
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6) EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 77) – January 2016

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Dear Friends,

A WISE PATTERN FOR INTRODUCING CHANGE

Change involves Risk Ministers often discuss how to introduce change in the church. I don't mean doctrinal change but changes in the pattern of life and practice of the church. It is discussed because it is difficult and a number of pastorates have come to grief over it. I've heard ridiculous ideas on the subject, 'Change as much as you can as early as you can because afterwards you won't be able to!' My instinctive reaction would be to reply, 'You won't be able to change anything later because you won't be there to do it' – it sounds like a recipe for short-lived, disastrous pastorates. Other comments are silly, 'I don't want to have to bother to try to get everyone on board with me.' Believe me you will find that the work of seeking to get everyone on board is nothing compared to the repair work you will have to do if you introduce significant change without getting as many as possible on board with you!

Recently I came across some guidelines from Stuart Briscoe who was 33 years as a senior pastor in the same church and who shared the lessons he had learnt in an interview about leadership. Mike Milton picks up some of these in 'The Secret Life of a Pastor' (CFP):

- Don't be hasty in introducing change
- Don't knock down a fence until you know why it was put up in the first place
- Do present solid biblical and commonsense reasons for change
- Do present change as a proposal, not a fait accompli
- Do allow time for reaction, and don't fail to listen to objections
- Do invite suggestions, and don't hesitate to incorporate the best ones
- Do give people a chance to take ownership of the change
- Don't be disappointed by naysayers, and don't forget you're still their pastor

The comment of the interviewer was, 'Leading people through change is one of the major tasks of a pastor. Briscoe's counsel can help us all learn to do so with wisdom and grace.'

I want to pick out a major point which I think Stuart Briscoe's thinking exemplifies and which the comments above, which I am critical of, completely fail to pick up.

Leadership is Primarily Relational not Organisational One of the tragedies of a number of failed pastorates is the evident fact that the pastor who left or split the church clearly put organisation above relationships. Their attitude is, 'The church would be right if we could do'. Often the ideas put forward may actually have been completely correct and would have been best for the church to adopt but if things are handled wrongly it is a disaster. While Paul's words in Ephesians 4: 1 – 3 are addressed to all Christians, pastors in particular need to remember them as they seek to introduce change:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

If we do this then we will want to take time to understand why the church has done things the way it has. We will want to take time to explain why we want to introduce change and to anticipate and listen to the objections that arise in people's minds. We will realize we don't have the monopoly on wisdom and that others may have good and thoughtful ideas as to how to change. We will accept that a few will continue to disagree but realize that if we don't put up barriers most of them will in fact acquiesce in the changes long-term. Our motivation for such patience with the sheep is the patience the Good and Great Shepherd has with us who are also stubborn and difficult sheep!

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

February 7th Beverley all day// 8th – 15th World Evangelical Congregational Fellowship in Orlando, Florida followed by holiday in USA. 28th Low Ham am + pm. **March** 6th Wycliffe Church, Stockport am – 20th Woolwich am – 26th Batley Evangelical Church am. I am happy to preach for nearby churches if only booked for one service.

EVEN ANWOTH WAS NOT HEAVEN-EVEN PREACHING WAS NOT CHRIST

A PROBLEM DISCERNED The above words from Samuel Rutherford (via Annie Ross Cousin) pick up something of huge importance for our walk with God throughout our ministry. The Lord may bind our hearts to a particular people in a particular place but even in that we have not arrived at our home. Because of the nature of humanity, tensions will come where there was peace and God's hand will seem to be turned against the very churches that previously seemed to live under his smile. Equally we may find that our best times of spiritual warming and excitement often take place while we preach. We love the preparation and the delving into God's word, we love the creative excitement of crafting a sermon, we are thrilled with the experience of interacting with God's people as we preach but we will, if we live long, eventually get to a situation where failing health and mind mean we can no longer preach. Samuel Rutherford reflected thus because others enforced his removal from his place and preaching but we need to prepare ourselves for changes in the fellowships we belong to and to changes in ourselves that eventually prevent preaching. We cannot prevent sadness but we can avoid the real spiritual danger this can put us in. Here I am going to concentrate on the dangers that come when someone loses a preaching ministry either temporarily or long-term.

