



Do's and don'ts for a new leader

TN70 Training Notes series: Leadership

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In my work as a church consultant, and as someone who has been involved in selecting church Ministers for most of my adult life, I observe Christian leaders and their churches at times of transition.

When a new leader takes over there is celebration on the day, but the period following is fraught with danger as leader and people eye each other up.

I have seen many mistakes and am only too aware that I would make many of them myself. Here are some lessons to note from case studies of people I have met.

I appreciate this snappy list will not be helpful for everyone and I am aware it omits much about self-care and family. For such topics (in an Anglican context) read David Runcorn's perceptive chapter in the book *The Vicar's Guide*, (ed David Ison, Church House Publishing).

A Do rethink your methods

Alex arrived at his new church with systems, structure diagrams and sermon series he had used before. But he immediately realised that he had moved from suburban to rural, from one all-age congregation to five with an average age of 60. He could see that he needed to rethink everything so went back to the drawing board.

The history of church leadership is littered with examples of people who assumed that because something 'worked' in their previous post, it would be just as effective here. But churches are not clones of each other and, even if they were, God does not work in the same way each time.

B Don't get up-tight about secondary issues

Becky always preached from the NIV but discovered that her new church had pew NRSVs, a translation she was not used to. So she made an early recommendation to the Church Council that they switch, at some cost. The Treasurer objected – and relationships were soured. Becky was forced to defend her cause. It went to a vote....

There may be things to make a stand on but this does not sound like one of them. Using the present pew Bibles is not going to be a disaster and may have hidden benefits. As it is sometimes put, choose which battles to lose in order to win the war.

C Do get to know people

Charlie preached a sermon three or four weeks after this arrival which included some interaction with the congregation. People noticed that whenever someone responded, Charlie thanked them by name. That made quite a mark; people were talking about it over coffee afterwards.

Whether it comes easily to you or not, it pays to make a real effort to learn names and faces right from the start. This might mean studying the church photo-album each night, writing names down as you hear them for the first time and, above all, visiting people in their homes.

D Don't try to prove yourself

Darren decided that, because he was young, he needed to show the congregation he could take tough decisions. After three months in post he made the Children's Worker post redundant to save money, the home groups were told to follow a common syllabus which he wrote, and he introduced a sharper baptism policy in spite of advice to the contrary.

This is a fierce approach that perhaps displays lack of self-confidence by wanting to take control. Sometimes there are tough long-standing problems to sort out quickly, but this feels as though Darren is acting for his own benefit.

E Do choose some appropriate actions

Esther quickly noticed that people were frustrated at lack of involvement in Sunday services in both her new churches so introduced rotas, and training, for lesson readers and intercessors.

Although it may be a mistake to take too strong a set of actions in the early weeks, people are going to wonder what's going on if you do nothing. It is often wise to try to find something that you can see needs changing, and which many people have been longing to see changed for some time, and do it.

F Don't arrive with a fixed plan

Fraser had read the parish profile and could see at once that there were a number of areas where the church was simply not up to scratch. So, even before his interview, he devised a three-year plan to turn things round. It went into operation the day he arrived. He knew he was right.

The trouble is he had jumped to conclusions long before he had come to any real understanding of the people or culture of the church and the reasons why it was like it was. By all means have a pretty fluid list of possible ideas for early action, but don't make too many assumptions before you can test them.

G Do ask questions

Gerry became known, and respected, as someone who asked challenging questions, not as someone who knew all the answers. He asked 'why?' questions but did it with charm. And he listened to the answers.

Don't make assumptions that everyone knows what the paperwork for your post stated to be priorities. If you ask the kind of questions that make people think, and ask them in such a way that they were glad you asked, you will be starting to enable church members to become the church you have been praying for.

H Don't stamp on existing traditions

Hester's theological tradition was somewhat different from that of two of her new churches and she made that very clear from day 1 by (choose any of) what she wore when taking services, the jargon Christian phrases she used, the mission and relief agencies she wanted all the churches to support,

Like several other points in this list this sounds like someone not prepared to listen to the differing traditions of her new churches and blind to how people would view her challenges to what was precious for them.

I Do make a date for a public assessment

Ian used the Annual Meeting, six months after he arrived, as a platform to announce his assessment of the church and to invite people's contribution to a debate he started about ideas for development. It wasn't easy going, but a significant group were immediately supportive.

It can be helpful to make a date for some kind of direct announcement – long enough in to have understood people's views, but not so long for some to despair. The key is to judge the timing correctly and to win people's respect first.

J Don't criticise your predecessor

Jay's predecessor had been a much loved and gentle pastor even though he had frustrated many by his lack of action. Jay made it clear in sermons and in discussion that his much stronger style would come as a welcome contrast to such flabby leadership.

