

## Leaders, load bearers and the left behind

How our decisions about time and leadership impact those who are their primary carers, and through them, our children.

### *Anywhere, Any day*

Over time in my role as a pastor, a playgroup leader, a parenting course facilitator, and as a plodding along parent myself, I have come to have some “repeat-offender” conversations. What I mean is, if I ever end up in conversation with a parent who raises an issue or a struggle, I have either heard it before, or will hear it again, many times. **We all are working the same ground** and because my friends and colleagues and the people at the supermarket and the park are mostly parents, these issues, which are on my heart, but also in my work follow me round and tug at my sleeve, like a three year old always reiterating the incessant question, “Why?”

### *Europe, July 2011*

But today, today was a day - one day, that I thought would be a day with no work. Running away, I was treating myself to a day of random adventure. It was a day planned to be an oasis amidst all of the writing and presenting and producing and parenting of the past 6 months. I am on my own in a strange land, with more or less strangers. Surely work cannot find me hiding here!

I am sharing a meal with a woman who is the mother of preschool children. The meal was cooked for us by her husband, while we chatted outside around the children playing in the sand pit. Any meal that I don't have to cook for myself is automatically delicious, and this has been one to relish.

But over dessert, the conversation turns down what suddenly becomes a very familiar alley for me. She begins to speak of her frustration, and **honestly names her anger**, at the way she feels excluded by her church.

Her congregation has recently shifted a 6pm service to 5 pm. Not a huge change, one might think, but it now falls right on what parents in the trade know as ‘arsenic hour’. That time of day when all of a child’s conflicting physical, emotional and social needs are heightened and seem to conspire against any order, action or consolation. Most of us have been there and we know what it’s like...and let’s be frank, apart from provoking deep heart felt cries of “Oh God!” it is a time that is convincingly non conducive to corporate worship.

But there is another sting for her, and it is also one that I have heard before. **“The church, the pastor, have got what they want.** They want my husband, to lead, but they don’t want me, and they have made it so I cannot go. So, they’ve got what they want”.

Anyone can see that this is an ecclesiological disaster of the first order. These are the things that Paul stomps up and down about in First Corinthians, his blood boiling and steam coming out his ears!

# Leadership

## 'Leaders, load bearers and the left behind' continued...

- There is disunity, a fracture occurring in this community.
- Some of the more vulnerable members, a mother and the young, are being pushed aside and excluded, while, those who have the desirable gifts are welcomed and elevated.
- Furthermore, a mealtime is being disrupted...some are eating at home in relational poverty, while others feast at the Table of the King. Paul hates this! "Some of you are sick and dying because of this!" he warned the Corinthians.
- Families are being rent with competing agendas. (I'm pleased to say no one is sleeping with their mother in law) but there is a clash of allegiances for both the husband, between his call and giftedness and capability to serve in leadership, and also for the woman; she is loathe to constrain her husband, or to question the pastor who has set up this conflict of roles and routines in this family.
- and, be it unwittingly, the pastor has betrayed some of his flock.



We ought also to acknowledge that there are some precious opportunities that are being missed.

- Two young children do not see or experience (and this is so important) their creative and godly dad exercising his gifts, serving the body of Christ. His gifts are for the whole body, and surely this should include his very own children.
- And there is a reciprocal loss, for the father. Our children are great litmus paper indicators for the ph balance of our practice. A man or woman whose own children are in the congregation, one hopes, will be more attuned to the impact of their delivery on those whose faith is tender, and on those whose faith is primed and ready to explode with growth.
- The wife who is staying at home, is also a spirit-filled-and-gifted member of the body of Christ. Her service is being lost to the rest of the community.

# Leadership

## 'Leaders, load bearers and the left behind' continued...

A situation like this often reaches a stalemate, and the church simply re-commits itself to whoever is in front of them, and the narrative of "I don't belong" is underlined in another woman's life, the male leadership of the church is reinforced and the basic paradigm of 'whatever it was we were doing, let's keep doing that' becomes the strategic plan for the next season. The church misses its children in their most impressionable and open stage.

