

Leadership Central

Study Leave Report

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<u>CONTENTS:</u>	<u>PAGE:</u>
INTRODUCTION	03
WHO WE ARE AS LEADERS	03
THE HEART OF FOLLOWING	04
BUSINESS CARD	05
LEADERSHIP AS SERVING	06
LEADERSHIP AS EXPERIENCE	08
LEADERSHIP AS LEADING	09
Leading out of a context	09
Leading into a context	11
LEADERSHIP AS TRANSLATION	11
Communication theory	12
Cultural understanding	13
LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING CONVERSATIONS	14
LEADERSHIP AS DISCERNMENT	16
LEADERSHIP AS PERSEVERANCE AND RESILIENCE	17
CONCLUSION: WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?	18
REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

INTRODUCTION:

Leadership is a broad subject, and the angles and avenues that one could explore are vast and many. For my 28 day period of study leave between May and July 2015, I intended to focus on leadership in the Church as cultural interpretation. My observation as an expat South African living in New Zealand is that there are subtle and significant differences in our two cultures, along with many areas of similarity and overlap; along with a third dimension of much of the leadership material that I have been exposed to being American in origin and ethos, adding another cultural perspective to the mix. How best do we assimilate and translate this leadership theory into our particular context in a meaningful and helpful manner?

As I engaged with my time of study – seeking to create space from my regular routines of ministry life in order to read, reflect and write around these thoughts, **I found myself musing mostly about the nature of leadership itself.** There are a multitude of leadership resources that give advice and insight and provide numerous bullet points around the practice of leadership – what to aim for and how to do it; however I became more interested in the questions of “why” we lead, and “how” we lead – not in the sense of how do we best roll out our leadership plans, goals and theory, but rather in the sense of who we are as leaders and what we bring as Christian human beings to the experience of both leading and being led.

Without understanding who we are and how we are as leaders, our effectiveness as leaders is substantially diminished, and any effort to translate our intentions into action is significantly hampered.

WHO WE ARE AS LEADERS:

As a leader in the church, the core essence of who I am is a follower. Unless I am a fully committed follower of Jesus, I have no place in attempting to be a leader in any manner or form!

As I look at that statement I wonder if it comes across as severe or obvious? Leonard Sweet in his book “I am a follower” makes the point that in today’s climate, there are a multitude of conferences for leaders, and endless seminars dealing with issues of leadership, and yet when last did you hear of or attend an event on following? He writes “Jesus wasn’t looking for leaders at all. Jesus was looking for followers. There may be more to being a Christian than followership. There certainly cannot be less ... But when I stand before a crowd and say, “I do not stand here today as a leader. I make no pretence to leadership. My fundamental identity is this: I am a follower,” the arena gasps, and you can hear a pin drop. The only way I can sometimes bring them back is to have them sing with me the old gospel song I introduce as “my leadership anthem”: *I have decided to follow Jesus ... no turning back, no turning back*.” (“I am a follower”, p. 20).

What informs our basic understanding of our identity as leaders, and how does our understanding influence our practice? Sweet affirms that the basic call of Jesus is this: “follow Me”, and he suggests that we’ve turned the Great Commission from “go and make disciples” to “go and make leaders”.

This is a sobering thought. I have to admit that in my experience this rings true. I know ministers who spend the majority of their time “raising leaders” and “training leaders” and “preparing leaders”. We hear it everywhere, all the time, so much so that I agree that we’ve lost the focus on following. As we explore what is central to leadership in this paper, here’s another statement to ponder:

If you want to be a great leader, be the best follower you can be.

THE HEART OF FOLLOWING:

Jesus challenged His disciples “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25), and in Matthew 28 He says “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

The emphasis of that sentence is on the phrase “make disciples”. A disciple is a pupil, a student, a learner (“mathetes” in Greek, see Strong’s concordance 3101) – someone who is willing to learn something new as they remain open to being moulded and shaped into the image of God (as in 2 Corinthians 3:18 “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”).

