

# Accepted in the Beloved

Practical Wisdom  
for Christian Leadership

MICHAEL VOLLAND



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IN THE BELOVED



RIDLEY HALL  
CAMBRIDGE



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For Christian leaders everywhere;  
may you know that you are  
accepted in the Beloved.



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# Introduction

In this short book I remind Christian leaders of their identity as those who are accepted in Jesus Christ and I share some of the practical leadership lessons I've learned during my time as Principal of Ridley Hall, a theological college in Cambridge.

Ridley is a worshipping and learning community made up of full and part-time, residential and non-residential students and families, sabbatical guests from all over the world and a large staff team. The College has a range of institutional partners which include other theological colleges, two major universities and several Christian denominations.

In recent years Ridley has navigated significant challenges, including the global pandemic. Like others, we have had to change, adapt and think in new ways about who we are called to be. In the pages that follow I endeavour to articulate some of what I have learned about leadership in a complex institution during a demanding but fruitful season.

This book was originally intended for students preparing to leave Ridley Hall and take up lay and ordained leadership roles in the Church. Since embarking on this project, however, a wider readership has emerged: the many who find themselves stepping into Christian leadership for the first time, along with those already active in exercising leadership in a range of settings in the Church.



## Accepted in the Beloved

At the east end of the Chapel at Ridley Hall is a striking stained-glass window. The figure of Jesus occupies the centre. His arm is drawn across his body in a gesture of blessing and sending. I recall this depiction of Jesus when students arrive at Ridley, and remind them that we come to this place in order to leave it. We are gathered, blessed and sent out, empowered by the Spirit of God to offer leadership in churches around the UK and beyond.

I have looked at the Chapel's east window hundreds of times. However, it was only recently that I noticed four words in a small section in the bottom right corner, 'Accepted in the Beloved'. These words are part of a dedication for someone who lived over a century ago. That person, a Christian leader in a time with different challenges than our own, was sent out from Ridley Hall to serve God by loving the people among whom they found themselves. The great truth that underpinned the ministry they exercised is that they were accepted in the Beloved, Jesus Christ. This is a truth that every Christian leader needs to grasp and minister from today.

You are entirely, completely and utterly accepted in the Beloved.

Growing in awareness of this truth is foundational if we are to serve God with a glad and peaceful heart, retain perspective,

love others — even and especially those who appear impossible to love — and be resilient over the leadership long haul. It is only when we know that we are accepted regardless of our gifts and failings, that we become truly free to love and serve others, to move out of the way and point to God with our attitudes, words and actions.

You are entirely, completely and utterly  
accepted in the Beloved.

As you seek to put the practical wisdom for leadership in this book into practice, I encourage you to commit to growing in the knowledge that your true identity is not as a leader with particular talents or fears, but as one who is accepted in the Beloved.

## Leadership...?

Since the birth of the early Church, individual Christians have been called and equipped to serve the wider body, helping the community to gather, worship and witness together fruitfully. Much discussion has taken place about whether 'leadership' is the right word to describe what those called to exercise oversight in the Church of Jesus Christ are doing.

We talk about leadership in almost every walk of life and the word can be accompanied by unhelpful baggage in relation to ego, ambition and coercion of others. This is perhaps why some Christians are uncomfortable with using it in association with ministry. However, Christian leadership is — or should be — marked by certain distinctive traits. This is because the template for Christian leaders is Jesus' own example of humble service and submission to his Father's will. When Christians lead, whether in the Church or in spheres such as education, business, the arts or government, they are called to do so as those rooted in a loving relationship with Jesus Christ and as such, their motives, words and activities should reflect his life and character. They should be open to being shaped by the activity of the Holy Spirit in their lives and institutions. They are expected to watch over themselves and those they serve with great care and attention, aware

that they will be called to give an account to the One through whom and for whom all things were brought into being.

Most of us have heard about or even encountered poor or abusive leadership in the Church. However, there are also countless examples of outstanding Christian leadership, offered by those who have sought to serve God by loving others and who, through the grace of God working in them, have poured themselves out for the sake of the body of Christ and the coming Kingdom of God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, and trust that he is at work in his people, it is to these examples that we look and aspire and which we seek to imitate.

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and when exercised with love, wisdom and  
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people of God to be faithful and fruitful.

Leadership is a gift of God to the Church and when exercised with love, wisdom and humility, it brings glory to God by enabling the people of God to be faithful and fruitful. When understood in this way, leadership is a useful word for Christians. It helps us to understand and talk about what happens when people gather together with shared desire and a sense of common purpose. Talking about leadership is useful because it allows us to draw power dynamics into the light, where there can be scrutiny and accountability and, as a result, the building and maintaining of trust in a community.

## A word to students preparing for ministry...

Right now, you are a student. You have agreed to turn up, join in, be on time, read books and write essays, attend an attachment church, and manage a wide range of evolving feelings about the whole process. The experience is emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and physically demanding. The intention is that, along the way, as a result of time given to regular prayer and worship, engagement with scripture, academic study and in-depth conversation with friends and tutors, you will grow in love, wisdom and humility and find yourself in a position to leave and take on an exciting and, no doubt, challenging role.

And then you will be in ministry. You will find yourself growing in experience and confidence; preparing talks and sermons, leading home groups, delivering food parcels, discipling those coming to faith, caring for people at the beginning of life, sitting with those for whom life in this world is reaching its conclusion, and praying with those in distress.