This has implications for our missiology and vision for evangelism. I would be the last person to put all the missional eggs into the '60 minutes on a Sunday' basket, and hold the Sunday service as the primary site of evangelism, far from it! But it is also unthinkable that it is not a site of evangelism either, in so much as all we are called to do is to make disciples. If what we are doing is not proclaiming good news, we should stop doing it. In the same way in which, if we are not exercising pastoral care, or justice, for that matter, in what we are doing we should simply stop. Straight away, Cease and desist! Then start doing what Jesus has clearly asked us (and will empower us) to do.

Thus, if the church has a culture in which families are marginal, in which it is hard for even the most faithful mother and child to attend, we will be hard pressed to convince ourselves that we are extending an invitation beyond the church membership to others - either to join us in the celebration of the resurrection, or to become disciples of Jesus.

Nearing the end of the conversation, this godly and faithful mother, becomes shadowed by a sense of resign. "I don't want to just be a complaining person." I hear the self-judgment, the 'shoulds' of generations who we have convinced to ignore their gut or their heart to their intuition and maybe in the process the disruption of the spirit.

"I don't want to just be a complaining person."

There is no such thing in the body of Christ. There is no such thing as just one complaining woman. We are made of the relationships and covenants and allegiances of our lives. If she is suffering or struggling or sweating it out here, although she feels terribly isolated, she is assuredly not alone. Her husband is suffering - "between a rock and a hard place" he tells me, and I don't want to think about the two parties in that metaphor in too much detail - her church community is suffering - her world is suffering. If one part of the body is hurting, the whole body is affected.

"I don't want to just be a complaining person."

I feel my pastor's heart thumping against the cage of ribs and threatening a jail break.

**I cannot let this self suppression (and the suppression of children that will be its consequence) go without a challenge.**

# Leadership

## 'Leaders, load bearers and the left behind' continued...

"You are not just a complaining person; you are missing the thing that is at the very core of why we have church, you are missing community. Community is essential for Discipleship, and you are missing it, in the context of worship. That is no good. It is important to address." I launch in.

On the one hand I am a guest in her home, and I am certainly not wanting to offend her. On the other hand, I am soon to leave and flee the foreign country, who knows maybe never to pass that way again, so maybe there is a gracious space to speak bold words of encouragement. If I am going to express advocacy or solidarity or even just empathy, now is the moment.

"I will pray about this for you. I will pray for community for you. Because, I really believe it is impossible, if you are on your own. But if there are two or three families or at least some people who will be family with you, and you are open to each other and helping, protecting, sharing the load, you can change the culture. Maybe not the whole culture, but you can establish a culture for one another and for your children. And who knows - there on the margins, where you are, it may be the place where the door opens out onto the street for others. I will pray for community."

She looks at me without replying. Who knows what she is thinking? I hope it's not the silent refrain of

"I don't want to just be a complaining person."

Perhaps I have overstepped and offended.

Speeding away on the Eurostar, I am reading Miroslav Volf. He writes about the difference of culture in the new community of living hope, and the way change can arise, in the Spirit, not demanding a whole new regime, or setting an all or nothing ultimatum.

*"As we strive for social change, 1 Peter nudges us to drop the pen that scripts master narratives, and instead give an account to the living hope in God and God's future (3:15, 1:5) to abandon the project of reshaping society from the ground up and instead do as much good, personal and systemic as can from where we are at the time we are there (2:11)."*

Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God*. p.82

And I feel the passion of advocacy rise in me.

So here I am, typing furiously. I cannot wait until tomorrow to write about this.

Sunday comes around again and again. Every Sunday we perpetuate a pattern, or we take the narrow road and prophetically reposition.

What will it be for her this Sunday, for you this Sunday, and the next, and the next?