Although it was said in a different context, I think this quote attributed to Alvin Toffler issues a challenge to us in the church today: “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and re-learn”. The heart of following is to have the heart of a follower, to deny ourselves, to humble ourselves before God and to have an attitude of trust and an openness to correction and to further growth and learning. In this regard Psalm 25:4-5 says: “Show me Your ways, Lord, teach me Your paths. Guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Saviour, and my hope is in You all day long”.

When we think that growing in leadership is about going up a ladder of success and promotion, then we're in for a surprise, because we're about to pass many Christ-like people heading in the opposite direction. As these familiar words remind us: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:3-7, NIV 1984).

The heart of following is found in being a humble learner who is a disciple of Jesus in the truest sense of the word possible.

BUSINESS CARD:

Here's an interesting question: if you have a business card, what does it say under your name? What word or two do you use to describe yourself? I've noticed a contemporary trend to upsize our position and importance (generally speaking). I seldom see people described as secretaries or managers on their business cards these days – it's more common to have administrators and senior managers. Almost everyone near the top of their organisational structure – regardless of whether that structure has one or one hundred employees – seems to describe themselves as a "Director". And so too in the church. I've seen cards that say "senior pastor" and "lead elder" and "minister in charge". One card I have on my desk simply says "leader" – I haven't made my mind up on that one yet. But never have I seen the description "follower" or "follower of Jesus" or "learner" or "fellow learner" and so on.

Do the titles we use reflect our humility in leadership, or our ambitions and aspirations that take us beyond what is essential "Christian leadership"?

D.T. Niles is credited with the saying "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread" (*New York Times*, May 11, 1986) – which reminds us that as leaders we are simply "first followers" who lead others because of who we are as followers, and because of how we follow the Master (for more on being a "first-follower" read the prologue in Leonard Sweet's "I am a follower"). Mike Breen says this in "Building a Discipling Culture": "What has really captivated us in this discussion of discipleship is the Greek word for "disciple": *mathetes*. When directly translated it, it means *learner*. Scripture really seems to be getting at something here, something about orientating our lives around becoming *lifelong learners of Jesus*" (p. 21). Now there's a contender for my business card description, a "lifelong learner of Jesus" – how about you?

LEADERSHIP AS SERVING:

Not only are leaders followers, but also servants. Jesus described Himself in this way:

“Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”” (Mark 10:42-45).

If we are His followers, we will lead by exercising His example of serving others.

In the Presbyterian tradition, “professional” church leaders are known as “ministers” because we understand the role as one of service – to “minister” to the body of Christ. In 2004 the PCANZ adopted an approach that encourages all of its leadership personnel to be “servant mission leaders” (see Appendix A “Leadership for Mission” in the 2011 KCML Leadership Handbook). This description encourages leaders to be accountable in serving the mission of God, and values the character of the leader. The document also reminds us that the purpose of leadership is to serve the church, and that every Christian has gifts and abilities that can be offered to the Church in its daily work of ministry and mission in our world.

Service of any kind requires sacrifice, and nowhere is this more the case than with leadership. As I reflect on the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32, and as retold as a modern story in “The prodigal” by Brennan Manning and Greg Garrett), I come away with one key insight regarding serving as sacrifice, and it is this:

Leadership requires bearing the cost of grace.

Most of us find it easy to identify with the prodigal son, because we’ve had times in our lives where we’ve acted foolishly and selfishly, where we’ve hurt and disappointed people, and as Christians where we’ve come to our senses and asked God for forgiveness and pardon. We see ourselves in the story as the lost son who has come home and experienced the welcome of the father – as the child who has received first-hand the grace of our heavenly Father. But how often do we identify with the person of the older son in the story?

If the story of the prodigal is explored as a metaphor for the spiritually lost finding their way home to God, then the younger son represents those who are “lost”, the father figure represents God, and the older son represents the Church – both in the sense of those who have found their way home and those who are in the position of welcoming others home. As a beggar telling others where to find bread, or as a sibling receiving a family member back home, leadership is about both first-followers and first arrivals. And having arrived ahead of the others, leadership is the activity of preparing for and facilitating the arrival of others still to come.

