

Shouldering Responsibility: Advancement through Retreat

Peter Heslam provides here a reflection on the recent Faith in Business Leadership Retreat, held at Westminster College, Cambridge, 5-7 April 2019. The retreat, entitled 'Devoted Living – Work as Worship' had Ken Dickson, a business leader who is part of Faith in Business' Executive Team, as its Rapporteur. Ken summarises his reflections on the retreat in the shaded box below.

Leaders carry responsibility. This statement may be obvious, but it is also metaphorical. Leaders do not necessarily carry anything, and no one can carry something intangible, like responsibility.

In many cultures, the responsibility leaders are said to carry rests on something equally metaphorical: their shoulders. That's the strongest and most stable place for the human body to carry heavy things.

Reflecting this, authority in military and uniformed organizations around the world has for centuries been symbolically displayed on shoulders. In ancient Israel, for instance, the vestments worn by the high priest included shoulder pieces with onyx stones set in gold (Ex 28: 9-14).

This is the background against which Isaiah celebrates God's shattering of the oppressive yoke across his

people's shoulders, and looks forward to the coming Messiah, for whom 'the governance shall be upon his shoulders' (Isa 9.4-6).

Therefore, if all leaders bear responsibility, they do so because it has been delegated to them by Christ, on whose shoulders supreme authority rests. This has practical implications for leaders – they are to exercise that authority in accordance with Christ.





To lead in this way is demanding but also liberating. All human responsibility comes with anxiety and disappointment. But when leaders know that that responsibility has been delegated to them by Christ, who carries it with them, they can receive from him a peace beyond human understanding. For as Isaiah puts it in those verses, the ultimate governance-bearer is the 'Wonderful Counsellor', the 'Prince of Peace'.

Many of the retreat participants will have attended Christian events and church services in which they will have been encouraged to leave their leadership responsibilities behind at the entrance, in order to focus on God. But this event took a more integrated, wholistic approach.

Although participants, which included a high proportion of women, were retreating from the ordinary pattern of their lives, they came to God not just as their spiritual selves but as the this-worldly leaders God had called them to be, within a broad range of economic spheres.

These spheres included accountancy, construction, agricultural technology, electronic engineering, consultancy, architecture, international finance, semi-conductors, publishing, property, banking, product design, manufacturing, construction, well-being, food service, pharmaceuticals, e-commerce, technology, heavy industry, coaching & training, PR & marketing, research & education, film & TV production.

With responsibilities in these spheres weighing on their shoulders, the retreat was an opportunity for participants to allow the wonderful counsel- and peace-giver to lighten their yokes and to equip and inspire them to return to those spheres as more effective leaders – the kind of leaders other people love to follow.

One of the most significant ways this took place was through the ministry of the Prayer Team. At specified times during the retreat, two members of the Prayer Team were available in the college chapel, for

participants to come and pray with them personally and confidentially about work-related matters.

Another form of equipping came in the form of two beautiful recent additions to the college grounds: a prayer labyrinth and an art studio. The significance of the labyrinth to the theme of 'work as worship' was introduced, and passages of scripture and poetry that convey this theme were placed, along with abundant painting materials, in the art studio. All these assets functioned as aids to faith-filled meditation, prayer, imagination and creativity!

The leaders of our gathered worship, Sam and Sara Hargreaves, provided further deep resourcing. With great musicality and modesty, they exhibited rare liturgical, theological and spiritual depth, and they drew with sensitivity from the breadth of the Christian tradition. As knowledgeable, perceptive and emotionally-intelligent worship leaders, they skilfully created ambience and space for reflection and contemplation.¹

All these elements of the retreat, plus those noted by Ken Dickson below, provided a cornucopia of resources for busy leaders! But none of them would have been as effective without the extraordinary self-discipline participants showed regarding the use of electronic communication devices.

Determined to make this retreat a true retreat, most participants put away such devices. This helped facilitate a depth of personal engagement that is becoming scarce in the increasingly distracted, frenetic and relationally shallow world of conferencing.

Here were business leaders who were like military commanders, not only in the weight of responsibility upon their shoulders, but in understanding that to advance it is necessary to retreat.

What an amazing event! This retreat retained the benefits of the conferences that preceded it but had scripture, prayer, reflection and gathered worship running as golden threads through the entire programme.

God will have spoken to each participant in a different way. What I offer here are merely some of the things that stood out for me.

One of them is the importance of passion in leadership. Each of the speakers and interviewees spoke not just from their head but from their heart – the seat of their will and motivation. In doing so, they demonstrated openness and vulnerability and reflected Jesus' words: 'Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks' (Lk 6.45).

A recurrent theme was how God leads us on an adventure that can only be understood in retrospect. We need, in the meantime, to step up, step out, and step into God's purposes. It was good to be reminded, during the Communion Service, why we can have such boldness: 'Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.' (Josh 1:9; cf Mt 28:20).

As a member of the Host Team, I was delighted to see existing relationships between participants deepened, and many new ones made. Half of the participants were new to FiB, and they represented a diverse mix of age and background. Countries represented included the USA, Burundi, South Africa, and China. I'm inspired to find out what 'devoted living' might mean in those contexts.

Wherever we work, we should be fostering cultural transformation. This was a prominent theme in the talk and workshop led by Paul Bulkeley. As one of his employees observed, 'We're not a Christian business but a business run on Christian values.' The way we do business impacts colleagues, customers and competitors. One speaker talked in particular about the challenges of corruption. But we are all influencers and can change the cultural atmosphere around us. This is what will happen when our work is part of our worship.

All this is reflected in the fact that in Hebrew, as Peter Heslam reminded us in his opening remarks, the words 'work' and 'worship' stem from the same root.² We need to keep these

two things connected in our workplaces. Only then can we fulfil the injunction on which one of the Bible reflections was based:


Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom 12.1-2).

As our opening speaker Genevieve Loaker reminded us, 'If we don't see work as worship, we will worship our work.'

In the gathered worship throughout the retreat, Sam and Sara Hargreaves demonstrated 'whole life worship' and used an eclectic mix of styles and approaches to ensure everyone felt included. Their approach was fresh and vibrant, involving poignant liturgy and lyrics, silent reflection, and even a creative modelling exercise! New words sung to familiar tunes lifted minds and hearts to new levels.

In his sermon, Paul Valler summoned us to follow Christ by turning our boat against the tide. His refreshingly different preaching style was a model of effective communication with people as they are, rather than as we might wish them to be.

Whatever the key messages participants came away with, they all need to take them to heart and to seek God's wisdom as they consider what they mean for them in practice. For in the end, it is not just *hearing* that matters, but *doing*.

Ken Dickson,
Founding Director of Axiom-e. 

¹ Sam and Sara Hargreaves have kindly made available the resources they used at the retreat here:

<https://www.engageworship.org/articles/faith-business-conference-feedback>

² See also Peter Heslam's article 'Devoted Living: Work as Worship' in *Faith in Business Quarterly*, 19.3 (pp. 33-34).



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