# Christian Leadership in Education

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This chapter sets out to explore educational leadership as a context for, and expression of, Christian faith in action. The aim is to support a fuller understanding of how Christian faith can engage more effectively with the personal and professional challenges that leaders experience. We aim to answer the following questions:

1. What do we mean by Christian leadership in education?
2. What can Christian belief and practice bring to the study of educational leadership and how might Christian leaders engage with professional and secular thinking and practice?
3. How could Christians be better prepared for, and sustained in, their educational leadership roles?

## What Is Meant by Christian Leadership in Education

Work is a hugely significant frontline—one in which we can join in God's transformative mission through the work we do, the people we influence and the structures we touch. Our work matters to God because we matter to God, and he has given us a creative role to play in his world. (London Institute of Contemporary Christianity 2016)

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This chapter concentrates on the leadership work of Christians who are involved in education, regardless of their setting, formal designation or affiliation. They may be connected to schools, colleges or other educational organisations and systems.

Christian leadership in education is not defined narrowly but includes the work of anyone with responsibilities in and across education systems. Leadership might be exercised, for example, by frontline teaching and or support staff, by those involved in school or college management or in governance and other voluntary roles. It covers leadership roles of parents and employers as well as key people in local communities. Arguably we should include children and young people when they lead other learners. Beyond that, the work of many leaders entails developing wider relationships or working practices, across disciplines, professions and agencies.

Leadership in education is about 'leading' but also 'being led' and this has special resonance for Christian leaders. The dynamics between the leader and follower highlight the importance of skills for leaders that focus on the relationship they have with those for whom they are responsible, including, for example, building and sustaining trust. An extensive leadership literature on followership (e.g., Crossman and Crossman 2011) also reminds us that leaders spend most of their working lives in roles that are dependent on other leaders, rather than just leading others. So, to be effective, they will rely on a range of skills including those of following well. Christian leaders follow other people as appropriate but they have a significant additional dimension and dynamic—their followership of Christ.

## Christian Priorities and Perspectives on Educational Leadership

Thinking and policy about educational leadership come from academic theory and research, practitioner networks, independent agencies, think tanks and the process of 'policy travel' between nations. Educational leadership as a field of study is multi-disciplinary and contested. Rational, objective, positivist and scientific thinking was supposed to explain and control the workings of educational processes, organisations and systems. This has been challenged and to an extent discredited by radical criticism. Much educational leadership theory is now more rooted in practice— adaptive, imaginative and tolerant of complexity and ambiguity. However, it lacks, and may fundamentally reject, any sense of an over-arching coherence or meta-narrative. Christian faith offers such a coherence.

Some contemporary ideas and theories may sit well with Christian practitioners and others may not. Some models of leadership have more immediate points of connection with Christian values. These include 'servant leadership' and educational leadership that are described variously in the literature as authentic, ethical, spiritual, moral, adaptive, inclusive or transformative. Christian leaders need to be familiar with these models and, building from Christian principles, engage with them, recognising their roots and respecting changing needs and circumstances.

In her challenging analysis of the recent history of school leadership practice and research, Helen Gunter (2016) identifies and critiques what she describes as the dominant model of transformative leadership with its many hybrid forms, including system leadership. Transformative leadership concentrates on development, learning, change for the better and on taking holistic account of the complex interdependence and interaction within and between organisations and systems. This seems to fit well with the values of education but it is not benign. Gunter argues for a hard-hitting review of transformative educational leadership and its agenda-setting. Her aim is to flush out its potentially oppressive, anti-human and anti-democratic elements and consequences (Gunter 2016, pp.192–193). Christian leaders must be ready to take these into account.

A Christian understanding of current leadership thinking takes us beyond a critique of transformative leadership. John Sullivan, in a broader context, encourages Christians to adopt 'a counter-cultural stance in the light of their understanding of the kingdom of God as the ideal towards which human communities must aim' (Sullivan 2003, p.223). Rather than simply accepting and enacting prescribed values, pre-determined priorities, opaque policies and standardised practices, Christian leadership in education is well placed to introduce a challenging, faith-based dimension into this process. In so doing we recognise that faith, religious belief and life choices may be perceived by some as part of the problem and not a solution. The contemporary philosopher and provocative public intellectual Peter Sloterdijk, for example, is a fierce critic of religion's exclusive and fundamentalist claims. He argues that the 'sacralisation of leadership' through religion has brought unjustified legitimacy to centuries of division and violence in society (Sloterdijk 2016, p.11). Christian leaders need to be prepared for such arguments and respond. Christian faith has and will continue to bring purpose and coherence to leadership. There is a vital place in this fragmented world for leaders who are informed by current leadership thinking but who thoughtfully start from, express and apply Christian principles faithfully to their work.