Being a student and stepping into full-time, paid ministry require that you take on a degree of personal and corporate responsibility. In both of these situations the responsibility is real, but in the end, it is limited. You are not in charge. You are part of something. You may play a really big part. You

might even feel like you are carrying more than your fair share. The reality, however, is that someone else is ultimately responsible for what happens at college, and in your first ministry post.

Assuming all goes well with your first role, at some point you will seek the next thing; possibly a chaplaincy or associate post. If so, you will continue to have areas of oversight and influence but ultimately someone else will be responsible.

However, it may be that you accept a job where *degrees* of responsibility are exchanged for *full* responsibility. Here, the buck stops with *you*. You may have great colleagues who share in some of the responsibilities. They might be hugely supportive, gifted and willing to work hard. But now they are not ultimately responsible.

*You* are.

## You have a choice

As you take up a position of leadership, hopefully you will feel called to the role, be ready for the challenge and filled with enthusiasm and excitement. You will have moved from responsibility in some areas of your ministry to a more all-encompassing responsibility. When you wake up, you are responsible and when you go to sleep, you are still responsible. When you take your day off, the final responsibility for the community comes back to you and when you arrange cover for your annual vacation and travel to a remote part of Scotland for two weeks, even there, ultimate responsibility for the community remains yours.

In answer to the question, 'Who is responsible here?' The answer is a resounding, 'You are!' *All* the time.

Of course, others can take up some of the slack, step in, do what needs to be done. You can retain perspective, love your friends and family, enjoy your day off, have fun hobbies and take great holidays. I am not saying that being ultimately responsible means you are lost in your work or destined to live with a skewed sense of identity. I am simply pointing out

that in answer to the question, 'Who is responsible here?' The answer is a resounding, 'You are!' *All* the time. Until you leave. And then someone else is. Although it is likely you left because you have been invited to accept even more responsibility somewhere else...

This sense of all-encompassing responsibility will probably come as a shock. It did for me. Not long after becoming Principal of Ridley Hall I began to feel something like claustrophobia. There was no escape from the responsibility of being Principal. I could take my day off, laugh with my children, go for a run, read a book and think about other things, but all the time, at every moment, I was the Principal of Ridley Hall and therefore ultimately responsible for the College.<sup>1</sup> I thought I knew how this would feel before I took on the job.

I didn't.

I couldn't.

You can't know how something will feel until you are living right in it. And once I was living in it, I realised that the only way I could stop struggling under the weight of the constant awareness of being responsible was to stop being Principal. I didn't want to do that. I felt called to the task and was enjoying the job. I had some reflecting to do.

I began to realise that, although the responsibilities of the office of Principal were not up for re-consideration, my feelings about them certainly were. I had a choice. I could choose to allow myself to feel trapped and live with a mixture

<sup>1</sup> I believe that God is ultimately responsible for Ridley Hall. It is God's college and this is a great relief. However, God shares some of that responsibility with the staff team and me, giving us grace to undertake the work and inviting us to undertake the task willingly, wholeheartedly and with humility (see, 1 Peter 5:1-4).

of anxiety, fear and resentment. Or I could choose to embrace my new reality as a gift of God and seek the grace and strength of Jesus Christ to persevere and even flourish.

Had I chosen to live in a place of frustration, it wouldn't have taken long to discover that this leads to discouragement and disillusionment. Feelings like these often push us towards escape fantasies and unhealthy behaviours and they negatively impact and affect all those around us, including our congregations and our closest friends and family.

Choosing to embrace the call to the role we occupy, seeing it as the yoke of Christ, of which he bears the greater part, is a healthier and more sustainable approach. This choice sets us free to move away from claustrophobic, life-diminishing feelings and habits, to expansive, life-affirming attitudes and behaviours.

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As I chose to understand the call to be Principal in this way and stepped towards embracing it, the task continued to be challenging, but I was surprised to find that the feelings of claustrophobia faded, I grew broader shoulders and my capacity for life, work and joy increased.

May God give you grace to choose to embrace the work to which you are called and may this embrace open up expansive, life-giving horizons.

## See and be seen

When you are the leader, people in your community need to see you regularly. To develop and maintain trust, you need to be with your people. To understand what they think, where they are hurting and what they are excited about, you must be among them; they need to see you and you need to see them.

Even if you start out with the best of intentions, being the leader will mean that your diary fills up. In a community or institution there will be many things to do and more arriving each day. It may be tempting to tuck yourself away in order to get on with that pile of admin. You might feel that if only you could get a few hours (or days!) at the desk to clear the backlog, you would feel so much lighter and be able to get back to the real task of leading. The problem with this approach is that the admin will never diminish. While you are attending to the pile, more is coming in. Effective leadership certainly requires diligence in administration. But it is also, essentially, about being with people. If the community is going to grow and change, trust has to be built up and maintained. For this to happen, it is essential for you to be among and alongside your people. For communication to remain unhindered, clear and helpful, you need to be with people; to see them and be seen by them.

An important question is, how will you be present to people — be seen by them — while not neglecting the administration, planning and various other necessary organisational tasks?

A note to those readers who are content with seeing only a little of their people and prefer not to be seen by them too often; who find being with others exhausting and who feel most alive in the study. First, praise God for the ease with which you will attend to the paperwork, sermon-writing and budget scrutiny. Once you have given thanks in this way, cry out to God to give you grace, strength and courage to create regular times when you leave the study and go out among the people. Talk to your spiritual director or mentor with the aim of finding a way to be sustained in the aspect of your calling that requires you to be with people. With wise counsel, prayer and a desire to form new habits of engagement, it is possible for leaders whose energy is depleted by being with others to learn to flourish and even enjoy this important part of the work to which Christ has called you.

