

Embracing Interdependence

The early church that developed immediately following Pentecost was established through embracing interdependence inspired by teaching – “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need...” (Acts 2:42-45). The sharing was actual, not hypothetical – goods and money, food, teaching and worship. Paul imagined his vision of community as one body with many interdependent parts (in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12-14). Each member is secure in who they are (confident, not envious or resentful), and understands that flourishing is reliant on their authentic interaction with other parts. This is a vision for a cohesive and life-giving staff room, school, MAT or Diocese. It also affects those with whom we choose to partner, and how those partnerships are formed – there is always something to be learned, whatever our current badge or job title may say.

As children grow up and mature, there is an interplay of dependence, independence, and interdependence, and a continual rebalancing of them in growing relationships. It is the great skill of the parent and the teacher to support these three dimensions, and the emergence of maturity is the integration of dependence and independence with interdependence. Strong reciprocal relationships are at the heart of flourishing schools. The Gospel of John has a core concern with mutuality and reciprocity – Jesus encourages it again and again, teaching it in three ways.

First, in practical action: he washes the feet of his disciples and says that this example is to be followed by them doing similar acts of humble service to each other: “... if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14) Mutual service is at the heart of

interdependence. This leads directly into the new commandment of mutual love that imitates him: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)

Secondly in relationship in the Parable of the Vine, in which his own intimacy and mutuality with those who trust and love him is pictured as the relationship of branch and vine: “Abide in me as I abide in you... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” (John 15:4, 9) Service remains essential, but the mutuality has the quality of friendship, and the difference is made by shared understanding springing from the teaching of Jesus. Moreover, this friendship of Jesus is sealed by a love that is willing to sacrifice to the point of laying down his life. Most experienced teachers have been challenged to go the extra mile for their pupils, their colleagues, their school or their community. For an educational leader, the response to voluntarily sacrificial action should not only be gratitude, but also dedication to encouraging the sort of mutuality and reciprocity which mean that those who risk giving themselves in costly ways (beyond the contractual) are warmly supported and protected.

Finally in a prayer: Jesus prays to his Father, culminating in his desire for later generations. “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:23, 26) It is a desire for our utter mutuality with God and with each other in love, for the sake of the whole world. This is a vision of the glory, peace and joy of God embodied in relationships, all energised by the free gift of God’s love. In a century threatened by nuclear warfare, environmental catastrophe, and much else, this can be an inspiration to give ourselves together as never before for the sake of “life in all its fullness” (John 10:10).

1. To what extent do you resonate with Paul’s picture of a community as ‘one body with many interdependent parts’?
2. How could you encourage your team to feel confident, secure and authentic in who they are?
3. What have you got to share with others? How could you help be the answer to another leader’s questions?
4. What can we learn from Jesus’ example of washing his team’s feet, and his subsequent command to ‘love another’? What does love require?