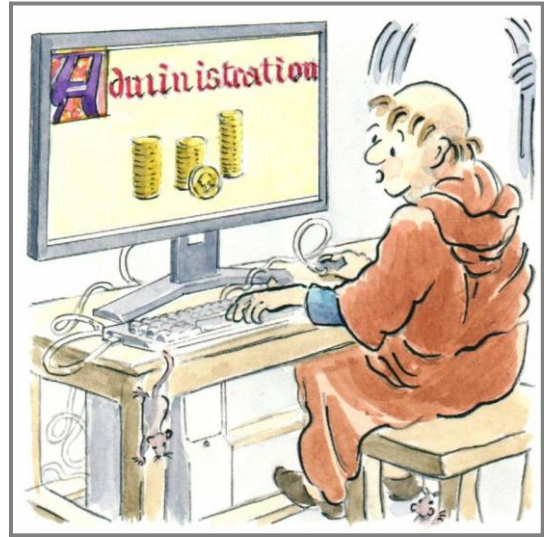


Reliability in ministry

For administrators and leaders

A27 Articles series: Administration



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It struck me recently that I have seen and heard little teaching on the concept of reliability in Christian ministry. It is an aspect of character that should be especially evident in both administrators and leaders, among other groups.

It may sound rather old-fashioned to some, but we all need to be challenged on this score if we seek to live a godly life. So here is a first attempt at an introduction to this part of the fruit of the Spirit (if we link it to 'faithfulness'). Please email me with comments and ideas to add to the discussion and help improve future versions of this article.

The concept

Reliability: the word

'To rely' on or upon means to depend upon with confidence, to trust or to count on, often on the basis of past experience. You need to prove your reliability. The word comes from Latin *re-ligare*, to bind or tie together and so hold fast and thus to be safe.

It may be that I find that the 6.34 train is always on time. My trust may grow if the experience continues to be good and the 6.34 continues to get me in on the dot each day, or it may be dented if something goes wrong and the 6.34 is cancelled. If I rely on the 6.34 I continue to catch it each day. If I can no longer trust it, I may be forced to catch the 6.12 instead.

Over time I come to trust certain volunteers or work colleagues that, whenever they say they will do something in a certain way and by a given date, I can rely on that delivery. They will not let me down. I won't have to chase them up. I can relax. Unlike with others where I have to make a diary note to send a reminder in case nothing has happened.

This track record then leads to a level of wider expectation. I can delegate a new task to a volunteer who has never done something like this before, or give a colleague a more responsible task than I have asked of them previously. Because they have proved themselves to be reliable in other matters, I can trust them for a new challenge.

Relying on God

The concept of a God who is utterly reliable is woven into Scripture. We are asked to put our trust in him because he is trustworthy.

So the Psalmist can say, among many possible quotations, 'Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God' (Psalm 20:7). Proverbs commands us to 'trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not (do not rely) on your own understanding'. (Proverbs 3:5).

Old Testament leaders challenged God to be true to what he had promised. So Moses, in the incident of the golden calf, reminds God of his promise to Abraham to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and to give them the land he promised them – and God is true to what he promised. (See Exodus 32:1-14 and the original promise to Abraham, then to Isaac and then to Jacob: Genesis 13:14-17; 15:5,6; 22:15-18; 26:3-5; 28:13,14, 32:12; 35:10-12.)

At the Last Supper Jesus reminds his disciples that they need to rely on him. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.' (John 14:1) This is to be based not on some blind faith but on the experience of their time living with him and observing him closely.

He reminded the Jews, 'But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.' (John 8:26)

Paul says to Timothy, 'Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.' (1 Timothy 6:17 cf. Matthew 6:19-21)

Paul also reminds the Corinthians that God is faithful and can be trusted when it comes to temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13) and that his promises can be trusted (see 2 Corinthians 1:18-22). He tells the Thessalonians that the God who calls them is faithful and will keep them (1 Thessalonians 5:24). And so we could go on.

Many of our hymns and songs remind us of this fact. So William Cowper wrote, 'Can a woman's tender care, Cease towards the child she bare? Yes, she may forgetful be, Yet will I remember thee.'