A note to those whose personality and disposition lends itself readily to being among others. Praise God for the energy he has given you to spend time listening to and loving your people. But before visits, meetings and social occasions fill every waking hour, ask God to give you the grace and patience to make deliberate space to pause, be still, think, process, plan, pray and deal with the necessary administration that will keep the whole thing moving along.

In addition, if you draw significant energy and affirmation from being with others, I encourage you to keep a particularly careful watch over your heart, your motives and drivers. Be honest with yourself and avoid the temptation to feed

your ego by constantly being with people. And avoid using your love of being with people as an excuse for not attending to necessary administration.

When you find a reasonable rhythm of being out among your people and being diligent in your study, guard it carefully.

All of those who are called to leadership are also called to work at discovering a sustainable rhythm of engaging — being seen — and withdrawing to attend to the administrative tasks that must be done in the relative quietness of the office or study. A balance is required.

When you find a reasonable rhythm of being out among your people and being diligent in your study, guard it carefully.

May God grant you the necessary courage and grace for each.

## Tone, values, atmosphere, culture

As the leader, your words, actions, habits, sense of humour (or lack of it!), and even your choice of clothing are constantly being observed and noted and they set a tone. This tone will act as a guiderail for the attitudes and conduct of those around you and will signal what is imagined to be acceptable and what is not. It will lead to an increase in some behaviours and a decrease in others. The tone you set will encourage some to join in and step up and it may prompt others to move aside or to stay away. The tone is shaped by your values and quickly affects the atmosphere in the community and, over time, this will shape a culture. To imagine or pretend your impact on those around you is not particularly significant is naïve, unwise and potentially dangerous.

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In light of this, it is important to think long and hard and to pray carefully about the tone you are setting, the values that will shape your words and behaviours and the sort of atmosphere and culture you hope will emerge.

I encourage you to pause and make a note of your values now. Not an idealised list of what you feel might be generally acceptable, but the values that you actually live by each day. If you value caution and deep consideration, write these down. If it is innovation and energetic pursuit of change, say so. If you are deeply committed to ensuring everyone around you is content and fulfilled, be honest about this. Once you have jotted down your list of four or five values, spend some time thinking and praying about them. Are these things you want to carry forward? Are you happy for them to continue to shape your life and the lives of those around you? Do you feel any of these might benefit from further work? Is anything missing? If so, what will you do about this?

It is probably safe to say that most of us would like to be part of a culture that is life-giving and purposeful, a culture in which we feel we can belong because the atmosphere is warm and hospitable, where people are actively encouraged and regularly thanked, an atmosphere that evokes joy and prompts gratitude even when things are challenging and in which there is a palpable sense of expectation for God's hopeful future. It is certainly a good thing to aspire to be a leader whose values, words, habits and actions contribute towards this sort of culture in the community or institution for which you are responsible.

Most of us are keen to avoid a culture where mistrust has taken root, that is overly critical and discouraging; a place where people are divided, feel alone and are unable to express their true feelings; an environment in which the atmosphere is one of fear, tension or frustration. Not many of us want to stay long in a place where we sense that other people are becoming disillusioned or are planning to escape. If

we find ourselves leading in a culture like this, we need to do some urgent praying, thinking, advice-seeking and action-planning in order to facilitate a move towards a more hopeful and fruitful future. With desire, prayer, and hard, focused work over the long haul, new and different futures are entirely possible in such situations.

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culture of a community.

It is a privilege and joy to be called to set the tone, atmosphere and culture of a community. I encourage you to allow that joy to become an inner spring, bubbling up vital energy and providing you with the strength for this beautiful task.

## Clear in your task

In order to lead well, you need a clear understanding of your task. To put this the opposite way, without clarity about your task, it is all but impossible to lead effectively.

An important first step in achieving clarity about your task is acknowledging that you are a leader. This sounds rather obvious but, as already mentioned, some are uncomfortable with the idea of being the leader and resist it, preferring to speak about their role in other, less-apparently hierarchical ways. The problem with this approach is that it confuses those around you. In their minds you are the leader and they expect you to lead. In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding and general frustration, I encourage you to make peace with the notion of being a leader, and then get on with the job of leading. Once this important first step has been taken, the next is to have clarity about the task.

Without clarity about your task, it is  
all but impossible to lead effectively.

As a leader, how would you describe your task? Not the task of leadership in general, but the task that you believe you are called to carry out as a leader in your particular context.

I encourage you to complete this sentence, 'As a leader in this place, my task is to...'

Once you have thought about the overarching task of leadership in your place, make a note of the sorts of things you need to do in order to achieve whatever is at the heart of your sentence.

As an example, here are my answers to these two questions.

As Principal, called to lead Ridley Hall, my task is to pray for, love and serve the community, watching over each facet of its life, doing all in my power to assist and enable its flourishing, and striving to ensure it serves its purpose of preparing leaders for the Church now and in the future.

In order for this to be achieved, I must ensure there is a clear vision, understood and owned by all members of the community, that excellent staff and students are recruited, supported and cared for, that Ridley sends out well-trained Christian leaders who are full of God's love and wisdom and who have undertaken deep and challenging work on character, that college finances are properly managed, the buildings and grounds are maintained and that the community is handed on in good order to those who come after us.