An analysis of leadership literature suggests that it can typically be divided between writers who focus on the personal/individual and others who emphasise the social/organisational (Cheema et al. 2008). Christian leadership in education is rooted in recognition of both. The literature also identifies key contextual linkages between theory and practice—critical dilemmas, challenges or issues from leadership experience that cry out for theory-in-action. These features offer a useful starting point for thought, belief and practice. We will examine each of these in turn to see what kinds of leadership are consistent with or more open to Christian faith and practice.

### *Personal and Individual*

Christians in educational leadership may prioritise personal beliefs, values, passion and commitment and express them in terms of their vocation or life mission. Moral and spiritual leadership theory does not feature in all secular leadership theories but, for a Christian, the moral and spiritual dimensions are essential to their approach to leadership. Christian discipleship at work may be strengthened by taking time to reflect, actively connecting faith and experience, being consciously missional and valuing the community of believers (Marshall 2012).

These reflective processes can draw heavily on biblical stories, parables and metaphors. Metaphor matters in communicating ideas about leadership. The Old and New Testament offer a great variety of metaphors that help Christians to build a composite picture of the leaders that God intends we should be. David Bennett records and explores 94 of them. Like salt in food, the influence of leaders on their organisations or communities should be pervasive and observable, not so much through specific actions as through their very character and faithful commitment to Jesus Christ. The shepherd metaphor in the New Testament is applied to Christ and then, after his resurrection, to Christian leaders in spite of the low esteem in which shepherds were generally held at that time in the rabbinical tradition (Bennett 1998, pp.150, 173).

A primary focus for Christian leaders is on the life and leadership of Jesus Christ. Jesus was a compelling leader who continues to fascinate and inspire writers on leadership. Peter Shaw, reflecting his experience in a very senior educational leadership role in the UK Civil Service, identifies six leadership characteristics of Jesus as visionary, servant, teacher, coach, radical and healer (Shaw 2004, pp.2–8). Within this framework, he looks at

current leadership challenges, pointing out, for example, how Jesus combined radicalism with a recognition of the importance of preserving and building on the best of inherited resources and traditions. Shaw also draws out, from the accounts of Christ coaching the disciples, the role of leaders in developing 'hard and soft skills' through a range of individual and group exchanges, including some very tough talking (Shaw 2004, pp.17, 18).

The biblical accounts of the life of Moses offer other fruitful examples for leadership learning, including: finding confidence in the face of unexpected leadership responsibilities; dealing with the challenge of the loneliness of leadership and its times of despair; demonstrating the value of persistence, fortitude and courage; and, against all the odds, steering a whole nation through key periods of transition (Maxwell 2014; Bridges 1987).

Jesus engaged with large groups but more often worked person-by-person, leper-by-leper, widow-by-widow and neighbour-by-neighbour (Brueggemann 2011, p.37). This encourages a personal focus on what Christian leaders do and how they do it. In educational settings, it means closely guarding a child-by-child, parent-by-parent and person-by-person perspective, especially where a distanced, de-personalised and disembodied culture may seem to be an accepted norm for leader behaviour. Christian leaders in education will also recognise the significance of building a theological or faith understanding of key features of their working environment, including that of learning and the learner (Astley 2002; Astley and Francis 2013; Willmer and White 2013).

Within cultures influenced by neo-liberal and market priorities, there is a strong sense of individual accountability driven by competition. Christian leaders aim to balance this against their primary personal accountability to God for bringing living hope to individuals and communities. We are personally accountable, in a contractual relationship, to the secular in the educational systems within which we work. There is also for Christian leaders a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ that sets us in an enlarged and enriched working culture. This is shaped and sustained by grace and the gifts of God which include faith, hope, love … and leadership itself (1 Corinthians 13:13; Romans 12:8).

### Social and Contextual

Leadership engages individuals with other people, the personal with the social, the human with the wider context. Educational leadership gives priority to relationships, especially as a basis for effective action and agency.

Agency is about getting things done. It is a capacity to identify our goals and work them out for ourselves. Relational agency involves a capacity to offer support and to ask for support from others as we interpret and respond to the challenge of working in educational settings (Edwards 2005, p.169). Collaborative agency is mobilised through engaged social interaction and focuses on collective leadership rather than on individual leaders. This account does not minimise the importance of individuals but argues that 'the self is as much a product of interactions with others as it is a self-defined unit' (Raelin 2016a, p.19).

