

Leadership as a Sacred Trust

Summary of Content of Faith in Business Retreat

Each year, Faith in Business (FiB) engages with a theme that reflects the contemporary world of work. It does so by drawing on biblical insight and wisdom to offer fresh and creative perspectives. The aim is to stimulate positive practical change in the sphere of work and in the church contexts to which working Christians belong. Engagement with this theme culminates in the annual retreat, held in Cambridge during the last weekend of April. For the academic year 2025–26, the theme was Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership. FiB’s director Peter Heslam here provides a concise overview of the retreat content.

Leadership today is in flux. Traditional hierarchies are weakening, trust in institutions is fragile, and the misuse of authority has left many people suspicious of power. Yet power and influence are not inherently dangerous. They are God-given. Their impact depends on how they are used.

Across the six sessions of this retreat, a clear message emerged: responsible leadership is rooted in humility, shaped by the character of God, and expressed through influence more than position.

Power and Influence: Neutral Forces with Transformative Potential

Power is the capacity to direct others’ behaviour and is derived from formal authority. Influence, on the other hand, is the ability to cause an effect indirectly through persuasion, inspiration, guidance or encouragement. As both power and influence are morally neutral, they can be used for good or ill.

One speaker had been a Chief Financial Officer during organisational turmoil. The team was competent but fractured. Through regular meetings centred on mission and purpose, trust grew. Eventually, the team identified each other’s “superpowers” (special giftings or charisms). This transformed collaboration. The challenge, then, is for workers to identify their superpower/s, recognise the superpowers of others, and then

to combine them to strengthen their workplace cultures.

This strategy suits the shift in work alluded to at the start of this article. Younger generations lead through ideas, networks, and credibility rather than titles. Leadership is increasingly about value, insight, and trust rather than positional authority.

This does not mean that power is necessarily suspect. God’s power is seen in creation, sustained by his word, and revealed in Jesus. But God exercises authority largely through human beings. Although humans are fragile, they are entrusted with delegated authority as prophets, priests, and kings—called to speak truth, steward creation, and govern responsibly. To fulfil this vocation, Christian leaders need to be filled with God’s spirit, who gives them “power from on high” (Acts 1.8).

Safeguarding: A Core Expression of God Honouring Leadership

Given the widespread abuse of power, safeguarding is not peripheral but “a core concern for God.” Scripture is full of stories showing the consequences of unaddressed abuse – from Eli’s failure to restrain his sons (1 Samuel 2–3) to the suffering of Tamar (Genesis 38) and Dinah (Genesis 34).

Safeguarding is a shared responsibility, rooted in the priesthood of all believers. It requires courage to

intervene, humility to listen, and a commitment to protect the vulnerable.

Lament acknowledges suffering while holding onto hope – “life sucks but it shouldn’t”. In avoiding despair and superficial optimism, lament allows communities to face trauma without losing sight of God’s healing.

Safeguarding also demands listening to marginalised voices, especially from women, ethnic minorities, people with low social standing, and people with disabilities. When these voices are suppressed, a community’s self-understanding is warped.

Servant Leadership: Power Reimagined through Jesus

In the upper room of John 13, Jesus – fully aware that “the Father had given all things into his hands” – washed his disciples’ feet. This was not weakness but deliberate, self-giving strength.

Three sub-themes emerge from John’s narrative:

■ **Leadership as Care**

Leadership is not only strategic; it is embodied and involves prioritising the wellbeing of others.

■ **Leadership as Equipping**

Leaders empower others by modelling what they expect from them and by giving them opportunities. The speaker recalled being entrusted with a major presentation as a junior programmer – an act that shaped his confidence and his career trajectory.

Boaz pouring Six Measures of Barley into Ruth's veil (detail)

Rembrandt (c. 1645)
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



■ **Leadership as Connecting to Vision**

People thrive when they see how their everyday tasks contribute to a larger mission. Leaders help others see purpose in their work, even in seemingly ordinary roles.

Influence Over Position: Lessons from Paul and Barnabas

Case studies in servant leadership can be found in the stories of Paul and Barnabas. Paul held no formal office, yet his influence was immense. It was rooted in divine calling, relentless effort, suffering, theological depth, and persuasive skill.

Barnabas, by contrast, embodied quiet, enabling leadership. His encouragement gave us the leaders of the early church and most of the New Testament. It demonstrates that leadership is not always front facing. Sometimes the most transformative leaders are those who see potential in people others have written off.¹

Responsible Leadership in a Complex World

Broadening the lens, what lessons can be drawn from Joseph and Boaz in the Hebrew Bible, from female preachers today, and from business leaders in recent history?

Joseph's story illustrates both the beauty and danger of power. Though empowered by God to rescue people from famine, he also participated in the enslavement of Egyptians. It is a reminder that even well intentioned leaders can cause harm when humility falters.

Boaz, by contrast, models integrity in a culture which, like our own, is rife with misogyny. He protects Ruth, refuses to exploit her vulnerability as a poor immigrant widow, and follows due process even if it comes at a personal cost (he was willing to lose Ruth to another relative). In a world wrestling with toxic masculinity and the rise of the 'manosphere', Boaz offers a counter-narrative of honour, restraint, and justice.

Misogyny is also one of the challenges women face in preaching today, along with overly critical scrutiny, and the pressure to conform to preaching patterns developed by men. Women flourish when encouraged and trusted (especially by men), and when they are released to preach with creativity, vulnerability, and authenticity.

The life of Sir Kirby Laing (1916–2009) provides an inspiring example of a modern business leader with multi-dimensional influence that extended far beyond his formal positions as a civil engineer in business. That influence was invariably thoughtful, enabling, generous, and far-reaching.

Finishing Well: The Fragility of Leadership

The retreat ended with a sobering warning about obedience. Paula Vennells and King Solomon both began with promise but ended with damaged legacies. Even gifted Christian leaders can "go seriously astray". They can allow power, wealth, ego, or lack of concern about the suffering of others, to eclipse integrity.

Christian leadership must instead reflect the being, nature, and character of God. The true litmus test is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5.22–23). We can learn from the example of Philip (Acts 6:1–6; 8:4–8; 8:26–40) that the key to manifesting such fruit is obedience to God, even when we do not understand God's ways. It will involve seeking to belong to, and serving, the communities in which God has placed us.

A Final Call

Across all sessions, one truth rang clear: leadership is a sacred trust. Whether we hold formal authority or exercise quiet influence, we are called to steward power with humility, courage, and love. We are called to safeguard the vulnerable, elevate others, and pursue God's purposes above our own. This will not always be easy, but it is the pathway to freedom and joy for all those involved across the globe in Christian leadership, whether inside or outside the church. 🇬🇧

1. For an article by Peter Heslam on what Barnabas can teach us about Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership see Part 3 of the series on this theme on pp 36-7.



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