Here we see a clear statement of the high-level task of leadership at Ridley Hall, followed by a summary with a little more detail, which embraces vision, communication, attention to getting the right staff in place and to recruiting students, reference to training and formation and all that this entails, including the provision and maintenance of spaces for people to eat, sleep, wash, worship, study and socialise, and the management of the staff and administration to support and enable this complex endeavour. Each of these areas could generate its own drop-down task list. I will spare you

this, but the point is obvious. Having and maintaining clarity about the task of leadership, from the highest-level summary to the fine detail, is fundamental to leading fruitfully and faithfully. It will also help you to be resilient, and therefore more likely to be energised and sustained over the long haul. This is because clarity about your task reinforces your sense of calling and purpose and therefore makes a significant contribution to your ongoing peace of mind and heart, which are essential in a ministry focused on others.

Having and maintaining clarity about the  
task of leadership will help you to be  
energised and sustained over the long haul.

May you have clarity in the task of leadership in the place  
to which God has called you.

## A degree of aloneness

When you accept the responsibility of leading, it is important to avoid the mistake of imagining your role is simply another job alongside the rest of the team.

Everyone who lives and works in the community has important work to do and, in one sense, you are no different; together you are pulling the plough. However, it is important that you accept the potentially uncomfortable reality that, as the leader, you have a unique responsibility; something that, to some degree, sets you apart and places a range of expectations on you that are not on others.

As the leader, you have a unique responsibility; something that, to some degree, sets you apart and places a range of expectations on you that are not on others.

Even if you are called to lead in a small community, or one in which you feel at home, or have shared history with others, or in which the majority are volunteers, to some degree you will be set apart from those you are called to lead.

Set apart does not mean 'better', or 'more special'. You have different responsibilities from the rest of the group. The

responsibilities of leadership mean that, although you may sit at the same table as everyone else, you are to some degree apart from them. This is why people speak of leadership as being lonely. In The Letter to the Hebrews we read,

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing — for that would be harmful to you.* *Hebrews 13:17*

The call to keep watch over the souls of the community is, to some degree, a mutual task for Christians. However, we learn here that leaders have a particular responsibility in this area and will give an account to God for the way in which they undertake it. This is a privilege but it is also one of the reasons why the work of Christian leadership can be experienced as lonely; the call to keep watch over souls may mean having to say challenging things to members of the church, perhaps even the entire community! Others may pray for, advise and support you in this task, but responsibility rests with you.

Part of the cost of the responsibility of leadership is a degree of aloneness. Aloneness is not the same as isolation. And it certainly doesn't mean that you should be defended or lack appropriate vulnerability.

Being vulnerable doesn't mean sharing everything with the whole community at all times. Discernment in what and how you share is required if you are to maintain your integrity and if the leadership you offer is going to continue to be effective.

One area in which this is particularly important is in guarding your lips. Exercising care in your words when leading is

of the utmost importance. But this is difficult because there will be many things you want to be able to say. Exercising wisdom and discretion may make you feel as if you are not being yourself. You might even feel you are being dishonest in not saying everything that comes to mind. This could be an aspect of the work that makes you feel alone; unable to pour out precisely what is on your mind and heart.

Exercising wisdom and discretion could be an aspect of the work that makes you feel alone; unable to pour out precisely what is on your mind and heart.

Of course, you will need to process your feelings, express frustration and perhaps even let off steam, but I encourage you to do this away from the community with an appropriate other whom you can trust to listen, offer wise advice and pray with and for you.

May God give you grace to bear any sense of aloneness and provide you with good friends to keep you from isolation.

## A nudge on the tiller (not revolution)

Very occasionally it is obvious that radical change is needed in a church or institution. The community has become stuck or drifted so far off course that nothing short of a revolution will release new energy and refocus people's hearts, minds and behaviours on the main thing.

Revolutions are dramatic and exciting and the idea of rapid, radical change is seductive, particularly when, as a leader, the alternative looks like a slow death for you and your people.

Revolutions may force change but, sooner or later, those involved must face the inescapable task of rebuilding something worthwhile and lasting from the rubble.

But revolutions are also chaotic and bloody and often come at great cost to both instigators and communities. Revolutions may force change but, sooner or later, those involved must face the inescapable task of rebuilding something worthwhile and lasting from the rubble. This involves the hard work of drawing alongside others and working out, often at length, what shape life together in the 'new' era is going to take. There will be negotiation and compromise.

Healing must be part of the process. It may take months and even years. Revolution is never a quick fix. If radical change via revolution is called for, those involved must proceed with wisdom, care and patience. If you are of a revolutionary disposition, I encourage you to think about whether you are genuinely prepared to put in the real work after the excitement has died down and the rebuilding begins.

When you are the leader, for the most part, it is not revolution that is required, but a regular nudge on the tiller of each sphere of work. Since you will have multiple fronts open at any one time, generally you won't have the capacity for revolution. Initiating necessary changes, guiding and supporting others and generally encouraging the community to keep moving towards God's hopeful future involves a regular, considered nudge and a lot of patience. This also means that you are more likely to retain people's trust and move at a pace they can cope with.

May you receive the wisdom each day to understand how best to nudge the tiller.

# Making decisions

Leadership requires regular decision making. Many of these decisions are relatively minor and the life of the community or efficient operation of the institution rely on you having the experience and confidence to make these decisions, communicate them clearly and move on.

However, as you go on in leadership you will find yourself having to make decisions with greater consequences and which require more prayerful consideration. Sometimes you will find that several of these come at the same time. And the day-to-day admin still needs to be done, sermons must be written and your friends and family want to spend time with you.

Wisdom will teach you to make a priority of creating space to process situations in order that you are able to make decisions well.

