dripping and shivering, and thinking, 'Well, I'm never doing that again.' But the beautiful thing about Peter is that he kept on making a mess of things, but then got up and had another go. He didn't let fear of failure keep him from stepping out in faith, and I want to have more of Peter in my leadership.

AND FINALLY...

As I look back over these lessons from parish ministry, it's struck me that most of these were lessons that didn't come instinctively. God often had to work to refine me in areas of challenge. Most of these insights may be relatively self-evident intellectually, but the experience of living them out over twenty years has made them hard-won and deeply valued. And yet, somehow, most of them are lessons that I have to keep on learning all over again...



REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- What are the areas of greatest challenge for you right now? What is God forming in you through this time, and how can you let him refine you through it?
- Is there one word or phrase here that needs to be stuck to the wall over your kettle for a few weeks?
- Do you need to let Jesus become the leader again?