It is this active participation in preparing for and welcoming others home that incurs a great cost. In the parable the older son doesn't make a good impression. He is judgemental towards the younger son, resentful of his life choices, and unimpressed with the generosity of the father. Added to this is the consideration that the feast that the father prepares doesn't cost the younger son anything – he has no means to contribute anything to the meal whatsoever. His share of the inheritance is spent, and anything that he receives comes out of the remaining estate – which consists of the father's and the older son's share. The parable doesn't explain those details, but my interpretation of the situation is that the older son is grumpy because he realises that he is having to pay in some way for both the younger son's waywardness and the father's generosity and grace. The parable ends with him not even joining the party, thereby missing out on enjoying that which he has paid for.

Does this remind you of the Church in any way? The Church is made up of those who are at home on the estate – perhaps having previously left and returned, or perhaps having been born there and having never left. The temptation is to see this as “our” estate – our buildings, our possessions, our activities, our accumulated assets, our interest income that we hope the Mission Enterprise Fund will never see ... and yet we are invited to participate in God's mission in the world, and that requires paying the cost it takes to welcome others home! We are the older son, and we can change the end of the story. We can join the Father in offering an open embrace to those returning, and we can join the party of celebration, and we can forgo our material assets in order to populate the Kingdom of Heaven with the best investment ever – all of God's prodigals returning home!

As leaders we play a pivotal role in encouraging those staying on the farm to watch and pray and prepare for those coming up over the hill in the distance. Leadership isn't easy, and like Paul we too will carry the marks of following Jesus on our bodies (Galatians 6:17), but is there any other viable alternative? And even leading/serving those on the farm is hard work. As leaders we will all be exposed to people without and within the fold who are inconsiderate, selfish, problematic, clueless, argumentative, abusive, belligerent and difficult (to name a few). There are those who will place demands on our time that far exceeds any possible contribution that they may make in return, and we will struggle with the thought that those who

are far more gracious and humble deserve much more of our time and attention than we will ever give them. And as we struggle with processing the apparent unfairness of it all, we will hopefully be reminded that grace is not fair, and it never will be. Grace is unmerited favour, and it is loving-kindness in action, and it is always way out of balance. Grace is graciously abundant, and as much as we rejoice in having benefitted from God's amazing grace in our lives, as leaders we are called to be mature enough to realise that the Father's grace costs us something too as He continues to offer it to the world at large. Leadership is responsibility, we are both the younger and the older son, and having been welcomed home it is now our turn to welcome others home – and to graciously (and gladly!) pay the cost it involves.

If we want to be leaders, are we willing to follow Jesus in humility, and to pay the cost of service and grace?

LEADERSHIP AS EXPERIENCE:

I shared a critique of leadership conferences earlier (see “who we are as leaders”), although it's also true to say that they can be highly enjoyable encounters. Being exposed to gifted leaders and motivational speakers can be uplifting and energising, as well as inspiring and refreshing – and it helps to build our reservoirs of knowledge and leadership theory. I find it hard to come home from a conference without buying a book or two, and reading them adds to the sense of fulfilment that I gain from these events, and I'm well aware of the potential trap that follows. Acquiring theory around leadership is important, but so too is processing that information in such a way that clear and practical points can be identified for the contexts in which I minister and lead. If application into our local contexts doesn't happen, then the value of the information gained diminishes. Theory and application need to be closely linked for effective leadership to take place, although there is a third aspect needed to complete this process. The *experience* of leadership is an important third leg to the stool of leadership, without which it will fall over.