All decisions, even small ones, require the exercise of wisdom. The first step, then, is to ensure you are proactive in seeking to grow in wisdom. Alongside love, humility and courage, wisdom is the basis of all fruitful ministry and leadership. Wisdom will teach you to make a priority of creating space to process situations in order that you are able to

make decisions well. The more complex the situation, the more space and time required to process and weigh up potential outcomes. And you will generally have to do this on the move, with other pressures and without letting everyone know just how hard things are for you.

You will always be holding in tension the need to make decisions reasonably quickly with the importance of ensuring you have given enough thought to the consequences for you to have confidence your decision is the best one you can make in the circumstances.

Most of the decisions you will need to take in an institution or community will involve some element of time pressure. This is because there are lots of other things that need your attention and more arriving all the time. It is also because other people are relying on your decision in order to get on with their own jobs. An inability to make decisions or too long spent thinking through every possible outcome, or fear about making a wrong decision can mean you become a bottleneck, things grind to a halt and frustration builds.

However, in your haste to make a decision and move on to the next thing, there is a risk that a decision that is not carefully considered may result in unanticipated problems — disaffected people, fractured communication, low morale and negative organisational, legal or spiritual consequences.

You need to seek to understand which decisions require what level of reflection, and act accordingly while continuing to attend to your ongoing responsibilities. You can't go on retreat to think through every important decision. However, you do need to know when to slow a decision down and carry the situation through a longer period; wait, pray, think, ask advice and delay the decision a little. Sometimes additional

information comes to light and the situation takes a new turn. On other occasions, it resolves itself. I have been surprised by how frequently I have found myself thinking I was pleased I didn't do what I originally planned and waited a little longer to see what else might happen.

When it comes to making significant decisions, in the end you will need to act, but only after seeking advice from a range of stakeholders and wise others, and after much prayer and reflection. It can be frustrating and even painful to proceed in this way but, by the grace of God, you will avoid poor outcomes and contribute to the growth and fruitfulness of the community.

May God give you the strength to make many decisions each day, the courage to take difficult decisions and the wisdom to know when to delay a decision until you have greater clarity about God's will for a situation.

## The right people in the right roles at the right time

One of the most important tasks you will undertake as a leader is appointing the right people to the right roles. Whether you are working with volunteers or paid employees will make a difference to terms and conditions and what you can reasonably expect of someone. In either case, however, as far as is reasonably possible, ensuring that those with appropriate dispositions, expertise and gifts are matched with jobs that need to be done is crucial.

A brief note to leadership ‘all-rounders’ who would rather do things themselves than have the stress and frustration of finding the right people for the right roles. People make a community and, however talented you are, you simply cannot do everything that needs to be done to enable a community to function. And, even if you could, or think you can, don’t. That isn’t the point of community. You will get exhausted and want to leave. Everyone else will become passive and grumpy and the whole thing will be a pale shadow of what God intended. Being a fruitful leader will mean passing up the temptation to do everything yourself and, I’m sorry to say, it just does involve dealing with the frustrations that accompany working with others; especially if they are over-sensitive, lacking empathy, unreliable, of questionable

competence or generally annoying. We all have to deal with these experiences. Perhaps we can learn to see them as opportunities to grow in grace and patience!

Close to the heart of the leader's task is understanding what needs to be done in the community and prayerfully drawing volunteers or paid staff with the right gifts and dispositions into the variety of roles. And then, of course, ensuring these people have clarity about their task. And, alongside this, making sure people understand the way in which what they are doing relates both to what those around them are doing and to the overarching vision and purpose of the whole endeavour.

Sounds straightforward?

It isn't.

Which is why you need to remember that this is a task you absolutely share with the Lord. In your prayers, give thanks to God that the community or institution are not yours but God's. Ask God to bring in just the right people for this season and to help you to be open to who they might be. Pray especially that God will give you the gift of being open to appointing surprising people or those you might not usually pick first.

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of being open to appointing surprising people  
or those you might not usually pick first.

Sometimes it is important to have someone you regard as a safe pair of hands; a person who will understand what needs to be done and who will simply get on with it. In other seasons, you will have the opportunity to make a judgement

call about someone's potential. They may be unproven, perhaps young or inexperienced, but somewhere in the process of discerning whom to offer a role to, you catch a glimpse of what this person might become and sense that with encouragement and support, they may be able to bring far more than you could imagine or ask to the position. This could seem like a big risk to take, and it certainly requires much prayer, consideration and wisdom in setting up probationary periods, training and mentoring. But, in a world of rapid change, those who do not come with fixed points of view or preferred ways of doing things, those who can see differently, who bring energy and a desire to make a positive impact, can be a wonderful gift of God to the community — helping to release energy, shape things in new ways and enable a move towards God's hopeful future.

May God give you discernment and courage in finding the right people for the right roles and the right time.

## Dealing with challenges

The hope is that ministry is consistently a joy and blessing. Much of the time this is true. However, there will be seasons when the going gets tough. I am not talking here about the day-to-day challenges of chairing a meeting whose main agenda item is the church guttering, or working with someone you find mildly irritating. I am talking about serious challenges that defy a quick fix and which have the potential to throw you off balance. The challenge may be something happening in your own life, or with friends or family. It could be a difficult situation in the congregation or the wider community. The focus may be around an issue, a group or an individual. The challenge could be entirely new and unexpected or the root may lie in the past, perhaps before your arrival.