AN EXAMPLE TO LEARN FROM One of my favourite books is 'The Diary of Kenneth MacRae' which displays great spiritual insight and empathy in his observations of church life. There are a series of entries in his diary between 8th June 1942 and 25th May 1944 which I have found challenging concerning George Mackay of Fearn, who was a prominent Free Church Minister

Got news today that our good friend in Fearn has taken a slight (stroke). He lost his speech, but it has now come back to him and he can read. It will be a great loss to the church if (his) preaching days are over (he) is now much better, is going about and is able to converse quite freely. At the same time he complains of a lack of power to transform his thoughts into accurate speech. Yet I fear he will never be able to preach again, which will be a tremendous loss for the Church, What a terrible change has come over my old friend! He used to be so charged with vim and courage. Now it is all vanished, and he is a poor, little, old man. He was a matchless preacher, and preaching was his glory, but he will never preach again. intimation was made of the death of my old friend No doubt it is better, for he is simply eating his heart out at this enforced inactivity. He lived for preaching and when that was taken from him he had nothing else to live for.

Taken on their own the final words are chilling: 'He lived for preaching and when that was taken from him he had nothing else to live for.' It seems a far cry

from Paul's 'for me to live is Christ' and yet there are points we should note before being dismissive of a great servant of Christ, who experienced a great spiritual struggle before his death:

1. **He was not deluded about the value of his preaching** Kenneth MacRae was sometimes blunt in the extreme about the preaching he heard so we can't conclude his diary entries were flattering – sometimes they are definitely not so. He writes of George MacKay, 'undoubtedly he was the Church's best preacher'; 'there is no other preacher among us who can compare with him'; 'he was a matchless preacher' and 'Another master preacher has been silenced.' When he struggled with his inability to preach it was not just that his preaching had a 'feel-good' factor for him! There was unquestionably a 'did good' factor which others were aware of and benefitted from.
2. **Paul's 'for me to live is Christ' is actually embracing the opportunity of Christian service** The contrast with 'to live is Christ' is with 'to die is gain' and is desired so that he can 'remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.' It is legitimate to desire to be enabled to have health and opportunity to serve the Lord Jesus as well as we can and if we preach that will certainly involve preaching.

It might be more accurate to say that the removal of normal opportunities to serve can reveal spiritual danger that we have been in yet have been previously unaware of. In this case the danger is clearly that our sense of value, perhaps even our identity, is so tied up in what we do that we forget that what we are is vastly more important. If it is true of us that if our position and work as so central to our identity that without preaching we have, 'nothing else to live for' then that is a miserable, dangerous and inherently idolatrous position to be in. It is miserable because it makes us completely vulnerable and dangerous and idolatrous because it puts our preaching in place of Christ and knowing and pleasing him.

AN ANTIDOTE TO APPLY There are certain truths we actually already believe and which we need to adhere to - whatever our initial emotions may tell us:

1. **Christ not Preaching is Ultimate** We need to be serious – we believe that 'Even Preaching was not Christ' and we need to apply that. That preaching is important is not something we could argue with. It is God's ordained way of saving sinners and building up the church (See Romans 10: 14 + 15 and Ephesians 4: 11 – 16) and to be used to do this is a wonderful honour and grace on God's part! To save us is wonderful and then to use us is a source of additional wonder and praise. However it is more important that I know, love and serve Christ and if he had never given me preaching gifts that would be ultimately unimportant and if he chooses to withdraw or suspend the opportunity to use

those gifts that is also ultimately unimportant.

