

'LEADERS LOVE PEOPLE'

OPENGATE STEP MODULE 6, APRIL 30TH 2022 R Horswell

1. Jesus' Model
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3. The Few – What is required of the Leader?
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1. Jesus' Model *Loving involves helping people to become more Christlike*

Consider these quotations:-

But God demonstrates his own **love** for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *Romans 5:8*

“God loves you just the way you are, but He *refuses* to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus. ” *Max Lucado*

Then Jesus came to them and said, “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 28:18-2*

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! **As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.**” *John 20:21*

It's no new revelation to anyone here that God loves us with a love which resulted in the Son giving up his life for us. Nor is it a new revelation that he wishes us to become more and more like Jesus. It *is* interesting that in Matthew 28 he calls us to *make disciples*, not just believers. There's a sense of forward progress about the word 'disciple', someone keeping their eye on the Master to learn more, whereas the word 'believer' might be seen as static. And we can see that Jesus expects us to follow his example from John 20:21, the last of these quotations. I don't think that means we're all called to be itinerant preachers (although some of us may be!) but we are all called to love people and to help them become more like Christ, just as we ourselves can be helped by others to become more like him.

Recently Paul and Francesca Gander came to help pastor Wantage Community Church. I have been impressed by their love and care for a whole new group of people and how quickly they have got to know us. I asked Francesca what were the most important aspects to her of loving people, and she wrote this:-

To love people is to see people as God sees them - everyone is unique, created in the image of God. God's love, grace and forgiveness are gifts for us all. We need to demonstrate this truth, being free from judgement and condemnation. None of us is without sin and we are

all a work in progress. There is still a place to challenge - pointing people to God and not ourselves (and ultimately enabling them to flourish in their faith).

To re-iterate: From the least to the greatest we carry the image of God, but we are still works in progress. There's no place for judgement or condemnation, although there may be a place for challenge. Our aim is to see people 'flourish in their faith'. If that's Paul and Francesca's heart for us, Wantage Community Church is very blessed to have them leading us, as I believe it is a true reflection of Jesus' heart.

What other aspects of Jesus' model can we see?

Dealing with crowds, small groups and the few

Jesus taught the **crowds** (and healed the sick – it would be good if we could emulate that a bit more often!) He also chose the **Twelve** to travel with him and have closer access to him, and, under certain intimate circumstances, he just took **three** of them, Peter James and John, to be witnesses.

Encouragement, correction, giving opportunities to practice

He could encourage the disciples but would correct them when they were saying the wrong thing: remember Peter's acknowledgement of Jesus as the Christ, followed by his attempt to stop Jesus talking about his death (Matt 16). Jesus did not give up on them, although sometimes amazed by their lack of faith. Jesus even let them practice without him, as when he sent out the 72 to announce the nearness of the kingdom of God (Lk 10).

Service, friendship, vulnerability, being known

We know that Jesus served them, for example by giving time to teach them, but also by washing their feet, and that at the last supper he called them 'friends', not servants (John 15:15).

And he was vulnerable with them, for example in Gethsemane before the crucifixion, when he asked for the cup of suffering to pass from him, before he gave his life for them and for us all.

He wanted his disciples to know not just what he said, but what he did in private moments, how he related to the Father, how he thought, in short, who he was.

Prayerfully choosing who to invest in, and the rewards of loving people

There may be occasions then when we are called as leaders to have deeper relationships with a small group of people with the aim of helping them grow in Christ, and perhaps an even closer relationship with just a few people. But it's worth noting that Jesus, in consultation with his Father, *chose* those who would be closest to him, and we too should surely make such choices a matter for prayer. To relate closely to people is to share yourself, which in our case will reveal our weaknesses, as well as our strengths, and may even (as happened to Jesus) risk betrayal, and yet there are rich rewards. To quote Francesca again,

When people invite and allow you into their lives - sharing their life and faith story - this is a reward of 'loving people'. The privilege of journeying with people through their highs and lows and sharing in the joy of answered prayer - this is a reward of 'loving people'. Seeing people grow in their knowledge and love of God and therefore in their relationship with Him, is a reward of 'loving people'. Ultimately, empowering and enabling people to do what God is calling them to do, is the reward of 'loving people'.

REFLECTION

Who taught you the most about living the Christian life? How did they do it?

Is it inevitable that our growth in Christlikeness slows down the longer we have been following him, or can it speed up? What makes the difference?