If it is serious, it is likely to be complex, with a range of views at play and heightened emotions for those involved. When things get really tough, there may be a threat to the stability and harmony of the community. You might even find that your judgment, authority, suitability or integrity are called into question. This could evolve into a situation that you experience as an attack. It is possible, of course, that you have said or done something regrettable and the difficulties are a result of your own poor choices. However, it could also

be that, in trying to lead with integrity you encounter those with differing opinions on something significant and begin to experience resistance. Even if you attempt to handle the matter with sensitivity, care and wisdom, events can spiral into a complicated, hurtful mess from which there is likely to be no really 'good' outcome for anyone involved.

When you find yourself in a situation like this, you quickly discover that it becomes the main thing you spend time thinking about; rapidly draining your spiritual, mental, emotional and physical resources. You may feel that you would like to run away, leave everyone to it and go and find a less complicated, responsible and demanding job. This is one option but, since difficult situations will occur wherever human beings gather, it is probably more fruitful to accept that the route lies through the challenge rather than in running away from it. To navigate ministry challenges wisely and safely you will need God's help. Which is good, because in prayer, we know God is close at hand and more than equal to whatever difficulty we are confronted with.

Given the option, it is likely I would not have chosen to experience most of the challenging things that I have had to face. However, I can say with absolute sincerity that I prayed a whole lot more while in the midst of these things and, as a result, times of difficulty or distress have been among the most intimate in my walk with the Lord. Devotion to prayer during tough times has deepened my faith and increased my love for God. It has set a deep trust inside me which is rooted in an experience of God's faithfulness. I have learnt that God is attentive, kind and able to provide wisdom, peace and reassurance during long weeks, months or even years of enduring a difficult situation.

Since teenage years, my own prayers during challenging times have been shaped by the Psalms. The following verse, from Psalm 37 has always been a favourite.

*Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.*

*Psalm 37:7a*

In ministry I have often found myself returning to this verse. Frequently, the difficulty at the heart of the matter is not clear-cut. One of the most disquieting things about challenging times can be the sense that you can't quite understand what is really happening. You know things are bad. You replay difficult conversations or re-read accusatory emails or angry letters. You stew over how someone has behaved towards you and struggle not to wish them ill. You kick yourself for careless words or for becoming emotional and saying too much. You know there are behaviours and conversations that are beyond your awareness but which are contributing to the situation. You yearn for clarity, for solutions, for justice, for a resolution. Ultimately, you long to be able to put the whole thing behind you. And all of this while life is happening. A host of things still have to be done. Other people need attending to; people you might actually enjoy spending time with; people whose presence and words are life-giving and fun. Administration needs to be dealt with. Your friends and family want to see you. And meanwhile, the difficult situation is eating away at your joy and you can't even work out what's really going on, let alone how to resolve it and move on.

*Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.*

When the ministry path passes through challenging terrain, I encourage you to pray this verse from Psalm 37. Stay with it. Stop, sit down, close your eyes, breathe deeply and repeat the words in the presence of God. Don't try to think through the details of the difficulties you are facing. Cease attempting to plot your way forward. Give up on caring about being right or proving that you are not wrong. Place your hands before you, palms up. In your heart hold the situation and all its murky complexity before God. Pray this verse. Let these be the only words in your heart and on your lips. You

When the ministry path passes through  
challenging terrain, pray this verse. Let these be  
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will be in good company; the Psalmist's words are ones with which Jesus himself would have been deeply familiar. Set the eyes of your heart on God rather than the problem. Let God set peace in your heart, open a way forward in His good time and give you grace to be sustained as you navigate challenging weeks, months or even years.

*Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.*

## Get used to disappointing people

Please don't misunderstand this statement. I am not suggesting we get used to *people* who are disappointing! Many years ago, a wise Christian explained in simple terms that I should get used to being a disappointment to people because, sooner or later I would certainly let someone down.

After a brief pause, they added; 'And you should probably get used to disappointing yourself too...'

Everyone has expectations of the leader. But sooner or later you will fail to meet expectations.

I invite you to take this on board and ask God to give you the grace and courage to accept and live out of it. This is not an excuse for lacking diligence in the work God has called you to or for being careless about letting people down. This has to do with accepting the truth of the reality of living with integrity among other people; particularly when you have responsibility as the leader.

Everyone has expectations of the leader (including you). But sooner or later you will fail to meet expectations. This might be in relation to something that you were not even aware of. And if you are aware of it, it could be something

you don't believe is all that important. That is not really the point. The point here is that sooner or later you are going to let people down and disappoint them.

Actively trying not to disappoint people exerts power over us. This power is rooted in fear and does not bring out the best. Quite the opposite, in fact. But the love of God drives out fear and sets us free from its grip and the effects of its working. Once you have understood and come to terms with this, the power that trying not to be a disappointment has over you can be broken. As you consciously give up trying not to disappoint people, you begin to find you are free to get on with God's work without being hampered by what you imagine others might think of you.

One of my students once said to me, 'Would you like to know what they say about you in the common room?' I paused. 'Don't worry,' he went on, 'it's all good!'

I told him I didn't want to know and that I tried not to care because, even if it hadn't been good, I was trying my best to do the job I believed I was called to with integrity and humility and knowing what students said about me in private wouldn't be helpful either way.

Of course, when you start out in a new role, it is important to try and reach agreement and clarity with those around you about expectations; theirs and yours. This will help avoid unnecessary frustration and conflict. There may be key things you are expected to do (or definitely not do), or attend, which are obvious to you and all. As far as possible, it is worth seeking to understand in general terms what is expected of a leader in a Christian community and to endeavour to attend to these things in a sustainable way. Having done this, we must also recognise that people often have all sorts of

undeclared expectations, some of which may be reasonable and which may even come to your attention, and others of which may be unreasonable or unshared. Either way, sooner or later you are going to fail to meet someone's expectations and disappoint them.