There are two sides to the coin concerning the experience of leadership. Am I motivated to lead, and do I enjoy the process of leading? There are always challenges, to be sure, and some days can be tough, some are unsettling, some are lonely – but all in all, is the experience of leading a fulfilling one? The other side of the coin has to do with those who are being led – how are they experiencing the process of following, and is it motivating and enjoyable for them? Following involves challenge too, and so by enjoyment I mean are those who follow feeling a sense of worth and significance in being led. Even if they are being deeply challenged, or embracing transformation and change and other similarly uncomfortable endeavours, do they see value in the process, and does their experience cause them to have a growing sense of trust in you as a leader?

As leaders we think, we plan, and then we do. All three are necessary for effective leadership. Leadership theory can help us to know the information, but it's all in the head unless we apply it to our respective contexts, and then follows the heart response as we are immersed in the experience that follows. And those we lead are exposed to the experience of being led all the time, even when the planning and the theory may be weak or ill-prepared – and so we have to be vigilant in our awareness of leadership as experience.

How do we experience leading?

How do others experience being led by us?

LEADERSHIP AS LEADING:

This heading sounds ridiculously self-evident, and I hope it is – although I sometimes wonder how often we lose our sense of perspective in the midst of our leadership activity. To “not see the wood for the trees” reminds us of the importance of keeping the big picture in mind while dealing with smaller, more focussed aspects of the whole, and this section is a reminder to be ever mindful of who we are as leaders and where we've come from, as well as being mindful of who we are leading and where we are hoping to take them.

In the introduction I raised the question of “how” we lead, and here is part of that answer. No one leads in a vacuum – we lead *out of* a context and basic understanding of who we are and what our role entails, and we lead *into* a context of people who have an understanding of who the leader is and how they are expected to lead, as well as having an understanding of who they themselves are and how they expect to be led (possibly subconsciously more than explicitly stated in many cases). Some unpacking of this sentence is in order.

Leading out of a context:

Do we understand the context that has fashioned and formed us? This may not be as obvious as it sounds. You may well be familiar with the illustration of a frog in a pot not noticing the temperature of the water slowly rising until the frog gets cooked while feeling too comfortable to notice the danger and jump out of the pot. Familiarity breeds contempt, and it could just be that we too easily assume that we understand our context, without ever adequately exploring and navigating our personal terrain. When I was a mentoring minister to an intern a few years ago I couldn't help but notice the emphasis put on the action-reflection model of learning by KCML (Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership). How many of us older ministers have developed that practice well? Two years ago I undertook an extended Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) course which helped develop my sense of self-awareness and personal reflection

tremendously, and since then I have worked through Peter Scazzero's "Emotionally Healthy Spirituality" resources quite thoroughly. He uses the image of an iceberg to represent who we are – the portion above the water level is easily observed and well known by all, but what about what lies below the water line? If we are unaware of the contours of our own iceberg, our sense of understanding ourselves and the context we minister out of will be greatly restricted.

My own context is moulded and formed by an eclectic mix of influences and experiences which are good to recognise and acknowledge. My ancestry and country of birth, my family circumstances and influences, my Presbyterian Sunday School upbringing and exposure to a form of faith with a long history and reasoned theological foundation, my own experience of God and discerning a call into ordained ministry, my subsequent theological training and every life experience since has led me to where I am today, and understanding each component clearly is helpful in creating an awareness of the context that I lead out of whenever I engage in a leadership activity of whatever form.

A further aspect to this is the acknowledgement that those we lead also make assumptions regarding the contexts we lead out of. This is dangerous when not accurate. Some leaders give misleading signals when they are unaware of all the influencers of their context, or when they act in ways that are incongruous to the training they have received or the contexts they work within. In our current postmodern, individualistic context there seems to be a high level of autonomy exercised in many areas, which only serves to muddy the waters of a clearly understood context of ministry and leadership. Personal experience and intuition can bring welcome colour and flavour to leadership, but it can also become an impediment if misunderstood or not understood clearly.