And of course reliability is frequently used in relation to Scripture itself. Psalms 19 and 119 include verses on this idea (see, Psalm 19:7; 119:86 etc.) and Jesus clearly took the authority of the Scriptures of his time as read.

So any consideration of reliability should start with God's character and the certain expectation we can place in him. So far, we are on familiar

ground. But what about a requirement for **us** to be reliable? When did you last hear a sermon or preach yourself on that?

Our duty to God

If we are to live a godly life, then we have to reflect the character of our Father. So I expect there to be a requirement that means that, first, God and, secondly, others can depend on me.

Paul describes one part of the fruit of the Spirit as faithfulness (Galatians 5:22) which William Barclay calls 'the virtue of reliability'. 'We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments' is how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*.

To God we are to be reliable in the handling of the gospel (see 2 Corinthians 4:1-6) and in all that he has given us as stewards. Jesus commends the reliability of two of the servants in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:21,23) and makes a similar point in the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:10-12). In 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 Paul teaches that we must be faithful in the sight of God to what he has entrusted to us. We are to live a life worthy of the Lord (as in Colossians 1:10). God places high expectations on many of us (Luke 12:48).

We are given scriptural role-models too. I love the description of Timothy in Philippians 2:20-22: 'I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ....' Here is someone who could safely be said to have shown himself to be a 'reliable' disciple.

On the other hand we have people like Demas who deserted Paul because he loved the world more than the gospel (2 Timothy 4:10) and the fall-out between Paul and Barnabas about Mark because Paul deemed him unreliable (Acts 15:37-39).

So does God find us reliable in our calling? Have we proved ourselves so that he can trust us with the treasures of ministry? Both Christian administrators and leaders would do well to be challenged by this thought.

Reliability in society

I have this week bought a new kettle. The old one was in fact less than two years old but it seems to have died. No doubt 15 minutes of someone's time to repair it would cost more than the original price of the whole item, and it might take 60 minutes plus parts. My wife and I were bemoaning that in the past kettles lasted years. So we have bought a shiny, new one, courtesy of

a half-price offer. But, on past experience, we are not expecting it to last long.

There is a danger in generalisations but, when there was a greater sense of local community in our UK culture, people depended on each other more than now. Today we tend to live isolated lives, with networks flung much more widely than a geographical locality. We do not rely on each other in the way we used to.

We have lost the idea of individual attention in our rush to globalisation and the need to cut costs. In many sectors of life it can no longer be said, as the London Stock Exchange states, 'My word is my bond'. I cannot rely on people in general to be honest, to put the needs of others before themselves, or to reply to my email if it

does not suit them. We no longer expect people to keep their marriage vows.

There are, of course, exceptions but the point is that they are exceptions. How many claims made by advertisers, newspaper articles and, let it be said, churches and Christian missions prove to be honest and therefore reliable? Words such as 'reliability', 'dependability', 'trustworthiness' have a certain 'uncool' feel to them. Eugene Peterson's 'loyal commitments' sounds just a fraction dated in our brave new world.

Yet it was always so! 'Help, LORD, for no one is faithful any more; those who are loyal have vanished from the human race. Everyone lies to their neighbour; they flatter with their lips but harbour deception in their hearts.'(Psalm 12:1,2)

Practical examples

The concept of reliability is now applied to churches, to the work of administrators and to leaders. There is also a questionnaire for anyone to use.

Application for churches

If Christians serve a God who is utterly reliable and if we are to reflect his character in the Church, we have a wonderful opportunity to be counter-cultural and stand out from today's society. The trouble is that too often we fail to do this. Reliability is built up over time so this concerns long-haul, not one-off actions.

Could it be said that the world could rely on the global Church to have integrity by:

- practising what we preach – demonstrating our faith;
- being true to our calling – to preach the Good News;
- demonstrating real care – to people in every circumstance;
- showing competence in all we do – because of investment in quality training;
- understanding society – so we address real needs and communicate well;
- getting our hands dirty – wherever there is need;
- demonstrating contentedness – that makes the faith deeply desirable?