Clearly, paying attention to the basics over the long haul is important. For the sake of clarity, I have listed below some of the things that, as the leader, you would be wise to put into practice. Following the example of St Paul, I have made the words larger, to emphasise their importance!

Turn up, be visible, exercise love, wisdom and humility, be patient and kind, strive to be joyful, communicate clearly, work *with* those around you, create opportunities for others, thank people regularly, seek to set a life-giving tone in the community, avoid writing emails when you are angry, don't tell people how hard your job is, never blame your predecessor, remain calm in the face of challenges, encourage everyone, attend to small details, take care in what you say, be consistent in your behaviour, apologise quickly and wholeheartedly when you are in the wrong, be clear in your task and know when it is time to leave.

These are the basics and, mostly, they are in your control. But in addition to these, people will have expectations that you will fail to meet and this will disappoint them. This has to be okay. It shouldn't be allowed to dent your self-esteem, which is rooted in Christ and not in who you imagine others think you are or what you have achieved. Knowing this should keep your ego in check and is therefore a gift. I urge you to embrace it.

Get used to disappointing people.

## Don't climb into the washing machine

When you are the leader there will be people around you for whom almost everything appears to be a crisis or an opportunity for panic. Allowing those who behave in this way to influence you or others in the community has the potential to create a fraught atmosphere. This is draining, allows fear and confusion to take root and will mean the community regularly feels like it is becoming stuck.

Allowing those who behave in this way to influence you or others in the community has the potential to create a fraught atmosphere.

A wise mentor once pointed out that as I seek to lead, some of those around me will invite me to climb into the washing machine with them. What he meant by this was that they are in turmoil and they want me to join them in that turmoil. They are not really seeking a solution or to move into a more fruitful future. They are content to remain in the place of turmoil, spinning round and round, and are set on having me join them in it. He warned me to refuse to do this.

Not only should I refuse to do it, I should walk away from those who behave in this way. If walking away isn't possible,

I should work on something else and ignore the washing machine. Perhaps, starved of my attention, those who behave in this way will eventually climb out and join me in something more productive. If not, that will be outside of my control.

What is always in my control is the decision not to climb into the washing machine and to choose to get on with something fruitful instead.

What is always in my control is the decision not to climb into the washing machine and to choose to get on with something fruitful instead.

When leading, don't climb into the washing machine.

# Tending the garden

Leadership in a community or institution may have quiet seasons but, in my experience, there is a steady flow of demands coming in your direction. Some of these are repeated on a weekly basis, others are seasonal and yet others come out of nowhere and may take a variety of unexpected forms. They occur alongside your usual commitments and happen in spite of whatever is going on with friends or family. In order to survive and even flourish in such an environment, creating space to process is essential.

Ensuring that you have space to process is an essential part of offering effective leadership.

Ensuring that you have space to process is an essential part of offering effective leadership. This is for two reasons. Firstly, processing the various things you are dealing with helps you retain a sense of perspective and can help to keep you from becoming unnecessarily weighed down or overly burdened.

Secondly, finding space to process provides a way for you to seek to *understand* a situation as thoroughly as possible. It gives you time to scrutinise a challenge or situation from a variety of vantage points, to run events through your head,

spot what you may have missed, weigh up what someone has said or done, recall other relevant factors and analyse and reflect on your own reaction. You may move into the need to make a decision, but that is not what space to process is primarily about. As the person charged with leading, you need to understand what is happening around you. And what is happening is always changing and therefore requires continual vigilance. Creating space to process will ensure that you are paying proper attention and are able to remain calm and respond wisely for the benefit of all in your care.

An old friend told me that, decades previously, when he had been a student at theological college, he frequently noticed the Principal tending to his garden. At the time my friend wondered why the Principal wasn't in his study getting on with something apparently more worthy or important. It was only years later, when my friend found himself in a post of significant responsibility that he realised his former Principal took to the garden as a way of creating space to process the many and varied complex situations he was called upon to deal with day by day.

Find your own regular space and activity to enable you to process, and therein discover an important vehicle for achieving clarity in the challenging task of leadership.

I encourage you to find your own regular space and activity to enable you to process, and therein discover an important vehicle for achieving clarity in the challenging task of leadership.

Tend the garden.

## Race to the Stones

It is easy for the work of leadership to become all-consuming. This isn't just a risk for those who struggle to maintain a healthy work–life balance or who haven't learnt to delegate effectively. Even if you take time off and make sure the tasks are shared out among those best suited to them, when you are responsible for leading, there is always, always, always something else that requires your attention. You will have a perpetual 'to-do' list in your mind. A number of things on the list will need careful consideration and will require much of your mental and spiritual capacity. I have found it isn't enough to simply try to switch off during evenings or days off. You can't just stop thinking about things, especially if the issue is sensitive or if any decision is likely to have significant consequences.

Find something consuming and  
life-giving to do that is not work.

My advice is to find something consuming and life-giving to do that is not work. For me it is running. Eighteen months into being Principal, I signed up for a half marathon. While I was training for this, a friend told me about ultra-marathons.

