

Have you come across room re-arrangers. You know when they have something on their mind because there will be a new arrangement of furniture. It's not an uncommon thing. Many people with concerns or issues on their minds will find ways to occupy themselves while they work out things in their minds. It's good. It's healthy. It serves a purpose. But not all rearranging is helpful. Sometimes we move to change things because we sense despair and failure, and we think that moving the furniture will drive the dark of doom away. Shifting of then deck chairs on the Titanic.

A similar scenario is playing itself out among our dioceses. It seems that the last few decades has wrought an epidemic of restructuring within our mainline churches. If one listens, the sounds of moving furniture can be heard across the landscape with seagulls in the distance. Everywhere there is deconstruction, reconstruction, and rearrangement. Reviews, Strategic Reviews, Corporate Restructures, Task Forces, Process Teams; new departments with all too familiar secular corporate names and activities: Compliance, Health and Safety, Information Technology Finance and People and Culture! And the best of all, the jargon!....win win, synergise, reimagine, due diligence, move the goalposts, empower, ducks in a row, game changer, mission ready, take this offline, the helicopter view, low hanging fruit, the strategic staircase, elephant in the room, we have decided to pivot and my favourite...it is what it is! Registrars to General Managers to CEO's plus CFO's and back again and that's just in the Melbourne Diocese in the last few years- the furniture is being moved at ever increasing rates and in my view ever decreasing circles, using up vast amounts of energy and resources which in the main are our resources handed over in good faith by the parishes.

Corporate obsessed, well-meaning groups are coming up with a myriad of organisational options in the frenzied vain hope that structural change will stop the haemorrhage of resources and vision that most communities are now experiencing.

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

As we gaze at our institutional church life and watch what is happening, this passage offers a very powerful message. It shows us a Jesus on the road; a Jesus engaged in the ministry of teaching, healing and hope; a Jesus busied with preaching the Good News. There is, in the economy of language used to describe it, a wonderful sense of energy and enthusiasm about the work that Jesus is doing in the "cities and villages." He has travelled far and wide teaching in the synagogues, preaching to the people, healing their illnesses, and curing what the Gospel refers to as "every sickness."

And it is as though somehow in the midst of the wonderful work, Jesus stopped and took a break. And while he was knocking back a ginger beer, he couldn't help noticing how tired and dispirited the people seemed. It was hard to miss the fact that they were "harassed and helpless ... like sheep without a shepherd." So Jesus sits down, one imagines, and sighs. He turns to his disciples and he says, "See? The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out more labourers...."

To hear about the activity and power of Jesus' ministry on the road is inspiring indeed. It comes full force as a challenge and a call to us all. But then we need to stop, with Jesus, and notice that our people, too, are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

They are harassed and partially consumed by a culture gone mad with the pursuit of wealth and material gain. They are tormented by a society that has put a price tag on everything and everyone, rendering all things into commodities. Even more cruelly they think they are hale and hearty when in fact they are emaciated and starving. They are distracted by a Church that is more concerned with the worldly need of corporatisation and institutional survival than with living out the Gospel of God in Christ Jesus. And they are helpless, or rather, feel helpless to do anything about it. And understand this. Our people, our good Christian people, are not helpless in the sense that they cannot or will not act. They are not helpless in the sense that they are weak and without resolve. No. They feel helpless because they - because we - need visionary and bold leadership.

We in the Church need to confront the truth that real, authentic leadership has been abandoned for soft tissue concepts like "enabling" and "empowering" and other politically correct "right ways" of thinking. Faith communities have been left to drift, fracture, or simply dissipate while concepts and styles of leadership fill theological college classrooms without producing leaders. The articulation of clear vision and powerful motivation has given way to managerialism, political correctness, consensus and caution. Leaders are taught in seminaries and leadership workshops across the nation to "delegate" their authority. All of these, of course, are excellent ideas in theory that are appropriate in community process. But they do not, they cannot, replace the role of leadership.

In the midst of the frantic pace of reorganisation and restructuring in our churches, there is an unspoken truth illustrated by today's Gospel passage. We do not need restructuring. We need leadership. Even Jesus could see that people needed leadership. Even he stepped and filled a leadership gap, because they were "sheep without a shepherd."

We need leaders in the Church. We need leaders who have clarity of vision and a sense of passion for the Gospel. We need leaders who are not tired or weary, woke political ideologues, burnt out or cynical. We need leaders who love the Lord first and foremost. We need people in leadership positions who are not afraid of failure or of risk. We do not need perfection or down the line adherence to the Green Left of politics either. We need Spirit-filled powerful leaders who will inspire and encourage our people to do great and wonderful things in Jesus' name.

Sisters and brothers, we don't need restructuring. We don't need Strategic Planning or Reviews. We don't need reorganisation. We need leadership. The harvest is plentiful! The membership of our churches may be waning, but there is a spiritual hunger out there, which is near famine proportions.

Now it needs to be said in all the excitement, that leadership isn't dictatorship. Leadership isn't for people with control and power issues- we know these people. No. And leadership isn't about one style of leadership or another. The best leaders understand a wide variety of styles and approaches to ministry, and pray for the wisdom to know which is needed. Leadership is the ability to lift up a people to new heights, to articulate a vision that is grounded in the Gospel. No, we don't need the old style bosses or bullies lurking in our churches. We need prophetic, God fearing, caring leaders in our pulpits and at our altars, in our parish council seats, and in our bishops' chairs.

Jesus points out that the people are like sheep without a shepherd. A shepherd in Jesus' day had an interesting job. By day he made sure that there was grass for the flock to feed upon and that predators were kept at bay. Every night the shepherd would make a crude wall or corral out of sticks and brush, and before he would let the sheep inside, he would walk over every inch of the enclosure, making sure that scorpions, snakes, and other dangers were removed. Then he would bring the sheep in for a night of rest and safety.

Not only do our churches need leaders who are bold and prophetic, but also we need leaders who will work to create safe places for Christian community to grow and thrive. Each person walking into one of our churches must feel welcome and safe. Each person must be placed at ease, able to open one's heart to what we have to offer in the Gospel and in community. In this ease and safety, these same people must be challenged to go deeper into their faith, deeper into discipleship.

The ministry to which we are all called is a powerful and world- transforming task. It is a gift of a wonderful God. Let us not squander this incredible gift in a haze of institutional reorganisation, wokeness and corporate gobbledegook. Let us not force our people to jump through ever smaller hoops of compliance and "training". Please, dear Saviour, free us so that we might lift up new shepherds for your sheep, new leaders for your people, new visions for your Church. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton