

Leadership at a time of uncertainty

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As I write, I find myself in a dilemma: should I be encouraging my people to get involved in another building project?

Ten years ago I led my church through a massive redevelopment of our premises, which cost us just under £2 million. At the time when we embarked on the project, some 20% of the then membership were convinced that the decision of the other 80% to move forward with the redevelopment was totally unnecessary and would probably bankrupt the church. Ten years many of those who opposed the building project have changed their minds: not only was all the money found within five years of the re-opening, but as a result of the redevelopment, we have grown substantially as a church and are now a busy seven-day-a-week town centre church.

Now we are at another crossroads. We have a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity to buy the building next door. At the moment the precise cost is unknown. The market-rate appears to be in the region of £2 million. Were we to buy the building we could develop a wide range of new ministries and thereby make an even greater impact on our town.

Not surprisingly, when I raised the possibility within a sermon at the beginning of the year, and then elaborated upon it in a letter I sent to all our home groups, the church was very mixed in its views. Some felt that even contemplating spending money on the building next door is sheer madness, whereas others are enthusiastic and can't wait to take the next step. It is a complicated matter, and not helped by the fact that, at this very moment, I and my fellow leaders are uncertain where God is leading. We can see the opportunities, and yet, at a time of increasing austerity, we can see good reason not to launch into such a major project.

It was in this context that we held a 'church meeting' at the end of January, with a view to the leadership team sharing with the church the dilemma in which we find ourselves, to hear their views, and to ask for their prayers.

I thought that readers of **Ministry Today** might be interested in the way in which I introduced the subject for discussion.

"There are strong emotions present among us. But this is not a cause for regret or sadness. Indeed, the reverse is actually the case. We can thank God for disagreement, because sometimes we can see matters more clearly as a result of those disagreements. My mind goes to Proverbs 27.17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another". It is precisely through the clash of ideas that progress is often made. It is in this way that, as the GNB translation puts it, "people learn from one another".

Yes, there is a positive role for low-level disagreement. However, we have to be careful how we handle our disagreements. At all times we must 'fight gracefully'. This means that

- *We must allow people to express views different from our own*
- *We must listen to one another and try to understand one another*
- *We must never become personal: we are not in the business of accusing others, we are in the business of solving a problem*

I confess that I personally am uncertain about the building project. I share the dilemma of the leadership team as a whole.... I am ambivalent about another building project: more than anybody else I have known the pain of what that can involve. On the other hand, if God is in this, then I am more than happy to head up the project

Tonight, I want to facilitate the process of listening by acting as an impartial chairman, recognising that we do not simply want to listen to one another, but to listen to what God may be saying through one another. I was going to say that I want to be 'neutral', but that is not the right word. If God is in something, then I cannot remain neutral. No, my role tonight is to lead the church in the listening process".

So, for once, I failed to give a lead - or did I? I dare to believe that there are times when leadership involves acknowledging uncertainty. Over the next three months, I foresee a good deal of discussion within and without the church. I shall be negotiating with developers, local politicians and planners. Hopefully, at the end of the process, I shall be in a position to give a clear lead, but for the moment it is a time for pursuing possibilities and pushing at doors.