What if the world could rely on us to live blameless lives, to sort out our internal disagreements in a way that models love and to be, as one author has expressed it powerfully, a

provocative church? Here are some possible applications.

Teaching and training in Christian character

The New Testament is full of the requirement for Christians to live holy lives, but the Church today (in the UK) soft-peddles this challenge (see Romans 12:1,2 and beyond and Colossians 3:1-17 among many passages).

Appointing people who have proved themselves

Too often we appoint anyone we can find to fill a vacancy. If we tried to do less but took Christian character and track record more seriously, we might increase our spiritual competence. See 1 Timothy 3:1-16 and examples such as Exodus 18:21; Nehemiah 13:13; Acts 6:3.

Supporting workers: volunteers and employed

Once churches place people in ministry they too often see that as job done. But all workers deserve proper support: explanations about the post, training, team-working, injection of resources as appropriate, regular reviews, prayer, interest from the leadership. Churches need to take HR more seriously (without being woodenly stupid about it) – and therefore should consider doing less to enable this to be possible.

Offering professional behind-the-scenes back-up

We need to see administrative functions such as office hub, deployment of people, financial management, building maintenance, systems of control, structures and meetings culture as a part of our total ministry and essential if our teaching, pastoring, outreach and care is to prove to be reliable. A reliable church pays its bills promptly, deals with enquirers with charm and keeps careful records, among many other things.

Delivering what we promise

It is easy to oversell our churches in our enthusiasm to attract people. On websites and in literature we tend to say that our Christian communities are 'vibrant' (an in-word at present which I am guilty of overusing myself) or 'family friendly', where some honest impressions from all ages within a family might be painful but helpful. I often find that churches that describe themselves as 'friendly' are so friendly to each other that they come across as distinctly frosty to visitors. So a reliability audit on our website might not be a bad idea from time to time.

Meaning what we say

A church with a purpose statement about loving God and each other should be revolutionary. Often it carries on as before while the statement is quietly filed under P in a cabinet. We have let the Good News entrusted to us become Nice News: nice for us, nice for anyone who asks about it, lacking any power. We can only have integrity if we live out what we claim to believe in.

Applications for Christian administrators

Here are some ideas for those who act as administrators in churches, whether as staff or as volunteers, whether secretarial, financial or in any other way.

Running the church office

The office needs to have a reputation for reliability. This means that diary information needs to be accurate, databases up-to-date and volunteers who work there able to deal with visitors and enquirers with relevant and correct information. This in turn calls for communication systems and administrative team-working that are precise and meaningful.

Keeping confidences

It is essential that all aspects of pastoral work are handled with sensitivity and that privileged information is not gossiped or let out in any way (see for example Prov 11:13). A reputation of reliability will be ruined when confidential information leaks out through the administrative system, even if shared 'for prayer'.

Delivering on time

Delivery on time should be the mark of any administrator and this should apply whether it is leaders or the congregation who are relying on punctuality. This often poses a problem in that the end of the week can be especially busy if preparing print and other resources for Sunday, so systems have to be devised so that an uneven workflow can be accommodated. Should problems arise because different people all demand the administrator's response at the same time, there needs to be agreed priorities and the ability to negotiate.

Responding to requests

Administrators need to be adept at handling voicemails (getting back to people on time), considerable email traffic and enquiries. Most administrators prefer to have fixed and tidy systems but in church work much is untidy because a congregation is made up of volunteers and because clergy do not work within fixed hours as might be the case in a normal office. Church administrators need to act as role-models for efficient operation under difficult circumstances.

Role-modelling people-skills

The danger with administrators is that they can be task-people and so come across as rather cold or controlling to church members and to visitors. Because the issue of Christian character should be seen as a vital part of any administrator's profile, the need to deal politely and pastorally with all kinds of interruptions, even when inconvenient, should be part of an administrator's reliability.

Attending to detail

It is the role of any administrator to spot and sort all the details in any project or system. A reliable administrator will ensure copy is proofed accurately, times are co-ordinated, references are checked, changes to rotas communicated, all necessary actions taken and nothing forgotten. Well, that's the ideal!