Leaders Love People.....part 2

2. Our Churches

i) Beyond the Church

Loving our neighbours, blessing the community

Before I consider our churches in Opengate, I should mention that if Leaders love people this will not be confined to the church family. Many of our churches are involved in various ways to build and help their local communities and demonstrate God's love for the world in that way. Jesus calls us to love our neighbours, and this is not dependent on their response to the Gospel.

ii) The Congregation

Taking time to get to know as many people as possible

By 'the congregation' I mean people who attend our churches for whatever reason. Again I want to reference Paul and Francesca's experience of coming into a church where they did not know the majority of people. They made the decision to prioritize getting to know the members of the leadership team as they would be working closely with them, then others who held leadership responsibility in the church. Francesca writes, "[Following this we continue to spend time with the wider church family and newcomers, outside of Sunday mornings. We would do this in a number of ways such as hosting meals, inviting them for coffee and cake, or meeting them at coffee shops.](#)"

I know Paul has also gone to the youth group to get to know the young people and Francesca has been in a Children's church group. This may not be every leader's calling but as a parent I would always be encouraged to know that my church leader, or at least some of the leadership team, had an interest in what happens to the younger element of the church on a Sunday and beyond. We know that Jesus, contrary to the spirit of his age, deeply valued children.

Proverbs 27:23 Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds

Loving people involves welcoming, serving (often in difficult, boring or inconvenient ways!), and above all spending time with them, whoever they are.

iii) The Small Group

A place for care and encouraging growth in Christlikeness

Many of our churches in Opengate have a fairly high percentage of mature Christians and it's probably fair to say that trying to find a mentor/disciple for everyone has been attempted in a number of ways over the years without much success. However midweek groups can to some extent fill the gap. They are also a great training ground for leaders and provide many opportunities to love people!

Opportunities for leadership but also 'one another' ministry

The small group leader can seek to encourage group members to lead Bible studies, lead worship, pray out, prophesy, share experience and stories of faith, pray for each other's non-Christian contacts, possibly work together in evangelism, and so on. The Bible encourages us to care for one another, bear each other's burdens, confess to one another. A small group setting where there is trust between members can do this and not all pastoral care has to fall upon the leader themselves.

Support for the leader, and specialist ministries

However, the leader should have other leaders, or at least the church pastor, to support him or her in difficult pastoral situations. Group members can also be directed to individuals or organizations with known expertise in certain areas, for example care for the elderly, finances, bereavement, and the like.

An example of a group focussed more on accountability

Proverbs 27:17 says: **As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.** This is often applied to one-to-one discipling but can be just as true in a small group, where one person's faith journey may be just the thing to help someone else, and at times a friendly rebuke may even be possible. Recently in Wantage we have had separate discipleship meetings for the men and women on the leadership team where it has been possible to ask harder questions about our spiritual lives, our relationships, our work and so on, and it has given us some accountability to each other for these things.

A comment on groups in Lockdown

During lockdown Small Groups gave people fellowship on Zoom and prayer support on What's App groups as well as help with shopping, sharing encouraging songs and readings and boosting some technological expertise! They were a vital means of keeping the church together.

Two examples where love changed a group

I want to conclude with two stories about small groups where the love of the leaders for their groups won out over potentially difficult situations.

Many years ago I was in a church where the groups were mainly geographically arranged. As a result one group was made up almost entirely of older ladies from retirement flats and their leader was a young single man not long out of university. At first sight this might not have worked at all, but the young man had a car, a pastoral heart and a willingness to give himself to the people in his group. He gave lifts, visited, phoned, and chatted to the ladies in church. Before long they didn't want any other leader!

The second situation involved a group of people who had been Christians for a while and had very clear ideas of what the group should and should not do. Prayer was essential, Bible Study not so much. The leaders began to have meals together with the group before the meeting with different members often bringing some of the food. This was appreciated by the several single members. The leaders were willing to help practically, and were patient, listening to what people said and sharing their own ups and downs with the group. Soon the group began to appreciate their leaders' love and honesty, and after a couple of years the group's cohesion and loyalty was really strong.

To love a difficult group in that way requires that you know God's love for you, and for your group members. This is something that needs persevering prayer, and support from other leaders who can advise and encourage you!

REFLECTION

What priority do small midweek groups have in your life?

What are your experiences of small midweek groups as a leader or participant?

Do they in fact help your faith to flourish and provide opportunities for your spiritual growth?

How can you help others with their spiritual growth either within a group, or, if you don't go, in other situations?

Leaders Love People...part 3

3. The Few – What is required of the leader?

The need for relationship

I am thinking here of the equivalent of Jesus' closest group of disciples, Peter, James and John, or perhaps just a one-on-one mentoring relationship. In a group situation the members would need to be relationally close as mutual trust and support will be important.