These are races of any distance beyond marathon length, from 50k to 100miles and beyond. I decided I'd like to give one a go, did some research and signed up for a 50k around Kielder Forest in north east England. While I continued training for the half marathon and the 50k, the same friend told me about 'Race to the Stones', a 100k run along the Ridgeway to Avebury stone circle. It sounded terrifying. I signed up. Contemplating these ridiculous distances, training four times a week and researching kit and nutrition was completely absorbing. I found that while I was thinking about running, I wasn't thinking about work. Which was refreshing. And which meant, when I went to work, I had a quiet spirit, a clear mind, a joyful heart and the strength and energy to get on with the tasks and challenges requiring my attention.

Find something outside work that is life-giving and absorbing; something you can enjoy devoting time, energy and thought to.

The other unexpected benefit of running ultra-marathons is that after running for five, ten or even fifteen hours, at the limit of your physical resources, you finally reach the end of the race and run beneath a large banner emblazoned with the word, 'Finish'. For leaders, many things are never really finished. You rarely get to say, 'I'm done now'. Psychologically therefore, it is a surprising blessing to get to the end of something, see the word, 'finish', and be able to literally sit down and say, 'I did it! I finished!'

I am not suggesting anyone take up ultra-running. It works for me but it certainly isn't for everyone. But I do recommend you find something outside work that is life-giving and

absorbing; something you can enjoy devoting time, energy and thought to. Ask God to show you what it could be. Accept it as a gift from God.

In John 10:10 we hear Jesus saying, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' It is important to be an attentive, diligent leader; to give the task of leadership your best for the sake of those you lead and because you are serving God. But in order to be sustained over the long haul and remain fresh in the meantime, a life-giving addition is a big help. It may seem counter-intuitive, and you may feel as you read this, that you won't be able to find the time or energy. I invite you to pray about it, try things and take hold of the gift that God is offering.

Race to the stones.

## The joy of the Lord is your strength

Christian leadership requires many things of us. Strength is one. Strength to face the day and to serve those God has placed us among. The great hymn prays it well, '*Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*'. There is much to be done. We need strength to do it. Strength is rooted in joy. So, if we are to find the strength to serve, understanding how to open our hearts to joy over the long haul is important.

*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*

When I joined the staff team at Ridley Hall, I found myself on the preaching rota for chapel and this verse, Nehemiah 8:10, was the first thing I was asked to speak to. Deeply struck by the life-giving truth at the heart of these words, when I took on the role of Principal, I painted them on a board which now hangs on the wall beside my desk. I repeated the verse over and over while training for my first competitive long-distance run and recited it as I plodded along the Ridgeway alongside hundreds of other people 'racing' from Maidenhead to Avebury.

*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*

When we lose our joy, as is all too easy in the wobble and bump of life, we lose our strength. I should point out that it is important not to confuse joy with *feeling* joyful. I once read that feelings are like the weather on a mountain. The mountain and the weather are both real but, whereas the weather changes from one day or even hour to the next, the mountain remains constant. If the weather is your feelings, the mountain is you. God is love. And in God's very essence, God is also joy. You are created, sustained and beloved of God. And since, through faith, you participate in the life of God, I invite you to believe that it is possible for the joy of the Lord to become part of your very being, and not like the weather; an event that sweeps in and out and whose presence or absence you are at the mercy of.

Since, through faith, you participate in the life of God, I invite you to believe that it is possible for the joy of the Lord to become part of your very being.

The apparently everyday tasks of getting out of bed, and out of the house, and mixing with other people, require strength and courage. You may feel you don't have much of either. And even if today all is well and you are feeling strong, clear-headed and full of optimism, you may one day find yourself travelling a section of life's journey in which disappointment, anxiety, fear, dread, grief or despair rob you of your joy. And when you lose your joy, you will find that your strength for living, and getting up and going out and being with others, and leading the people of God has gone with it.

*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*

The joy of the Lord is at the heart of creation and, as we participate in the life of God, this joy lives in you, animates you and will become your strength and your song; the strength to get up and get on with living among and serving other people and to not be so completely drained by it all that you fall into lethargy or despair. This joy is *of* the Lord, it is *in* the Lord and it flows *from* the Lord. It cannot be lost. I invite you to believe afresh that this is true. And where you struggle to have faith, to ask God to give you more. And then, to open your heart and receive the joy of the Lord. Not seeking a temporary emotional lift, but making space for the life-giver, the creator, to come to you and abide with you. And for God's joy, the joy that is *of* the Lord, to become your strength. This is not the work of a moment, but a daily practice all your life long. It is not something you conjure up or work hard to perfect. It is a simple, humble practice of recognising your finitude and opening your heart to God's abundant life.

*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*

There is more than enough in these eight words to sustain a lifetime of prayerful reflection. I invite you to begin to pray these words to yourself. Repeat them over and over. You may find it helpful to sit quietly or to walk or even run with these words on your lips. Let them become the prayer of your heart. Know that the Lord is attentive to you and willing and able to give more than you ask, or even imagine. Open your heart with gratitude and expectation and receive from God.

As you seek to lead the people of God in the way of Christ, may the joy of the Lord Jesus become your strength.



In this book, written for time-pressured leaders to be read in one hour, Michael Volland reminds Christians of their identity as those who are accepted in Jesus Christ; he offers practical wisdom for leadership, addressing the importance of clarity about our task, growing in love, wisdom and humility, living well with the pressure of responsibility, confronting challenges, making decisions, and creating space to process.

Whether you are young or old, paid or a volunteer, lay or ordained, if you are called to Christian leadership, you will find inspiration and encouragement in this helpful resource.

*Michael Volland is Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, an Anglican theological college which prepares Christians for lay and ordained leadership in the Church.*



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# Accepted in the Beloved

Practical Wisdom  
for Christian Leadership

MICHAEL VOLLAND