Serving the Minister and others

If the Minister is to lead effectively, he or she needs to rely on administrators to deliver what is required. The chemistry between the two people or two groups is crucial. This calls for work from both parties to work as a team, each complementing the other.

Representing the church

Administrators often find themselves in situations where their actions and attitudes will be taken as those of the church and perhaps of the Christian faith too. Administrators who operate a reception facility of any kind need to be able to be trusted by the church to deal with people in a way that commends the gospel.

See also the box on testing yourself on personal reliability on page 6.

Applications for Christian leaders

What if we take this quality of reliability and now apply it to Ministers and lay leaders in churches?

Seeking out reliable leaders

When St Paul instructs Timothy on how to spread the gift of teaching, he uses these words. 'You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.' (2 Timothy 2:1,2) It is the role of leaders to train others for ministry and the key quality here is reliability.

Keeping confidences

As for administrators, if leaders are found to be reliable people, it is essential that in all aspects of pastoral work they keep secrets. A lifetime reputation of reliability will be ruined when a leader says too much.

Delivering on time

Many people, often volunteers with limited time to give, rely on team leaders to provide what they need when they need it. So if it is the leaders' responsibility to deliver articles for a newsletter by an agreed date and time, they must do all they can to honour that.

Responding to requests

Ministers need to learn how to cope with voicemails, emails, post and other incoming

messages so that people know they will receive an answer without inappropriate delay. That may mean the appointment of an administrative assistant in some form but it also requires basic skills in paper-handling and delegation.

Role-modelling discipleship

If people are to trust leaders, their own lives, which have to be lived in a public arena, have to be true to their beliefs. This involves, where appropriate, marriages, family life, time off, public behaviour, people-skills and much more. It is an awesome responsibility.

Responding to needs

The communications system in a church needs to work effectively enough for the Minister to be made aware of needs he or she should be addressing. So if someone is in hospital the Minister needs to know.

Promising to pray

It is so easy to promise to pray for someone who shares a need, and equally easy to forget almost at once.

Learning to say 'no'

It will by now be apparent that to do all the above is simply impossible. How can you possibly minister to every need while role modelling the perfect spouse and parent and dealing with emails reasonably promptly? The most fundamental point of all for a consistent and reliable Christian witness is knowing when to say 'no' and then saying it with charm and regret but with firmness. Then you will be found to be reliable for all the things that you have said 'yes' to. This calls for clarity in role.

See also the box on testing yourself on personal reliability. This follows on the next page.

Can we be trusted?

Reliability builds relationships. It is not a matter of business efficiency but trust in a person. It is a response to one of the greatest characteristics of God. It is something none of us will ever achieve with anything like perfection. But it is a characteristic of a church and of us that we should strive for. When we are reliable, others can relax because they trust us. But in that our aim must be to point them to the One who is utterly reliable, whose word is sure and who promises life in all its fullness.

Checklist: personal reliability

Score yourself out of 10 on each of the following issues over the past 12 months. This list is designed for use by anyone, but administrators and leaders will be able to relate it to their specific settings. You might then ask close friends and family to score you on the same scale.

1: Delivery

When you say you will undertake any task (such as mending something at home, completing a specific project at work or visiting a friend in hospital) you rarely if ever need to be reminded and deliver on time. When any deadline becomes impossible, you negotiate a satisfactory revision.

2: Diary

When booking diary appointments, you can be trusted to remember to be where you have said you will be at the required time, and are never troubled by double-bookings or forgotten engagements. You remember important birthdays and anniversaries.

3: Time-keeping

You arrive in good time for all appointments in ministry and events at home unless with good excuse, including church services, meetings, meals and other events where your lateness might distract others or hold up proceedings. When changing an agreed plan for timing, you remember to tell and explain to all those affected.

4: Recall

When given information or messages to pass on, perhaps in an informal conversation or in print, you remember what you are told and can recall it and process it as required. You remember people's names and personal details about them to demonstrate interest and care. If none of this comes naturally, you have appropriate systems to help you.