2. **Christ's valuation of us doesn't depend on our gifts** Balaam's ass delivered God's message perfectly efficiently but didn't become a human being made in the image of God by doing so. As God is the giver and distributor of all gifts we don't enrich him with our gifts – rather we respond to him appropriately by serving him with them. Loving Christ, and more importantly being loved by him, is of ultimate importance. Christ laid down his life for us but in doing so doesn't affirm our worthiness and our value but simply conveys the greatness and graciousness of his love. To be justified, sanctified and an adopted child of God dwarfs our preaching and our service in importance.
3. **Faith accepts that Christ decides on our service for him** This may mean we serve in a place we find difficult, God doesn't open doors of opportunity for us which we long to see opened. Or that health and advancing age means we need to abandon a way of serving him which we enjoyed and was very important to us. If my service of him consists of visiting and encouraging the saints or giving lifts to church and the children's meeting that can be done out of love for him every bit as much as preaching.
4. **We must recognise preaching's dangers** Do you feel insignificant and unnoticed? Do you want people to admire respect and love you and feel you are of value? Most of us are aware of the danger of mixed motives – we genuinely want to serve and love Christ but we are also very aware we can want to be 'up-front' and a leader for reasons that have more to do with self-image and ego than living out the relationship we have with the Lord Jesus. The problem with losing our ministry is that while we can still love and serve Christ without preaching we won't have the same image and ego boosts if we are no longer the centre of attention and respect.

A LITMUS TEST FOR THE DANGER OF IDOLATRY Tim Keller tells the story of two women in the church where he was Pastor, both of whom had difficult and unhelpful husbands and who then suffered the agony of seeing their son go off the rails. He makes the point that (obviously) both women found the experience agonizing and were tempted to anger and despair. When a husband fails the obvious recourse is to invest emotionally in one's children and if that goes wrong to be angry and blaming the husband who has failed to support and protect. He makes the point that one of the women, who in his estimation actually had more to complain about, handled it far better than the other. The reason in his understanding is that while the success of their son was important to both women, to the one who couldn't come to terms with it the problem was that it had become ultimate. The measure of her life was her

son and his success in life – if that was taken from her then she had nothing left.

When I hear of ministers who have had distinguished ministries who end up unhappy going to church because they cannot benefit from anyone else's preaching and for whom life not preaching is unimaginable then I am brought to a sad conclusion. Something which was good and a gift from God has become an idol and is actually harming the one who has done so much good through the exercise of that gift. We shouldn't be surprised – only good things can really compete to be the idols that dominate our lives!

WHAT SHALL WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

Recently I began reading 'The Secret Life of a Pastor' by Michael A Milton (CFP). Mike Milton has a wealth of pastoral experience and seminary teaching experience which he has distilled in a series of letters to students and those entering the ministry. One question which needs to be settled early in our ministries is the question above and to it could be added: 'What shall I tell my wife?' It strikes me as very important because I have come across the children of ministers who seem to know so much of what is going on in the church that they speak disrespectfully and unhelpfully about church officers and because I have come across the wives and children of ministers who, following bad experiences, want nothing whatsoever to do with the church. Clearly no-one thinks these outcomes are desirable so how do we avoid them?

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM We all get wound up by church members! Sometimes when we say such and such a church member is tactless we are being generous in our assessment! They are certainly plain rude but we cannot be sure it is fully intended so we give them the let-out of referring to them as tactless. Tactless words from friends can shake us and go deep so when we doubt the intentions of those speaking to us it is far worse. The result is that we brood and become resentful and angry and tell our wives all about it – gratifyingly they take our side and are angry on our behalf. Next we tell the children and, equally gratifyingly, they are indignant and angry on our behalf.

Now sometimes we have let off steam and we calm down and perhaps come to know and understand the church member rather better and see their own broken dreams which can lead to bitterness. The problem is that we don't convey that to our wife and our children and this proves a danger for them. Mike Milton writes (page 46):

It is easier to complain to your family and murmur about the problem people than to speak of the healing that you are able to see over time. So be careful. You could cause callousness to develop in the souls of your family members. You could leave them with a burden that they were not intended to bear. Some children grow up and say, 'I have had enough of the church. Why would I want to

get into something that hurt my family so much?' Or you will hear your wife tell you, 'I want out. I am tired of all the criticism.'

