

learning to lead

Alex Bunn interviews Greg Downes



Alex: *Greg, our medical students will all be leaders when they qualify, whether they think of themselves as leaders or not. What can they learn from Jesus' example of leadership?*

Greg: Jesus is the greatest leader humanity has ever seen; he was distinctive in many ways. First, he was completely non-coercive. In Christ, we see clearly the character of God, who woos us into discipleship, leading by example and inspiration. Even though he was the Son of God walking the earth, the disciples were never

coerced, but were simply captivated by his greatness. At one point when people were deserting Jesus in droves, he didn't chase the disciples, but simply asked if they would desert too. Christ-shaped leadership is unique in being servant-hearted. We assent to this in hymns, but rarely practise it. Jesus led from the centre of the pack, walking alongside those he disciplined.

Alex: *How does that contrast with other leaders?*

Greg: A prison chaplain once told me that the secret of

leadership is to 'let them have your way', meaning we trick people into thinking they're getting what they want, when in fact you are getting your own way as a leader! Christian leaders too often follow the world's lead. Though we say 'there are no conscripts in God's army', in practice we can be guilty of manipulation and intimidation. Some leaders in charismatic churches (including some of my colleagues) are guilty of 'spiritual abuse', claiming to have an exclusive hotline to God, and considering



themselves beyond accountability, saying 'touch not the Lord's anointed'. Some Anglo-Catholics also demand obedience in an unhealthy way. I once saw one wearing a T-shirt claiming 'Father knows best'! But Christian leaders should treat other church members as brothers, not children. Conservatives are also guilty, as we can use the Bible as a weapon, and teach a single watertight interpretation which controls others.

Alex: *What tips can you share from your leadership?*

Greg: I always say that 'the only authority I have is that which you choose to give me'. I'm not saying that spiritual authority doesn't exist, but simply that it's not the same as exerting power. Christian leaders need to take seriously the priesthood of all believers. We are not the sole earpieces of God; we have no monopoly on hearing God, no direct line. We need to value the experiences and gifts of others - like those of the football hooligan at our church who was called into social action. He became a pastor in prison ministry at the Ashfield Young Offenders Unit. He started a church for offenders when they emerged from prison, the first of its kind in Britain, and we were 100% behind him.

Alex: *Do you go along with those who 'invert the pyramid', saying that ministers should serve the congregation, and release them into their ministries?*

Greg: Church leaders have abdicated our responsibility to teach and model biblical submission, for instance in marriage. This has been jettisoned at a cost. We're now deeply suspicious of all authority. There are two extremes here (see table).

At one end are those who run a benign dictatorship, who lead by 'command and control' and simply lock up the gifts of members. At the other extreme are those who abdicate leadership altogether, and preside over a democracy, merely looking for some kind of consensus from the members. I prefer Jesus' model - he led from the centre of the pack. At my old church of Woodlands, in Bristol, leaders aimed for high accountability and low control.

Alex: *Your wife is a doctor who has been influential in the press. In what sense are doctors leaders?*

Greg: Traditionally, doctors have been influential in their community, respected leaders - although this is not so much the case now. My wife has patients coming to her with clutches of internet print-outs telling her their diagnosis and management! But doctors still have enormous influence in shaping thinking on ethics. My wife has been quoted lots in the press,¹ and she can speak with an authority as a professional that clergy simply can't, even though many doctors don't think they have a voice. They do, if they dare to enter the fray! I understand the hesitancy though, as I've seen the cost

Benign dictatorship:	Jesus' example of leadership:	Democratic approach:
■ Leader is over-controlling	■ Jesus had a non-coercive authority	■ Leader lacks influence
■ Leader is unaccountable	■ Jesus led by example from the centre	■ Constant search for consensus
■ Stifles growth of members	■ Jesus' followers matured as they followed	■ Members have no role models

first hand. But doctors are not just technicians, functionaries of the state. Why should certain politicians dictate an aggressive secularising agenda when they are so ill-equipped to lead on these issues?

Alex: *Tell us about your new course; how did it start and what makes it different from others on offer?*

Greg: One of the previous staff from St Andrew's, Chorleywood, had a real heart for our needier neighbours in Watford. One of the members was a businessman, who felt uncomfortable in his workplace after conversion. Some advised him to leave, reinforcing the classic sacred/secular divide which causes believers to retreat from the world. But others encouraged him to see his work as his mission field. He went on to help set up the Watford School of Leadership (WSL). Only one in 20 Christians will enter full time church-based ministry. Yet all the 40 or so Bible colleges in the UK train

primarily for church-based ministry. WSL offers training to the other 19. It exists 'to train ordinary believers to be transformational leaders in the world'. We want the 95% who work in secular environments (doctors included!) to rediscover a vocation of work, and to live out our faith in the secular world. For instance, my wife works in a Christian practice, but her patients include the 70% of the population who have no natural contact with church. She works alongside a counsellor and chaplain, who can care for body, mind and soul like no clergyman can. Work is mission!

Alex: *Some of our students take a year out of medicine, and might be interested in a course like this. What would it involve?*

Greg: There are four modules: discipleship, leadership, evangelism and theology. First discipleship: we all need to learn 'followership' before we can step up to be leaders. Evangelism: not just 'hit and

run' evangelism that irritates and alienates people, but learning how to be contagious Christians. Can we be an 'embodied apologetic', winning others by our life and words together? Theology underpins this, not stuffy theory, but the word of God transforming lives. This is all in the context of mentorship, communal worship and missional placements. It would be an ideal gap year, and only costs £2,000 for a year, starting each September.

Anyone interested can contact Greg Downes via www.wsol.org.uk

Greg Downes is a vicar, is married to a doctor, and is principal of Watford School of Leadership

REFERENCES

1. tinyurl.com/y99lvv6