5: Confidences

You never pass on information that you are not reasonably certain is true, including mass email messages and immediate reactions to viewpoints expressed. You do not exaggerate. You are known not to encourage any form of gossip and to keep your lip buttoned up whenever you are given sensitive information.

6: Deskwork

You reply to emails and to post needing a response within a reasonable time-frame and never have to be chased up for a reply that is overdue. You can find filed emails quickly,

you do not 'lose' emails or papers in your system that you need for response or for reference and you remember to include attachments or enclosures when necessary.

7: Finances

You pay all bills promptly and never receive reminders for overdue accounts. You manage your finances efficiently to avoid paying unnecessary charges. If appropriate, you submit expenses on time without errors.

8: Prayer

When promising to pray for someone in a particular need, or when receiving prayer letters whose mailing lists you have asked to be on, or when hearing of needs on a prayer chain, you take the time to pray specifically for the needs mentioned (in whatever form and for however long you feel to be appropriate).

9: Planning

You plan far enough ahead so that you never have to ask someone to do something for you at too short notice (such as lead the intercessions at church or go shopping on your behalf). You are not constantly changing your mind or reacting without proper thought to pressures put on you by immediate situations or those who disagree with you.

10: Life

When you make a promise about major issues (such as marriage vows, employment contract, any long-term commitments) you are a person of your word and can be relied on to carry out your intentions on the wider stage of the whole of your life.

In each case consider what your failure (which may have mattered little to you) did to the other people. How do you think they felt about it? What difference did it make to them?

So how can you improve your reliability? What help do you need in self-management or diary planning or learning to say 'No'?

What matters in the above is not that you alone manage to be reliable, but that you have systems or others around you who help you, and that you do not make rash promises in order to appear popular but which you cannot deliver on.

But the witness of administrators and leaders who deliver what they promise and who remember what they are told is powerful.

No one is perfect, and this writer is certainly not (ask his wife!). Do we strive to improve?

Group exercise

You may find the following a useful exercise in a group setting. First, everyone reads the two stories. They describe a Minister but the example could be anyone.

James' story

It was 8 pm. on Saturday evening and James Pallister, the Assistant Minister at Christ Church, was furiously rooting through his bookshelves hunting for a particular commentary on 1 Peter.

James had had a particularly good day. He had been the guest speaker at a major inter-church event in the town and his talk had clearly gone down well. Now it was time to prepare a sermon for tomorrow and he might just knock out something in time to watch the closing stages of the Snooker on TV.

Now, where had he put that commentary? He started pulling books out of boxes realising that he did not have all that much time as tomorrow's deadline was a fraction closer than he wanted. But he always said he worked best when the adrenalin was flowing and there was a certain thrill in the last minute pressure before a high profile task.

No, it couldn't be this box as this seemed to have books for young people's work. He suddenly froze. Young people's work ... Susan Sparks ... leading the 9-11s group for the first time tomorrow ... promised he'd drop in tonight to check through her material ... had he mentioned a time? ... perhaps ... he'd better get round now ... what a real, wretched nuisance but right, OK, go for it!

Within two minutes his car was out of the drive and rivalling a Formula 1 start as he hurtled round the bend at the bottom of his road. He was at Susan's in no time at all. He bounded up the path to the door of the flat and rang the door-bell in an impressive way. Here was the Christian version of Action Man on his ministry of helping new Junior Church teachers. He glanced at his watch and made a mental aim to be out again in three minutes to get back to that sermon.

"Hi, Sue" he called as he was let in by a nervous looking 20 year old. "Let's see your notes then." He started to read. It seemed OK but strangely familiar. He never noticed the beautiful card model on the table.

"That looks great ... but ... Oh, my dear Susan," spluttered James suddenly. "We did Solomon's temple last week when you were away. This week all the classes are doing lesson 23 on"

The colour drained from Susan's face. "But the syllabus says it's Solomon's temple this week –

and when you asked me to do this lesson you said it would be the temple."