FINDING A SOLUTION His suggestion is that you share some situations anonymously for prayer with your family – that of course would take ingenuity in the small churches some of us serve! His aim however is admirable:

In this way your wife and children are brought into your ministry, not positioned as enemies with others, hunkering down and waiting for an attack, or feeling defeated or victimised.

The demand this makes on your maturity but if you haven't got the maturity to protect your wife and children by being careful in what you say then it is inappropriate that you are in the ministry at all – (see 1 Timothy 3: 3), 'if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?' I appreciate that the wives of some pastors may be able to share many burdens and deal with them well but others are easily hurt and discouraged and need protecting rather than informing.

WHAT ABOUT THE REAL CRISES? Mike Milton goes on to look at the really tough situations when it is not a disgruntled sheep after you but a wolf! He writes:

In those times seek the wisdom of God on how to share the matter with your wife. I would not share it with my children until they were old enough to understand the deep matters of spiritual warfare (which some adult Christians don't understand!).

He anticipates our gripe about not saying anything, because we are not clear in our own minds as to what we are confronting:

But that will hurt me! I cannot be expected to keep things inside. I have to let it all out! Well, it may hurt you. And you may end up carrying things to your grave. Or you could carry them to the Saviour!

Let me add – or you could share them with a spiritual mentor, a neighbouring minister, another minister in EFCC whom you respect and trust – importantly not only will sharing the matter in this way help you but it won't damage the person you tell either.

BLESSED SUBTRACTIONS?

A Right Attitude to the Question I think that anybody who reads 'Planting & Watering' or has heard me speak at the Ministers' Prayer Conference knows what I think about this subject. Some of my strong attitude stems from listening to ministers speaking about former members with what seems to me to be a real lack of love and respect.

In his 'Secret Life of a Pastor', Mike Milton reflects on what people refer to as 'divine (blessed) subtractions' – is there such a thing? He assumes he is dealing with a difficult sheep rather than a wolf. He answers:

No, I say. There are problem people, but if there were not, would there be a need for a

pastor? I tell you that the greatest heartache and regrets I have are not in the time invested in the 'lovable saints,' but in protecting myself from the 'unintentional dragons'. I would rather, now, spend more time with them than with any other. Their nasty e-mails and their thoughtless barbs were so often the cloaked cries of wounded spirits. And I withdrew. Oh how I would go back a thousand times to hold them until the stiffness went away.

I suspect anyone with a true pastoral spirit can identify with these words. Often, in the failure of people to become what they might have been, and in our failure to help them in doing so, there is a sense of tragedy and waste. We regret not just what might have been achieved but also our retreat into ourselves and away from others, which actually ensured that it could never be achieved.

Is there anything we can do to do better? If you read this and struggle with it then so do I. Recalling past situations doesn't make it any easier. So the advice is as much a reminder to me as advice to you. Some suggestions:

1. **Don't make assumptions** One of the saddest mistakes I have made, and now greatly regret, is to assume non-attendance meant disaffection when in fact it signalled depression. This meant I reacted entirely wrongly to someone and no amount of repentance and apology ever put it right. I should have not assumed I knew the reason but taken the time and trouble to actually go and find out what it was.
2. **Spend time and listen** This really follows from the above but if we are too busy to spend time with people we are too busy. When we spend time with people we discover things about them we didn't know – and which sometimes give an explanation for the issues we find with them. We have to ask ourselves whether we love and commit to people for their sake and out of God-given love? Or if our commitment is really to our vision of how they could be useful to the church?
3. **Try to see behind the front people put on** People may be brusque and awkward in their ways. Sometimes this can be a let out for their fears – they are afraid you won't like them and rejection and their brusqueness means they can excuse this because, 'They can't cope with straight talking!' With such people you have to be unafraid to show you love and accept them and accept that their front may simply be a front.
4. **Don't withdraw** Our actions often take place in order to protect ourselves. We fear confrontation and tension and so we put ourselves in a position where, as far as possible, we will be able to avoid it. In the pattern of prayer I use, one area of intercession is for enemies who may become friends. In pastoral life this is one of the most wonderful experiences we can have.