The stronger and richer option of relational leading involves leaders in shifts, for example, from generating structures to attending to process, from adapting to innovating, from directing to enlisting, and from dictating to listening. It is in this context that leaders have a key role in building identity. They are the architects, entrepreneurs, artists, engineers and embedders of identity within and across their organisation (Haslam et al. 2011, pp.165–192).

Relational understanding, agency and leadership have much in common with Christian principles. The lifetime preoccupation of Martin Buber could perhaps be summarised by saying that in the beginning is the relationship (Buber 1996). More recently and springing from a Judaeo-Christian analysis of relationships, Michael Schluter and David John Lee proposed a 'relational proximity framework' of five key conditions or drivers of relationships. These are directness of communication, continuity of story, multiplexity of information, parity of power and commonality of purpose (Schluter and Lee 2009).

Alan Flintham, writing from his experience of research in church schools in the UK state system, represents leadership diagrammatically as three inter-locking circles. For each circle, he uses Greek terms infused with theological significance: *Kerygma* (sharing the vision to secure coherence of direction); *Kenosis* (supporting the vision through self-emptying care); *Koinonia* (serving the vision through building bonds of community); and at the overlapping centre of the three circles, *Metanoia* (transforming hearts and minds) (Flintham 2015). These ideas, though not unique to Christian leadership in education, suggest some of its characteristic dimensions.

### Boundaries, Spaces and Engagement

Working with boundaries and associated spaces is challenging for leaders. The identification and management of boundaries play a vital part in effec-

tive leadership, whether those boundaries are ethical, moral, professional, organisational, personal or physical. Christian leaders might need to help people define professional boundaries, or give leadership in multi-professional teams, such as for safeguarding children or resolving financial, legal or probity challenges.

Boundaries help leaders define roles, respond to risk or establish identity and cultures but they also provide leaders with the opportunity to create new spaces. At boundaries, alternative creative visions about what can be achieved are worked up and translated into practice. In the spaces that are formed by boundaries there is the potential to work and engage with others in safety or under other agreed conditions, perhaps to share knowledge, achieve organisational goals and learn (Edwards 2011).

Leaders in an educational setting, perhaps a school, college or educational agency, frequently find themselves concerned not just with the internal operation of their organisation but also with the multi-layered interaction they have at their boundaries with other organisations—perhaps another school or the national government. Third space is a concept that has been developed to describe and help understand how the space works in between two or more sets of people, organisations or cultures where neither have overall control and within which exchanges and relationships need to develop. The idea has been applied to different fields of educational research and practice, including language development in early learning, home-school relations and multi-agency work such as the safeguarding of children. Third space is a place with rich potential for creativity, openness and engagement (referred to as 'hybridity') where change processes can work differently (Bhabha 1994). Such spaces of interaction are a challenge and opportunity for Christian leaders in education, working at the boundaries inside and outside their organisation, including those between Christian faith and secular belief systems.

Chris Baker explores the challenges and dilemmas that face Christians and the Christian Church in a post-modern and secular/post-secular world at the boundaries with other cultures, faiths and social or political organisations (Baker 2009). He highlights the need for Christian leaders to give priority to coalition building, partnership working and reconciliation. Two areas of competence and skill that become particularly important in this shifting and ambiguous environment are the leadership activities of skilful translation and negotiation (Baker 2009, p.45). This emphasis and these skills have helped Christian leaders in education to understand and work more confidently and effectively at and across cultural, organisational and professional boundaries.

### *Truth, Power and Performance*

The features of Christian leadership in education that have been explored so far might be said to sit comfortably with some secular leadership models and could be applied to many other working environments for Christian leaders. So how is Christian educational leadership any different? The role of Christian leaders in schools has been described in terms of being 'a Christian faithful presence within' the school, working closely with its internal networks of change (Engebretson 2013, p.176). We follow Christ in journeys of faith and consequently our leadership practices are dependent on that relationship. Christians are called to develop a 'faith-full' as well as professional understanding of the culture and context of educational leadership. In that process of continuous learning and adaptation, Christian leaders, in the distinctive context of education and in a uniquely Christ-centred way, face a classic dilemma of how to engage truth with power.