Remembering that Jesus calls his disciples friends, mentoring often arises where there is a good relationship between people. The better the friendship, the more honest people are hopefully able to be, although time will also develop depth in the relationship.

Love God, receive his love for others, pray for them

All the things we have talked about in previous modules such as 'Leaders love God,' 'Leaders love the Bible' are absolutely necessary here. In fact of course they are necessary for any kind of Christian leadership, including Small Group leadership. Praying for those we seek to lead and serve will always be essential, as will asking God to give us his love for them.

Take direction and engage support!

We will need to hear from God if he is calling us to mentor/disciple anyone, and who that person or those few people are. Before taking that step we need also to speak with a church leader and make sure we have in place someone to whom we are accountable, with whom we can discuss any arising problems, and share any disappointments and successes!

Learn from the group

Nor will mentoring be a one-way street: as imperfect people we will have plenty to learn from the image of God in our disciple or mentee! A younger friend of mine was having a conversation with two older leaders about a situation where the church had caused him pain. One leader could not accept his point, but the other listened carefully and apologised for the pain the young man had felt. My young friend said, "That response taught *me* how to receive criticism."

Get faith and vision for our 'few' but we cannot be entirely responsible for them

We should be asking God to give us vision and faith for anyone we are trying to lead. How wonderful for impetuous Simon son of Jonah to hear from Jesus, “ I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. “ Matt 16:18 It cannot have been easy to hold this vision in place through all Peter’s boisterous ups and bitter downs, but Jesus had it from his Father and persevered in faith for it.

Did Jesus have vision and faith for Judas Iscariot? Discuss! As Pete Greig says, what a testimony of grace that would have been, if Judas had been able to return to Jesus and receive forgiveness, as he surely would have. But Judas’ faith in Jesus failed him.

It may be that not all our mentees make it to where we had hoped they would go. We need security in our own identity as God’s beloved children to see where we do, and do not, need to take responsibility for what happens to them.

Time, crises, boundaries, expectations

Mentoring will take time and at times is sure to be inconvenient. There is a saying that a week is a long time in politics, but it is in the emotional life as well. If someone is having a real crisis, seeing them next week is going to be too late.

However, ordinarily it should be possible for both mentor and mentee to discuss realistic expectations and boundaries. How often to meet, how to communicate (and don’t we all have our favourite means of communication!) and when to communicate: not at the children’s bed time, not after 10pm or whatever. The time frames should be sustainable for everyone concerned.

There’s a very popular phrase often used for opportunities to learn from a more mature Christian, that you should ‘do life together’. For me it has unfortunately become a cliché, although I agree that you get to know people better if you are working on some kind of project; be it serving coffee in church, painting a room or putting up a tent. However, a couple I know put a lot of ‘shared life’ time with their family into the people they were trying to disciple, only to be told, “You never give us any of your time!” The disciples in this case then specified that they wanted an uninterrupted evening, with no children around, to talk – and not just a carefully measured hour either. That was an example of mismatched expectations!

The need for reflection and analysis

After a session with your disciple you will need to reflect on it and ask God for help to analyse it well. Sometimes in going over a conversation I have just had, God drops an idea into my mind, “Oh, that’s what’s going on!” The little clues suddenly add up. Or I will think, “That’s a question I need to ask next time.” Equally we may need to analyse a situation which has occurred and share that analysis with our ‘few’ – think of Jesus explaining to the disciples why they could not cast a demon out of a boy, but he could –**‘this kind only comes out by prayer’ (Mark 9:29)**

Ask probing questions

Sometimes too we need to ask the very probing questions. Justin Whitmel Early in his book ‘*The Common Rule*’ tells how he and a close friend had an apparently frank discussion sharing their lives, and ended by saying, ‘Is there anything you aren’t telling me?’ They agreed that there wasn’t, but some time later the friend rang back and admitted that he was struggling with a serious moral problem and needed help. The conversation had given him an opportunity to be honest, even though he didn’t manage to take it at once.

People move on... disciples belong to the King

Discipleship relationships do not need to last forever, although friendships may well remain. Jesus after all left his disciples physically, expecting them to rely on the Holy Spirit. Every secondary school teacher knows that their most able pupils need to go on to study at university if they are to fulfil their academic potential. The teacher's success is to set their student up to move on smoothly. But what is success in the Kingdom? James the son of Zebedee had only fourteen short years after Jesus' resurrection to serve God on this earth before he was martyred. Why did one of Jesus' closest friends get taken so soon? We don't know, but we do know our disciples and mentees belong to the King, not to us, and the King is at liberty to use them as he will.