"Yes, yes, it was the temple when I spoke to you. But we changed it a fortnight ago at the planning meeting and brought everything forward one week to get to the end of the section by half term. I know I meant to tell you and I quite thought I had."

Susan was saying something about being busy but James did not really catch it as he castigated the girl in his mind for getting it all wrong.

"Well I must get my sermon prepared - look at the time. Just learn up lesson 23 – it's all quite straightforward and won't take long. I'm sure it will go fine. Must keep all the classes in step and, er," he suddenly realised that Susan's face was ashen, "thanks so much for all you do."

He clenched his fists as he drove off at speed. But then he suddenly smiled. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before? That commentary ... he'd left it in the lounge last week when Mr Peacock had come round. It was on the coffee table. Everything was going to be fine now. He might even catch half an hour of the Snooker.

Susan's story

It was 8 pm. on Saturday evening and Susan Sparks was busily employed with scissors and paste preparing a card cut-out model of Solomon's temple. Her two flatmates had left her there an hour earlier when they went out ice-skating, but Susan had cried off at the last moment. James had promised to call in at 6.30 pm. to check the lesson through with her. He hadn't appeared when it was time to go, but he'd promised to come so Susan reluctantly decided to wait. He was a brilliant preacher and much in demand so there was some good reason for the delay.

She used the time to try the model of the temple just one more time to make sure she could get it exactly right. Tomorrow was to be her first time in charge of the class of 9 to 11 year olds at her church and she wanted to be well prepared.

For some time Tab A on the model had refused to tuck under Edge B and stick to Side C - and if Susan couldn't manage it how were the children going to do it tomorrow morning? But at last it all worked and Susan stood back to admire her

handiwork and check all her notes for the lesson just once more. She was apprehensive but she prayed again for each child by name and felt better.

There was a screech of brakes outside and a few seconds later the doorbell rang three times in quick succession. "Excuse the terrible rush," blurted out James as he dashed in. "I haven't even started to prepare tomorrow morning's sermon yet so I can only spare a couple of minutes. All ready for the big day then? It's your first time, isn't it."

Susan showed him her notes and the model and stood to one side in a self-conscious way as James glanced at her neat handwriting. "That looks great ... but ... Oh, my dear Susan," spluttered James suddenly. "We did Solomon's temple last week when you were away. This week all the classes are doing lesson 23 on"

The colour drained from Susan's face. "But the syllabus says it's Solomon's temple this week – and when you asked me to do this lesson you said it would be the temple."

"Yes, yes, it was the temple when I spoke to you. But we changed it a fortnight ago at the planning meeting and brought everything forward one week to get to the end of the section by half term. I know I meant to tell you and I quite thought I had."

"Well why can't you check things through with us all earlier in the week? I've asked you three times since Monday and you always say you are too busy." There was exasperation in her voice but James did not notice it.

"Well I must get my sermon prepared – look at the time. Just learn up lesson 23 – it's all quite straightforward and won't take long. I'm sure it will go fine. Must keep all the classes in step and, er, thanks so much for all you do."

As the car roared off down the road, the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece sounded louder than usual in the stark silence of the room. It was a full five minutes before the sobbing started.

Exercise

You act as a mentor to James and by chance happened to drop something round to Susan half an hour after James' visit. You could see she was in a state and managed to persuade her to sit down and, between tears, explain all. You feel you need to tackle this with James.

List all the mistakes he has made in action and attitude. What would you suggest to him for immediate action, and where should he be looking for help to avoid future problems like this?

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A27. It is an expanded and adapted form of an item written by the author for *Ministry Today* (<https://www.ministrytoday.org.uk>) and published by them in July 2011. That was prepared for Ministers but in this version it has been rewritten for, primarily, administrators of all kinds. The final exercise is adapted from an Administry Mini-Guide written by the author some years ago.

See also on this website Training Notes TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*, TN87, *What to look for in your leaders*, TN91, *An MOT for disciples of Jesus*, TN110, *It's confidential: but it still leaks out*, and TN115, *Identifying gifts of administration*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A27 under Administration (with a link to Leadership).

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