Michel Foucault took a keen interest in truth and power. He wrote about the truth-teller and truth-telling as an activity. He wanted to know who can tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relations to power (Foucault 1983). Frank Pignatelli, a committed and influential Scottish educational leader, saw a strong ethical dimension to Foucault's analyses of power in education that required a response to the plight and marginalised status of the weak and vanquished. He applied this ethical stance to matters of educational leadership and school reform. He opposed ways of operating in the service of others that were marked by narrowness of purpose, inflexible systems of accountability, restrictive modes of surveillance and top-down mandates decoupled from local histories and issues (Pignatelli 2002, p.159). Other writers have challenged power assumptions about the hierarchical control of followers by leaders, on the basis that leaders know best, and the efficacy of unilateral top-down goal setting and communication. Effective leadership by contrast is seen to give a high priority to effective listening and concentrates more on developing people so they can work well within non-coercive relationships (Rost 1993; Hughes 2016). These are the kind of issues that emerge when truth and power are brought together and matter to Christian leaders.

Walter Brueggemann has outlined a biblical basis for understanding the relationships between truth and power that may help to clarify some of the responsibilities of Christian leaders in education (Brueggemann 2013). Examining the leadership stories of Moses, Solomon, Elisha and Josiah, he

sets out to show a continuity and development into the New Testament accounts of the life of Christ (especially in the gospel of John, culminating in the encounter between Christ and the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate) and the history of the Early Church. His analysis would lead us to argue that Christian leaders in education are called to live according to a different understanding of power and control that might involve re-drawing the maps of power in their educational settings and may bring them into conflict with the powers that be. Tom Wright suggests that, following in the footsteps of Christ, each generation of Christians needs to figure out wise and appropriate ways of speaking the truth to power and in the process, redefining power itself (Wright 2016, pp.160–167). The focus is not on preaching, but on action—advocating and modelling Christian principles that change lives and communities for the better. Speaking truth to power is performative—it is about advocating and doing the right things in the right way to achieve the best outcomes.

The challenges associated with living and speaking the truth, in a complex political and social environment such as education, raise many dilemmas, ethical issues and risks. Christian leaders in education should be ready to live and speak the truth with boldness, love and integrity but recognise the risks. Integrity does not just involve telling the truth, regardless of consequences. Stephen Carter writes about 'the insufficiency of honesty', reminding us of other, often competing, responsibilities. Inappropriate or careless truth-telling can damage relationships (Carter 1996, pp.52–67).

Christian leaders respond to the call to live the truth faithfully but can only resolve these dilemmas as disciples in the power of Christ. The performance and achievements of Christian leaders in education are judged not only or even primarily by the professional assessments of senior managers against prescribed targets, important as these may be.

## FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS IN EDUCATION

Patrick Duignan describes the formation of leaders in education as essentially an educative process that involves them being formed and transformed personally and professionally. (Duignan 2006, p.143). An inclusive and lifelong approach to learning, formation and development that emphasises human connectedness is just as important for educational leadership as for any other learning challenge.

Judith Chapman and David Aspin summarise key elements of an inclusive approach that steers through the complex, sometimes contradictory

and often confusing, array of philosophical and policy objectives for life-long learning. They argue that:

> This learning should be '*life-wide*'—recognising the interplay of informal, non-formal and formal learning in different life domains—and '*life deep*', incorporating the religious, moral, ethical and social dimensions that shape human expression…Such an approach requires us to be positive critics but equal partners in our learning. (Chapman and Aspin 2013, pp.57, 59)

The formation of educational leadership practice in complex settings has used insights from many sources including activity theory. These studies highlight the way relationships operate in terms of organisational behaviour and have special significance in educational settings such as schools and colleges, where learning is the core business. In activity theory, the importance of space is acknowledged as part of learning (Edwards 2005, p.171). In such spaces, the modelling behaviour of leaders on the job is significant because observing others helps us to clarify how new behaviours are performed, and later this coded information serves as a guide for action (Graca and Passos 2012, p.137). Group and networking opportunities to share and test out leadership experience and perceptions have consistently proved to be valuable as part of such an approach. They need to be well-structured with shared commitment and agreed ground rules.

'Leadership-in-practice', a related theoretical starting point, emphasises 'the experiential and embodied nature of leadership', with its dynamic, collective, situated and dialectic qualities (Raelin 2016b, pp.7–8). Other well established and relevant approaches to leadership development also characterise professional formation as knowledge creation—making tacit knowledge explicit by reflection in action (Schon 1983), valuing professional knowledge that is not just propositional but also personal, practical, technical and procedural (Eraut 1994), and recognising how knowledge is woven into participation in professional practices (Wenger 1998). Christian leaders in education can draw on all these sources of inspiration and shape their own responses depending on their context.