REFLECTION

Does anything in this section stand out to you?

Are you already involved in mentoring someone or a few people?

What for you would be the most challenging aspect of mentoring someone?

Can aspects of Christian discipling be brought into the workplace?

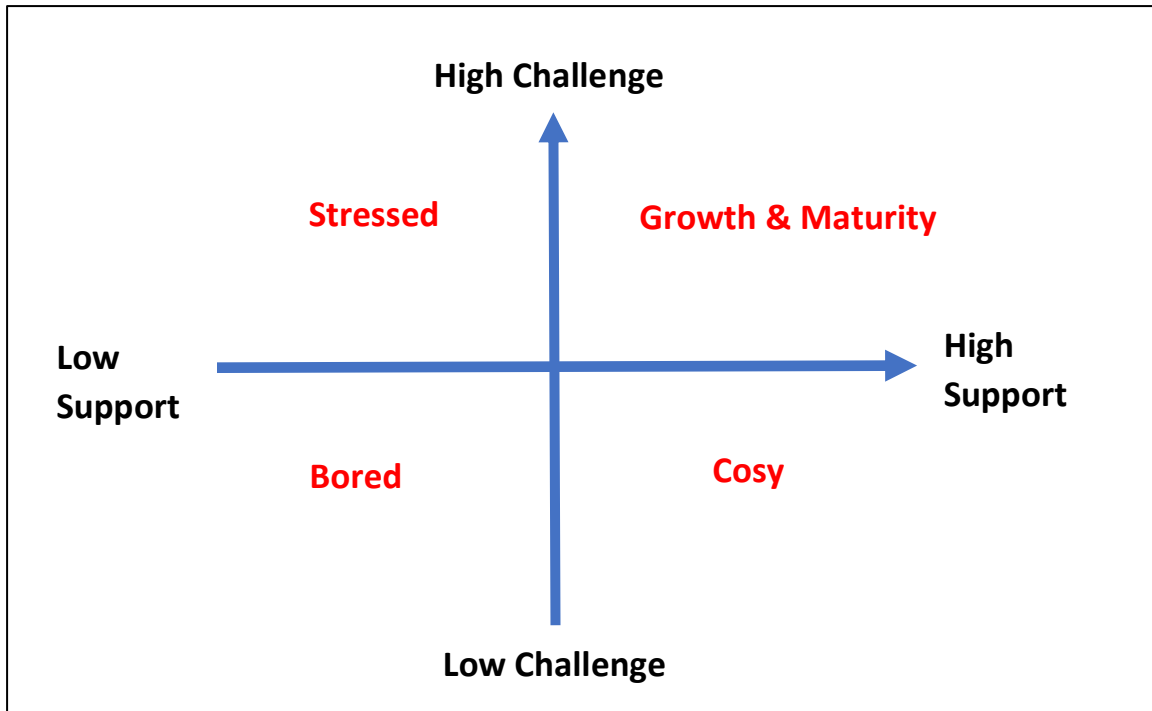
Leaders Love People...part 4

4. Mentoring to Develop Gifts

This is part of loving people

Loving people will involve helping them to develop and use all their gifts as far as possible and when the time is right. If we have a gift ourselves it may well be that God wants us to help others develop their similar gift.

The Challenge/support graph



This is a very familiar graph of how to help people grow. Too much challenge with no support leads to stress. A couple I knew wanted to start a Christian Union in a local secondary school. The church leadership had neither the manpower nor the expertise to support them, and none came from the school either. There was nothing wrong with the vision, but after a lot of stress for the couple the project never got off the ground.

If by contrast an individual is neither supported nor challenged they are likely to be bored. Finding the appropriate challenge may not be easy, but that is where a perceptive leader could have a role.

Quite often in the cosy corner we might find members of our midweek groups, well enough looked after but not really being asked to contribute much.

Finally there is the fourth quadrant where gifting and spiritual life generally is being properly nurtured. For example, teaching a group in our Sunday Children’s work might seem daunting for a new recruit at first, but after watching a more experienced teacher, then trying it out with help at hand and plenty of opportunity to discuss any problems arising, they are likely to be confident to be in charge themselves.

In conclusion I would like to ask **Andy Bruce** to share his experience of mentoring people who have wanted to get involved with leading worship in church on Sunday, what’s the process, and is it just about the music?!

REFLECTION

Take a few minutes of silence to ask God for a greater awareness of his love for you. Ask him to open your heart to love other people more.

Then share anything which struck you in this module and anything which you might like to act on in the coming days.