



# Administrators who miss the point

**TN68** Training Notes series: Administration

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**Martha is one of my favourite Bible characters. She was a *real* administrator. When Jesus visited her home in Bethany (Luke 10:38-42) she was, just like me, flying around trying to do far too much.**

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In her case there was all the housework to do, the silver to polish, the food to order from Tesco's home delivery, the table to lay with the best cutlery – and a feast to prepare, to cook and to serve.

For that evening there were going to be at least 13 extra people coming to dinner. Twelve of those 13 were pretty ordinary blokes though they had been out all day so no doubt they were famished. How do you cook for 13 extra when you are used to three? And to crown it all one of the 13 was rather out of the ordinary. He ought to have a special meal. So it was going to be worth doing her utmost to make sure it was all ... highly impressive.

So, all hands on deck then. “Hey, Mary, what are you doing sitting in a corner doing your daily Scripture reading? For crying out loud, girl, come and give a hand. No time for the niceties of the spiritual life, we've got a job and a half on our hands!”

But of course nothing went quite as intended.

The starter was an experiment and this was no time to try something new. The fan oven wasn't working properly again and the roast was at least half an hour behind where it ought to have been. The sweet hadn't been out of the freezer long enough and now she'd spilled the couscous all over the floor and that needed clearing up.

And (oh no!) Peter's just texted to say they're only ten minutes away and could they park the minibus on the back drive.

Ahhhhh!!

Well, something like that, anyway.

After they all arrived (“Don’t forget to wipe your horrible, dusty feet you lot before you tread on our nice new sitting-room carpet”) and Martha dashed into the room, what commendation would the Master give her zealous efforts?

“What’s that, Lord? Worried and upset about many things? But I’m rushed off my feet while that lazy Mary..... What? You want me to leave the kitchen for a bit and come and listen too...?”

So, what’s going wrong here? Is this scene ever played out today? I think it is. I know it is in my own case. It’s that common danger that all administrators need to beware of: missing the point.

Poor Martha. Her dedication to practical service was second to none (in John 12:2 she’s serving dinner yet again!). Her faith was amazing (see John 11:27 where she says, “I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world”).

So why did Jesus not commend this loyal, dedicated, passionate caterer and administrator? She was, after all, doing it all for him. They had to eat. And Mary was doing what no woman should have done: listening to Jesus with all the men – a shocking breach of the culture of the day (but with Jesus’ express approval).

I’m on Martha’s side here. That is until I start to think about the story in a little more detail. And when my analytical mind starts to untwist the strands of what was really going on, this is what I suspect were the real issues.

## 1 **Worried with detail, losing sight of the purpose**

We administrators love to fuss. We want the little things to be just right. We spot the fold that isn’t quite straight, the figures that don’t add up exactly, the minute that isn’t fully accurate or the appointment that is running late.

All that is good. We need to get the details right or other things go wrong. We are the ones responsible for that. But sometimes we let the detail become the main thing and lose sight of what it’s all about.

Luke comments that Martha was “distracted by (or frantic with) all the preparations that had to be made” (Luke 10:40) – but note that they did indeed have to be made. They needed to eat that night. The problem was the distraction, not the preparations.

So has the church office become your domain, a place where life is so shaped around you that others don’t feel they can come in? Has it lost sight of its purpose to serve the church and become a cold, unfriendly place – your power-base?

Or, as Treasurer, do your 24-page sets of church accounts look mighty impressive but communicate little about how the church is actually doing financially and spiritually, because it is all lost in the columns of restricted funds and sundry debtors?

Administrators need to focus on detail, but should never lose sight of the reason for it all. Administration is a servant ministry. It gets ugly if it becomes the reason for its own existence.

## 2 **Frantic in multi-tasking, with a victim mentality**

We administrators often have to spin plates. It’s not just detail: it’s lots of different kinds of detail all at the same time. In the church office you are trying to tackle an analytical task at the desk requiring crystal-clear thinking while at the same moment answering the phone, dealing with visitors, acknowledging the Minister who’s asking you

for something extra for Sunday, and trying to get hold of a plumber to sort out the blocked waste-pipe.