Coaching and mentoring are well established as core processes for progressively connecting leadership development to practice, focused on skills, performance, potential and the needs of the whole person (Parsloe and Leedham 2016, p.11). It is important to find ways of securing a 'co-constructed' approach to coaching that is analytical and critical as well as

creative (Kempster and Iszatt-White 2012, p.333). Effective coaches and mentors draw upon culturally relevant processes that will sustain the active engagement of the learner-leader while respecting their starting points in knowledge, experience and understanding. For Christian leaders in education, an important feature of their coaching and mentoring will be to support a continuing exploration and development of the faith dimension in their work. This is often not recognised by leaders or their coaches.

Steve Kempster (2009) proposed a systemic model of leadership learning which reflects both activity theory and our developing understanding of learning spaces. He argued that leadership learning is *observed*, *enacted* and *situated*, and that these formative processes have inter-personal and intra-personal dimensions. Through observation, enactment is guided. Through the processes of enactment, practice is refined, and situated practice is developed. As leaders navigate progressively through sequences of career contexts and learning spaces, they typically use these three formative activities of leadership learning.

Within their own learning spaces, which may have some of the third space features that were explored earlier in this chapter, leaders construct and test out their learning strategies. Kempster's research suggests that there are typically six components of those strategies (see Fig. 15.1):

- Identifying their own context (leaders get to know their boundaries, learning spaces and relationships)
- Observational learning (leaders wait, watch, listen and make sense of leadership)
- Trying out leadership roles (leaders trust, step out, practice the behaviour and learn how to do it)
- Developing their self-efficacy (leaders grow in confidence and belief that they can lead)
- Increasing prominence of the idea of leadership (leadership matters so leaders work at it and get used to it)
- Aspiring to a leadership identity (leaders work out who they are, who they are with and who they become)

Kempster's work on leadership learning, including that related to co-construction, clarifies and extends thinking about the processes which support and promote formation for Christian leaders in education. It is not suggested that these approaches are an exhaustive statement of what is needed. However, they are consistent with specifically Christian contributions
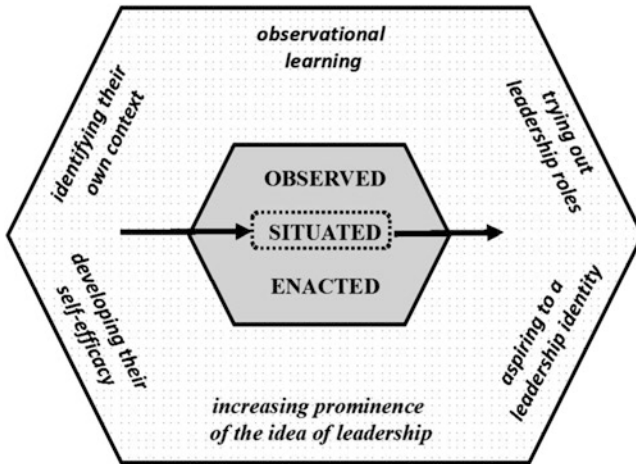
**Fig. 15.1** Formation of leaders—learning in action

to effective leadership, including a capacity for working with others as complementary to an individual life of faith. Biblical patterns and tenets of the Christian faith will also illuminate the dynamic modelling role of leaders, especially as seen in the life of Christ. The quality of Christian leadership is tested and demonstrated in individual and organisational growth, improvement and development. It is transformative in purpose and outcomes.

## Conclusion

This chapter sets out to tackle three questions about Christian leadership in education. Through our exploration of what we mean by Christian leadership in education, its relationship to the wider study of educational leadership and some of the ways in which it might be developed in people, we can sketch out a summary in the following propositions:

> Christian leadership in education is *God-centred* leadership that develops as *discipleship and service* not status and self-importance, in *community* not autonomy, with *empowerment* not exploitation, and with a vision for *learning* that leads to life and hope.

Christian leadership in education is essentially, though not exclusively, about relationships. It is God-led and God-empowered, engaging the tri-

une God with people in a shared mission of service to communities of learners of all ages for the advancement of learning, creativity, wisdom and fulfilment. It is visionary and inspired but rooted and relevant in the messy and complex reality of human experience. To advocate a learning focus for leadership formation is not just re-stating core business. For Christian leaders, learning is linked to God's creation, order, structures, boundaries and spaces within which life can be enriched and people find fulfilment. Christian leaders accept that learning leadership is about knowledge but even more about wisdom and a search for truth that recognises and promotes interdependence, connections and coherence. They seek to reconcile, faith and work, truth and power, justice and compassion, hardship and hope.

In this chapter, it has only been possible to suggest some of the many ways in which we might clarify our thinking and translate ideas into practice. It encourages Christian leaders in education to develop their understanding and to engage their faith boldly, faithfully and creatively with their vital work with learners and communities.

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