

“But since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”

(2 Corinthians 8.7)

What do you want to be known for?

When people in your local community hear your school’s name come up in conversation what would you hope that they would hear? When staff in your school talk about you as a senior leader in the pub (which they do!), what might you long to overhear?

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to a small group of believers who despite their relative youth as an organisation (probably under 5 years), are becoming known for doing well in a great suite of attributes. Reading through the 1 Corinthians will show this was not always the case – they had made mistakes in their journey, but this second letter really gives us the impression that they had learned many vital lessons. While they remain inherently vulnerable in youth (and arguably the stronger for it), Paul nonetheless gives them this rather suddenly gushing reference, excelling in faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness and even love, one of his most treasured themes, and subject of the most famous passage from his first letter to the church – the famous ‘Love is...’ passage of 1 Corinthians 13. Yet here Paul writes to them about their stewardship responsibilities – how they are going to make the most of their resources to fulfil their vision. The expression of faith and establishing of community is multi-faceted, but there will always be economic factors involved. Our bank statements and diaries may reveal much more about our vision and values than our straplines and ethos documents.

It is notable that the question of money and giving to others occupies two full chapters (8 & 9) at the centre point of this inspirational letter. Paul was establishing new communities quickly over a wide geographical area, in a variety of settings – some well off, others in serious poverty. Once the euphoria of these local groups beginning had died down, the new Christian communities began to get organised, and learn how to function together, how to live and survive - again economic decision-making was involved. While they could have potentially operated in isolation, they needed each other to thrive, and in the case of the Macedonians, to survive. Although Paul doesn’t actually ask for money directly, he frames this around one of his favourite concepts – ‘grace’. ‘Grace’ is a term which speaks of a ‘free gift’, or an undeserved love or provision. But Paul is going further here, asking the readers of the letter to be open to God’s grace being expressed *through them*. As NT Wright puts it:

“...what counts [when raising and giving money] is not whipping up human sympathy for a project, nor making people feel guilty that they have money which others need, nor yet encouraging them to gain social prestige by letting it be known that they have given generously. What counts is a work of grace in the hearts and lives of ordinary people.” (Paul for Everyone, p.87)

These ordinary people, in a new small community, are being asked to consider not what they can get out of a situation, but what they can give. In recent years, the concept of system leadership and changes to the education landscape have challenged schools’ approach to similar situations. Schools are moving from being largely concerned with value for money in their own institutions, to being frequently drawn into the language of mergers, acquisitions, competition and takeover – all in a context of finding better value across the system.

Interestingly, the word that Paul uses here for a collection of money, is not what his readers would have expected – the usual word *logeia* (used in 1 Cor 16.1, 2 for example) is replaced by this vibrant alternative, *charis*, - grace. In his commentary on this letter, David Ford (who chaired the writing group of the Church of England Vision for Education) highlights Paul’s vision of a God who is “the giver of all good things and the encourager of generosity with what he has given” (Meaning and Truth, p. 177). Indeed, Paul builds this notion of giving around his central idea of *koinonia* (which is best translated partnership, community, sharing, fellowship, and from whose root we draw the word ‘economy’ and ‘economics’). As Ford expresses it:

“The chapters (8-9) are certainly about money and basic attitudes to possessions and prosperity, but these are inseparable from the character and glory of God, the practice of faith and love in the church and the dynamic reality of grace.” (ibid, 177)

This is not so different from our developing economic partnership models in education, both the formal, such as MATs and how they function and the more informal networks and collaborations of which we are part – again, leaders asking what we can give, not simply what we can receive. The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership uses 3 words to talk about the kind of leaders it is seeking to develop – Called, Connected and Committed. In its definition of Committed, it says:

“Leaders who are connected operate deliberately within communities of practice, positioning themselves within positive relationships that sustain and encourage all parties. They embrace interdependence, demonstrate compassion and embody service to others humbly.”

This definition offers a compelling and attractive vision of educational leadership rooted in relationships, concerned not with what can be acquired in a situation, but what can be given – and how as leaders we can show that in our relationships, networks and collaboration, we can be demonstrating generosity. There are of course lots of ways that we can be generous and they are not simply financial or transactional – we might think of the sharing of resources between schools, the giving of time to staff, the investment in professional development, the consideration of attractive and sustainable benefits for employees, the exchange of teachers between institutions or the giving of staff (temporary or permanent) from one organisation to another. Any such decisions are predicated on the question of ‘what can I give?’ which is not always the way we approach new or established relationships. However, what might it mean for our organisations to start our thinking looking to give, rather than simply to assess what we can get out of a situation. What might a graceful relationship look like – between staff in a school, between schools, between MATs?

The Church of England has an interesting history in this area - we might think back to the early 19th Century where Joshua Watson and a small group of like-minded leaders wondered what it might look like to provide free education to communities who otherwise would have to pay. One could argue it began one of the Church’s most meaningful and far-reaching impacts on society – based on a generous vision for education and access for all. Equally, as we fast forward the clock 200+ years, we see a range of new school types forming, giving the Church the opportunity to enact something similar, frequently exercising strategic generosity to schools needing a MAT home and family. Indeed the Church of England Vision for Education, ‘*Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*’, is a vision for all schools, not just church schools. There are of course major funding challenges, which cannot be swerved around or ignored, but equally they cannot become a blanket response to the prospect of working better together and demonstrating generosity. We can’t be naïve either, as these relationships will be entirely dependent on the dismantling of competition narratives. The Church of England’s Vision is for mutual flourishing and the common good. Equally we need to ensure that we don’t inadvertently suggest it’s only larger schools that can give to smaller schools – clearly those leading in smaller size organisations have a huge amount to share with the wider community.

Effective stewardship of resources, particularly financial, does require extreme prudence, wisdom and sense, and there will be very few successful schools where the Headteacher is not either defined by this thinking, or actively supported by a Finance Manager or Bursar who is able to live these key values out. However, as we think of ourselves as connected leaders, embracing interdependence and looking outwards in our pursuit of excellent education for all, we may well do well to reflect on what it would look like to demonstrate generosity, the grace of giving, and indeed in the crucial area of school leadership, what it is for which we would wish to be known?

[Questions for Discussion]

1. What opportunities do we have as an organisation to demonstrate generosity in its broadest sense?
2. To what extent does our vision affect our financial decision making, and how would anyone know? How might a MAT balance generosity with the charitable object to further the aims of the trust?
3. If you are Corinth, who is your Macedonia? What could you give? What would grace look like?
4. When you join networks and partnerships to what extent do you think about what you could give to them? How does it impact your approach to such conversations? How ready and open are you to receiving from others?