He may have been right but by blatantly criticising his predecessor he made himself enemies quite unnecessarily. He was also blind to the fact that his predecessor had strengths where Jay had weaknesses.

K Do identify the gatekeepers

Kellie tried out her first ideas on the leadership team. They realised they were being given privileged access to her thinking and gave helpful input. Then she quietly discussed her plans with Mrs K who, while holding no church office of any kind, influenced the thinking of a large sector of the congregation.

You need to get away from the idea of a lone leader announcing change, and instead build teams and help the church to own their own actions rather than have them forced upon them. But you may need to get some key people on board, and to be aware of the multi-generational families who hold considerable power.

L **Don't ignore natural grief**

Liam jumped in to his new position with gusto, not realising that he was grieving for the loss of his previous congregation. This had an impact on him for the whole of the first year in his new post, but he put his depressed feelings down to the pressures of the new role.

It is sometime professional bereavement counsellors (*aka* clergy) who fail to recognise the symptoms in themselves. To complicate matters the congregation(s) may be grieving for their previous Minister, more so if the vacancy has been a short one.

M **Do understand yourself**

Matt knew he was a natural controller who liked to interrupt people and put his view across. So he asked his family to help him avoid going into control mode and to say rather less. He knew this was a potential weakness and he needed to be aware of it and correct it.

So many Ministers seem too un-self-aware with little idea of how others perceive them. A wise person understands something of their personality, of the strengths this may have but also the dangers they run. We all need close family and friends who can be honest with us without loving us any less for knowing the truth.

N **Don't seek to empty the church**

Nina was clear about the changes she wanted to make and was rather pleased when a large group, which she regarded as trouble-makers, walked out after six months. Their places were soon taken by as many people from other local churches who transferred their membership.

In terms of stark statistics, this might look like success. The pastoral damage, however, can be considerable. You are almost certain to lose some people but don't make this your aim.

O **Do learn from the community's stories**

Olly spent time in the pub talking to longer-standing members of the community, asking them to tell him stories from the past. They were delighted to be listened to, but Olly was picking up all kinds of clues that explained why things happened as they did.

So much of the past impacts the present and affects the future. There may be issues from many years ago which explain why families in the church still feud with each other, or why any change will be resisted in certain quarters. Your vision for the future should not be disconnected from the past. Look out, too, for any church dynasties.

P **Don't ignore people's lives**

Phil had never commuted to a big city and could not understand the pressures on members of his new congregation. He made it clear he wanted people out for an evening course he was running and chided them for their lack of commitment when they did not come.

If you are in a rural area, seek to understand the tempo and feel of country life – and why Harvest Festival is so important. If, like Phil, you have moved to commuter-land, learn what it is like to catch the 7.15 up to the big city each day, to get home late and to cope with child-care problems.

Q **Do seek prayer support**

Queenie knew she needed God's hand on her ministry so she quietly built up a team of nine members of her friends and family outside her church to pray for her daily in her new post, sending them her diary and confidential comment each month.

Mission workers have prayer supporters. Many Ministers are in missionary situations yet do not have a band of faithful pray-ers. This is especially important in the first years of ministry. You might also build up a small group of external advisers, but not just your friends from college who share your theological convictions.

Finally

In short, listen before you speak, understand the church before you produce plans, love the people before you take them on a journey, and earn their respect before you initiate major change. Be yourself but remember that in all the above it is God-given wisdom that you need, timing is so important and prayer is the foundation for your work. Remind yourself that you serve the Lord Jesus Christ, that it is his church not yours, and that you are an under-shepherd.

Things are never quite as simple as this neat list may appear to assume. But when you meet opposition and people out to block your every move, ensure you are not doing anything stupid to encourage this.

For another slant, read Training Notes TN28, *No two leaders are the same*.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN70. See also Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*. Also Training Notes TN12, *Twenty ideas to help people change*, TN28, *No two leaders are the same*, TN59, *Don't you dare change anything!*, TN78, *The role of a church leader*, and TN120, *Lessons for leaders*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of one-to-one work consultancy for clergy.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN70 under Leadership (with a link to Planning).

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A final comment for purists: The title of these notes is given as *Do's and don'ts...* There seems to be no one correct way to use apostrophes here. No letters are missing for the plurals (as opposed to the missing o in don't) so it could be *Dos and don'ts*. But Sir Ernest Gowers (in *The complete plain words*) and other experts allow an apostrophe for a plural when otherwise it would confuse as in *p's and q's*. *Dos* has to be confusing. So perhaps it should be *Do's and don't's* but that starts to look silly. Hence the hybrid *Do's and don'ts*. If you disagree so be it, but I thought I would explain!