And yet further still, those we lead can add a layer of complexity in making assumptions about the contexts we lead out from. In my experience in New Zealand I have conversed with many people attending Presbyterian churches who have little to no understanding of Presbyterian ethos and history, and for them the expectation of leadership is moulded by their own upbringing and experience, family and church background, not to mention an assortment of influences picked up from a wide range of speakers, preachers and resources that they have accessed via conferences, DVD's and Youtube videos. And this kaleidoscope of impressions can be funnelled into an assumed perception that this is how a leader should lead and how they should approach church and the world, which creates a potentially uncomfortable environment for leaders to operate within.

Know and understand the context you lead out of as clearly as you can – both the aspect of your personal context and background, and the aspect of the assumed context that those you lead may have of you.

Leading into a context:

Do we understand the context that we are leading into? The previous point dealt with the leader understanding the context that has formed their own understanding of the role and responsibilities that they carry, as well as noting the benefit of those whom are led having a good understanding of that context as well. This point is about the leader understanding the context that surrounds those whom the leader is hoping to lead.

Just as the leader will have gained an understanding of leadership through their own personal experience and training, those being led will have been influenced by their experience, environment and contact with others – all of which form an expectation of what the leader will provide by way of leadership and how. This expectation may include your approach to leadership (principles and values), your priorities (key goals and targets), your manner of leadership (style and communication), and your commitment to both leadership and those you are leading (passion and sincerity). It is highly unlikely at the outset that your position on all these areas will be in alignment with the understanding of those you are called to lead (and chances are that in a group of people they will not align with each other on each point either), however it is crucial that you work hard on growing your understanding of the context you are leading into as fully and as thoroughly as possible.

This will take time and will require the leader to communicate clearly and build good relationships that are open, honest, vulnerable and robust; and as the process unfolds the leader will have to exercise discernment in identifying where differences of opinion exist and how best to resolve them.

Leadership requires both humility and courage.

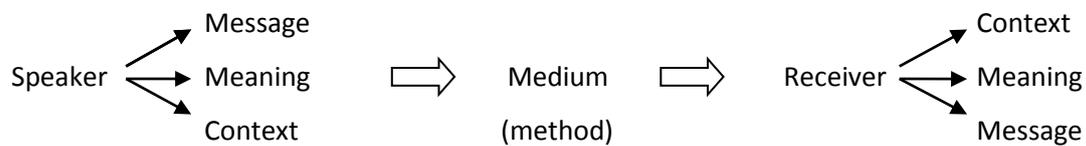
Leadership requires both humility and courage, which means being open to adjusting your expectations of both how you will lead and how you hope others will respond (humility), whilst also discerning areas where you will need to teach, encourage and lead change (courage) as the expectations of others are moulded into a form that will be open to receiving the leadership you are convicted to offer.

LEADERSHIP AS TRANSLATION:

One of the first maxims that I was taught as a ministry probationer (i.e. intern) was that “if you are leading and no one is following, all you are doing is going for a walk”. Leadership is a team effort, and within every team there is a need for understanding and clear communication.

I'm not an expert in this area, and there are loads of resources that detail **communication theory** in far better ways, but suffice it to say that there are a few basic elements in every occurrence of communication.

Simply put, there is the Speaker, the Medium and the Receiver. The Speaker has a Message to communicate which contains the Meaning the Speaker intends, which in turn is informed by the Context that the Speaker is speaking out of. The Medium is the Method of communication, which could be verbal or written or enacted (e.g. sign language) or observed (e.g. body language). The Receiver receives the Message in their own Context, which informs the Meaning that is derived from the received Message. And when communication has been effective, the meaning of the message sent is congruent with the meaning of the message received.



The theory behind how we communicate is vast and interesting, however for my purposes here I simply want to draw attention to the fact that it is essential that as leaders we be aware of these factors when we communicate. Information is not synonymous with communication, and so the transfer of information to one person from another through whatever means is not a guarantee of effective communication. An effective communicator will give careful consideration to how the message is likely to be received and interpreted by the receiver. The receiver's context will not only inform the speaker of the manner in which the message is likely to be received, but it should also influence the way in which the speaker composes their original message.

I'm not suggesting that a person changes the meaning of what they want to say or is somehow less honest in what they wish to communicate, but rather I wish to highlight the importance of understanding the context into which the message is being sent, and forming and framing the message in the most suitable and appropriate way so that the meaning of the sent message can align as closely as possible with the meaning of the received message.

This may seem to be so basic as to be self evident, but my concern is that some leaders become so focused on the detail of what they are doing and where they are going that they forget to include due consideration for others in their activity, and soon enough they are off on a walk wondering where everyone else is!

A second aspect to leadership as translation is that of **cultural understanding**. I mentioned earlier the importance of understanding the context that has formed who we are, and cultural influences play a big part in this. Leaders also need to be aware of the cultural influences of the context that they lead into, as well as understanding the cultural contexts of each individual in the group being led. This can be quite a task, especially when one considers that we are living in increasingly multi-cultural contexts all through New Zealand, and this does not just refer to people groups in general. Many individuals in New Zealand are bi-cultural or multi-cultural within themselves, which makes for some interesting interactions.

One book which I found incredibly helpful in this regard is Richard D. Lewis's "When Cultures Collide – Leading across cultures". Although the book is written primarily for business people wishing to undertake international business and trade, the principles are readily transferable in terms of understanding how different cultures operate, and how people of different cultures can come to understand and respect people from another culture. The book explains a number of important areas that affect cultural interchanges, including language, thought and conceptual differences, use of humour and time management, manners and etiquette, communication techniques, status and leadership structures, organisational structures and team meetings, motivation and trust, negotiations and contracts, decision making and problem solving across cultures. Every one of those factors is present in church life too, and leaders would do well to have a basic understanding of the differences in culture across the world – as many of them are present in our own congregations.

I mentioned in my introduction that this is an aspect of leadership close to my heart, as I recognise my heritage (South Africa), my immediate context (New Zealand) and the nature of the majority of leadership resources I've been exposed to (US American). A number of American leadership principles are simply incongruent with the values and practices of New Zealand Christians, and so my task as a leader is to understand the principles at hand, analyse them through the lens of appropriate applicability (whilst being mindful of my own cultural lenses) and then bring them to bear on my contextual situation in a helpful and receivable way by those I'm leading.

As I reflect on this task, rather than go into further detail of what that means to me (a lot of which I'm still working out), let me rather encourage you to consider your situation, and to ask:

How actively and reflectively have you been communicating and translating your leadership goals and vision to your people?

LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING CONVERSATIONS:

Emotional intelligence is often measured by the sense of awareness and maturity that a person brings to any given situation, and in this report I am largely arguing for an intelligent form of leadership practice by leaders – to be aware of what we are doing and why, and to follow that through with a positive experience of “being” – of being a follower and a leader that experiences fulfilment and joy in leading, and who sees positive results from understanding deeply and being understood clearly.

One aspect of ongoing learning is the ability to have learning conversations. Something I’ve realised in recent times is that different conversations have different purposes, and different contexts suggest different outcomes. Joseph Grenny talks about the art of having “crucial conversations”, which is another way of saying “seize the moment” when an opportunity presents itself to have a meaningful conversation that will have a significant and ongoing outcome far greater than the net result of most of your other conversations. That’s a great skill to develop, and certainly there are times when it is absolutely necessary and essential to engage in a crucial conversation.

As leaders we do that often, or certainly we engage in “important” conversations a whole lot. And in an important conversation there is often a pre-determined objective in mind. Something needs to be done by someone, and so the purpose of the conversation is to reach that specific point of clarification where there is clear agreement around who is going to do what needs to be done, and the necessary information is conveyed concerning how the task should be done. Mission accomplished.

That’s well and good, but I don’t believe that leaders should only be engaging in conversations of that nature. And as much as I originally conceived of this idea as a possible sermon or minister’s newsletter to circulate among the congregation, I now see the importance of this challenge for leaders too. And the challenge is this:

How often do we engage in conversations with others where the main goal is to simply learn about and explore whatever the given topic may be?