You may love it. You may fret and fuss like Martha. It's all going on and you are right in the middle of the action.

Martha was a caterer – and that's a multi-tasking role if ever there was one. For a church meal to come out with all the different parts of it ready at just the right time requires planning, experience and plenty of skill. Well, unless you pop some convenience food into the microwave. But do you secretly want everyone to see you flustering in the kitchen and to admire you?

One of the greatest multi-tasks in church life is organising a big event or weekend away: so many elements to combine all at the right time. But do the organising group want people at the event to be impressed by their skill, or taking in the Bible teaching?

If you are not careful you can rush around with your clipboard as soon as the Sunday service finishes making sure you see all the people you need to about Monday's meeting, Tuesday's training and Wednesday's workshop. Everyone notices.

But good administration is rarely seen and noticed.

### 3 **Centred on things, rather than interested in people**

We administrators deal with physical stuff. Stationery orders and other supplies, consolidated balance sheets, address lists, strategic plans, 'To Do' lists, agendas, maintenance contracts, filing. Even our communication may be centred on emails, Facebook pages, voicemail messages and pigeon-holes rather than real engagement with human beings.

It would, I am guessing, be too much to suggest that Martha wasn't interested in her guests that night. It was just that the meal preparation distracted her from them all, and made her livid with her sister.

It is possible for some people in administrative positions to be quite the opposite: people who love to meet and engage with other people and put this above the admin tasks to be performed. But for most of us we are task-people who need to remind ourselves that we serve humans, not run a soul-less production line or operate an impersonal call centre.

So, how is your telephone manner when under pressure? And what does your voicemail message sound like, not just in its words but in its tone of voice? Have visitors to the church office become an annoying interruption? For stewards, are you more interested in filling seats row by row than in giving everyone a warm welcome? Did you leave any charm at home today?

### 4 **Busy on Jesus' work, but failing to spend time with him**

We administrators have lots to do and often enjoy the adrenalin rush as we cope with a large Inbox, an overflowing in-tray and lengthy 'To Do' lists even though we love to complain about them all too.

The heart of Martha's problem, surely, was that Jesus had come to her house and she was so busy seeking to serve the assembled company that she missed out on simply being with him. And, to add insult to injury, Mary got that one right – even though her behaviour in the doing of it was verging on the scandalous in that culture.

This is where the Martha story gets uncomfortable and we start putting up our defences. But is there not just a teeny chance that we are guilty of the same thing and need to hear the Master's mild rebuke directed at us?

On Sundays do you pay attention (correctly if your responsibility) to the sound levels, the rotas for readers and intercessors, the parking of cars or the heating controls, but at the expense of focusing on what the service is all about?

Many administrators lead busy or pressured lives. If in the church office you may have the school run as you leave work and a meal to prepare after that. If as a Treasurer you may only get home from commuting late in the evening and have to start work on church accounts then.

Could it possibly be that you are so busy serving Jesus that you fail to meet him personally? When he appointed the Twelve he gave them two aspects to their job description. One was to go out, but the first was to be with him (Mark 3:14).

### **And so...**

Perhaps one or more of those four might just apply to you whether you are a church Office Secretary, committee member, Treasurer, Steward, organiser or any kind of administrator. I've listed these four because I easily fall for each one of them myself. So, learn the lesson from my good friend Martha, and perhaps the answer to the four points we have made is, in turn, to:

- 1 **Publish** the purpose in writing in the format of "to (do something), so that (something will happen as a result)" and display it so you never lose sight of it.
- 2 **Plan** ahead so that you can bring everything together at the right time without last minute fussing which draws attention to yourself.
- 3 **Pray** for the people you serve so your focus remains on them rather than the stuff you are dealing with behind the scenes.
- 4 **Place** Jesus first – listen to him, spend time with him, and only then go out and serve him.

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Contact John if you would like to enquire about any form of administrative training.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN68 under Administration.

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