

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Leading: The challenges of leadership 1. Why is it hard?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: This is the first of three sessions on the need for courage in leadership. This session lays out the challenges while sessions 2 and 3 offer some ways to meet them.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why do we need courage in leadership?

Understanding the information (40 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Why is leadership always challenging? There are many reasons:



Leadership always means managing change. Every change we seek will be for the good but change still involves moving from a place we know, to unknown territory, from security to insecurity.

Every aspect of leadership requires energy, whether that is to inspire others, to enable them by spotting their gifts and walking with them, or to mobilise a group of people in a sustainable way.

As leaders one of our unique callings is towards long-term commitment. If you influence others, you have responded to the call not to walk away when the going gets tough in a way that other people haven't. This is particularly true in a volunteer-culture, such as a church.

This kind of commitment is essential too because, while in some cases there is a definite end to a leadership commitment (for example managing a building project), most leadership related to people and God's kingdom has a never-ending horizon – there is always more to be sought.

With all this in mind, when Paul wrote to Timothy, encouraging him in his leadership, it is not surprising that in a few short sentences he reminds him that he needs to join him in suffering and to persevere "like a good soldier of Christ Jesus." To stay in the race "as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules." And to have the energy of a "hardworking farmer". (2 Timothy 2: 3-6)

Leadership can mean **hardship and sacrifice**. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.” (2 Corinthians 1: 8-9) Despite God’s call, Paul felt out of his depth, under enormous pressure, and in a situation which was beyond his power or skill.

It can require **hard work** “Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.” (1 Thessalonians 2:9)

We might have to **deal with disappointment with others** because they let us down, because they leave us or because progress is slow. We may persevere for a long time yet with little visible fruit. “...since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart....by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.

We might have to **deal with disappointment with God**. “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life....He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”” (1 Kings 19: 1-4)

Particularly for Christian leaders, **opposition/persecution can be normal**.

The opposition and persecution Jesus and the apostles experienced led to their executions. For Paul, sharing in Jesus’ sufferings was a natural expectation for those ministering in His name: “We are hard pressed on every side... We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.” (2 Corinthians 4: 8-10) He wrote that they had “...been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.” (1 Thessalonians 2:2)

We can expect **spiritual attack**. While no one in Scripture is paranoid in an unhealthy way about spiritual opposition (“Mock the devil and he will flee from you.” (James 4:7)) there is nevertheless a need to be vigilant and not surprised by it. Paul counsels the Ephesians to “... put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground...” (Ephesians 6: 13) Note he doesn’t say if the day of evil comes, but when. Peter, who must have been aware how quickly a leader can fall, wrote “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Peter 5:8-9)

We may experience **loneliness or, on the other hand, a lack of privacy**

The story of the disciples falling asleep in the moment of Jesus’ greatest need in Gethsemane speaks of the reality of loneliness in leadership, particularly during the most challenging moments. We can feel there is no one who will “watch with us one hour.”

On the other hand, a role of influence puts in a more public place than others, with our reactions and actions being more visible. We can feel more in demand from those who will be unaware of our circumstances. Having heard of John the Baptist’s death Jesus “...left in a boat to a remote area to be alone. But the crowds heard where he was headed and followed on foot from many towns.” (Matthew 14:13)

In order to awaken the motivation to change, it falls on leaders too to express the problems in an existing situation – to create dissatisfaction with the status quo. The double burden of being people who necessarily have a vision of the future which the community does not yet share, and of being the person who has to unsettle others in order to get there can be a lonely place to be.

People's attachments/expectations/projections: While we have choice over our actions and words, we have no influence over how they are received by others. Disappointing, provoking, or confusing others will be inevitable. Jesus' healings were seen as liberation by some but interpreted as acts of the devil by others. He was constantly working to ensure that people didn't try to enthrone Him as the Messiah who would overthrow the Romans.

As well as people's false expectations threatening the nature of our purpose or mission, we can also find ourselves the victims of other people's disillusionment. It is common for human beings to project our unfulfilled hopes onto leaders who can be everything we fail to be. If we find ourselves being idealized in this way our leadership role it can be easy to experience initial enthusiasm turning to indifference, or even resentment when we fail to meet these dreams.

Criticism and disagreement: If we are leading people we will experience criticism. To make our happiness dependent on always pleasing others is to be chasing a moving target. It is the leader's role to define reality, and therefore we have to take responsibility for dealing with the music group leader who can't sing, or the staff member who isn't doing their job. We will also inevitably be part of taking responsibility for discussions about wider need or direction which need to be resolved. At these times we will be processing disagreement and criticism from those who feel threatened or have different perspectives.

At the same time, as public and less than perfect people ourselves, our faults will be more obvious – and often to those with whom we might not have a close relationship but are invested in our area of oversight in some way and therefore have a valid reason to feedback to us. While criticism from those we love and trust may be painful, it is easier to receive. The reality for leaders, though, is that we will receive it from those we don't know or perhaps trust so well.

Twenty-first century context: One of the features of the age we live in is constant and rapid change. The term "VUCA" has become a fashionable acronym for times which are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambitious. The writer Brian McLaren tells us, "You and I happen to be born at an "edge", at a time of high tectonic activity in history- the end of one age and the beginning of another. It is a time of shaking. Yesterday's maps are outdated, and today's will soon be too."

The temptations of leadership - dealing badly with power or success: While our natural instinct is to want to see fruitfulness through our leadership, the temptation if we do taste success can be to lose our sense of dependence on God, or even succumb to unhealthy pride. In addition, we can find ourselves drawn into a cycle of having our own needs met by the approval we receive from others by meeting theirs.

It is interesting to note that straight after the miracle of feeding the 5000, Jesus immediately "insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. After telling everyone good-bye, he went up into the hills by himself to pray." (Mark 6: 45-46)

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This offers the temptations of being able impose our personality on an organisation and to set the rules and structure the community in a way that meets our own needs. To choose control, rather than collaboration.

Henri Nouwen put this temptation like this,

“Power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people.”

The cumulative effect of all these challenges can easily derail leadership in (at least) three major ways.

Burnout. We can experience “death by a thousand paper cuts”, losing our vision, having nothing fresh to offer, or at worst, suffering collapse.

Defendedness. We can retreat into a leadership style in which, rather than open up to others and empower them, we can increasingly “manage” ourselves and others.

Denial. We can lack the courage or skill to take responsibility for dealing with issues, allowing long-term problems to develop.

In the next two sessions we explore how we can resist these three threats.

Discuss: Which of these challenges most impact you?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read 2 Corinthians 4: 8-12 which describes the sacrificial nature of leadership.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:

What does this passage teach me about God?

What does this passage teach me about people?

How does this passage call me to obey God?

What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:

<https://youtu.be/fKp65FhD0>

What struck you as important in the video?



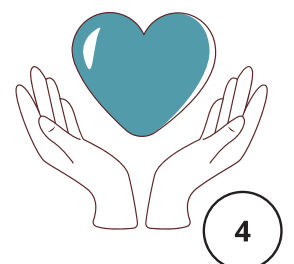
Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Spend a few minutes praying for leaders you know.





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