We may talk about having those types of conversations, but how often do we actually do so? And when we do, what might be involved? For me, learning conversations happen when we are aware and open to learning in the midst of a conversation. This learning/listening is intentional and active – and often active listening is achieved through apparently passive means, namely by humbling ourselves, quietening our inner thoughts and concentrating on hearing what the other person is saying rather than spending the time formulating our own response. Active listening is a discipline of passivity in the sense of training ourselves

to hear, to receive, to understand, to reflect, to practice compassion, to put ourselves in the shoes of another and to see life through their eyes and experience. This doesn't mean to say that we have to agree with, like or approve of everything the other person says – but we do need to hear and acknowledge and understand their perspective as best as we possibly can.

Learning conversations listen, and are open to learning. For this to happen all the parties involved in the conversation need to know that the end point of the conversation is not pre-determined. Our conversations may be predictable at times, but they should never be closed if we hope to listen and learn something along the way. There needs to be an understanding that the points of view we express are fluid and flexible, in that as we talk and listen, our views will hopefully grow in understanding and therefore develop in insight, and potentially even change in perspective. This is a learning conversation.

Learning conversations should not be confused with debates, which is the default way of reasoning in Western culture and the historical form of conversation in general church discussions. The goal of a debate is to make your case in the most compelling way possible in order to steer the outcome towards a pre-determined point, namely your entrenched position. In a debate, deception and duplicity are serious crimes, and to change your viewpoint along the way brings confusion, distrust, and even distaste.

Changing your position in a debate is problematic, whereas in a learning conversation it becomes a sign of progress and achievement – something to be celebrated! Learning conversations allow room for revelation and discovery as we unpack the issue at hand – asking the Holy Spirit all the while to lead us and to inform our conversations. As Paul urges us, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2), a renewal that comes by learning to listen well. As James so eloquently puts it, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19).

Leaders can role model learning conversations for those who follow. Not every conversation is able to be a learning one, although most can serve this purpose in some way if we apply ourselves to them well enough. For advice on how to have “fearless” conversations (a wider scope than I've covered here), I would refer you to Thom and Joani Schultz's books “Why nobody wants to go to church anymore” and “Why nobody wants to be around Christians anymore” for some further reading. I haven't read Grenny's “Crucial Conversations” yet (having only heard him talk on the subject at a Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit presentation), however others have endorsed the book as a valuable resource in this area.

LEADERSHIP AS DISCERNMENT:

While on study leave I watched the DVD “Soul Surfer”, which tells the inspirational story of Bethany Hamilton, an American surfer who at the age of 13 loses her left arm below the shoulder to a shark attack in Hawaii while surfing. The movie follows her biographical story of recovering from the attack and resuming active surfing in competitions, along with the role that her Christian faith plays in her resilience and motivation against the odds.

One particular scene that struck me as noteworthy is when she is preparing to perform in a national surfing competition and her father reminds her that she has a natural talent for sensing where the big waves form, and he tells her: “Don’t take any wave that comes along. The great surfers, they all had this sixth sense, they know when the best waves are coming, they feel it. It’s a gift. You have that gift too ... You know that moment, between the sets, when it’s quiet, when the waves haven’t even formed yet. It’s just energy, surging through the water. Well, that’s the time to be patient, listen to your instinct, trust it. You’ll know. Go get ‘em” (Soul Surfer, 1 hour 21 minutes in). Near the end of the session Bethany paddles away from the other surfers and is the only one to catch a massive swell that forms out of nowhere.

There are elements of leadership that can be taught, and there are others that can only be lived, and then there are those which are practiced. The main observation of this report is that our core identity as leaders is found in following Jesus – something that can only be lived out in our lives. And yes, there is theory to learn and translate and to hone through teaching and learning. However, the effectiveness of our leadership is predominantly realised through the practice of discernment – where we trust in God to lead us and to give us the insight necessary to lead in His way, and where we develop the art of discernment as we allow the Holy Spirit to inform our decision making processes as leaders and servants of God. Knowing where the waves are forming is essential to a surfer, and knowing where God is active and moving is essential to every Christian leader. And only by being shaped by God and trusting our transformed instinct can we practice the art of discernment through trial and error – following God’s prompting and then reflecting on the accuracy of our discernment, and then following again.

How informed is your leadership process by discerning where God is moving?

For more on how to develop skills of discernment, I would highly recommend Bill Hybels’ book “The power of a whisper” which offers practical advice on how to grow in this important area.

LEADERSHIP AS PERSEVERANCE AND RESILIENCE:

As we move towards the end of this study report, I want to encourage you in both your leadership and your followership. Leading isn't easy, and often we find ourselves exposed to public scrutiny, with all that that entails. As with many other things in life, our character is not determined by the mistakes we make, but by how we respond and recover from them. Resilience is crucial. Getting up after a bad fall is far more of a witness than by talking in broad terms about things that have never been tested or tried. Authenticity is valuable currency, whereas academic hypothesis is not as convincing or comforting or inspiring.

Brene Brown is a sociologist who has written a number of books on the power of vulnerability, the latest of which is called "Daring greatly". In the introduction to the book, she writes that "vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection" (Daring greatly, p. 2). I have found this an inspirational resource that speaks of the value of taking risks and making oneself vulnerable, and in fact Brown contends that without vulnerability a person's capacity to grow and mature is severely limited. As leaders we are called to engage with the issues before us, to "pick up our cross" as we follow Christ, and to persevere with whatever God is calling us towards. In Brown's words, "rather than sitting on the sidelines and hurling judgment and advice, **we must dare to show up and let ourselves be seen**. This is vulnerability. This is *daring greatly*" (p. 2, bold and italics in the original).

I mentioned the need for courage earlier, and being vulnerable is a courageous act. Being humble in a world that only seems to appreciate Type A personalities is a tough choice to make, even in the Church. Pausing to follow when everyone seems to be crying out for leadership is counter-cultural and downright unusual. And yet it is also what we are primarily called to do as Christians – to leave our nets (whatever they may be in each of our lives), and to follow Jesus. To know that "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). As both followers and leaders, we need to be aware of the obstacles we will face, and regardless of the cost, having taken into account everything that has been discussed in this report so far, we need to press on and press through, for the sake of Christ.

We walk in the strength of God, and His power at work in our lives is the example we set for others to follow.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

One might reasonably expect this question to normally be found in an introduction rather than a conclusion, however it appears here in the right place for our context having considered all that has gone before. How do we best understand and define leadership in light of the issues of followership that have been highlighted in this report?

In reflecting on who you are as a follower and as a leader, how will you lead and why?

This question will inform your approach to leadership in any given context – for after all, leadership is not rigid or static, but rather it has many angles and many expressions under its umbrella. Different people define leadership differently, and focus more on certain characteristics of leadership than others. Some people emphasise certain dynamics above others, and popular contenders that I’ve seen centre around aspects of influence, or example, or inspiration or instruction – and you may have come across others.

I’ve added a few considerations to the mix in considering what is important in leadership, and admittedly my content is quite possibly one-sided in many respects - but then again, this is a study leave report, and not a thesis or a dissertation. If your interest lies in an area of leadership that I haven’t touched on then I am sure that you will be able to source that content elsewhere.

As for me, as I have reflected on the nature of leadership during this time of study leave the overwhelming impression left on me in answer to what it means to be a Christian leader has been this – to be a disciple, a lifelong learner, a first-follower of Jesus.

In addition to that focus, I’ve also been challenged to be a courageous servant who is intentionally aware of my context and the contexts of others, and to do my best to effectively translate my leadership goals and vision into the environments I engage in. I’m reminded to willingly engage in learning and discerning experiences, to be vulnerable and resilient, and to always persevere in this task of leadership that God has called me into.

*Being a fully committed follower of Jesus is at the core of our identity as Christians, and as leaders, and this is what informs our theory, our practice and our experience. **For me, this is Leadership Central.***

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BIBLE TRANSLATION USED:

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