

# DIGGING DITCHES

## Giving space for God to work

Photo by Alison Morgan

While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha and he said, ‘This is what the LORD says: “Make this valley full of ditches.” For this is what the LORD says: “You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink”.’



By John McGinley

“You wouldn’t believe what it looked like before he came – it looked like a cow-shed!” pronounced my seven year old daughter proudly to our dinner guests yesterday. She was describing the process of transforming the church buildings at our last church, St John’s in Hinckley. It is great to look back and tell the stories of the work of God in our lives and among his people, and the Psalms are great examples of this. But as we reflected with friends on the journey that had just been completed when I left St John’s, it confirmed again my conviction that Christian leadership is about creating space for God to be at work. I find it a helpful framework because it brings together the practice of leadership and the need for us to grow in faith and dependence upon God.

At a personal level we know how God loves to come and work within the space that we give him in our lives and how he fills us with his Holy Spirit. We know how in the silence of a quiet day or retreat God comes and fills it with his presence and speaks to us. In the life of a church, we can also expect Him to be the same ‘space-filling’ God, but creating the space for Him involves the exercise of leadership.

## Ditches in the desert

In 2 Kings 3:16-17 we read *“While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha and he said, ‘This is what the LORD says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the LORD says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink.’”* These words were spoken in the midst of a military campaign. The army of Israel had marched for seven days through the desert of Edom in order to engage the nation of Moab in battle. They reach Moab exhausted and dehydrated only to discover that they had no water. Military defeat and economic crisis were inevitable unless the people and livestock found water to drink. Despair began to take over until King Jehosaphat fulfilled his leadership role and created space for God.



First of all he seeks the word of God and in worship the prophet Elisha speaks it out (God’s word) – ‘dig ditches’. But now Jehosaphat has the challenge of leadership – does he ask these exhausted soldiers to use their failing energy to dig ditches in a desert where there is no prospect of rain? The Biblical narrative is silent about how he does this, but it’s clear that he is the one who has to make the judgment call and give the orders - and he does, and they dig ditches. The passage records that the next morning ‘there it was - water flowing from the direction of Edom! The land was filled with water’(v 20).

## Space for God to speak

The implication of this passage is that if Jehosaphat had not asked God to speak and then led the army to dig ditches, the water would not have come, and even if it had it would have dissipated without ditches to collect it. He created space for God to speak and physical space for Him to literally fill with the water they needed. Yet the moment when he really showed his mettle as King was when he decided to call for ditches to be dug before there was any sign of water. For Christian leaders there will be many moments where they need to make a decision to create the space for God to work, *before* there is any sign or certainty that what they are seeking will come. Yet without that ‘space- creating’ leadership it is almost certain that such growth and change will not come. Faith and leadership skill are both needed; together they create the space for the work that God already desires to do within people’s lives.

Let’s look at three key areas in which leaders can create such a space for God, all of which come to mind from my personal experience.

## Physical space

Church leaders have to wear many different hats. Two that I have been well used to have been the those of the fundraiser and building project manager. In the two church communities I have led at St Paul’s, Hounslow and St John’s, Hinckley we have successfully undertaken large scale building projects and seen the churches grow in number and effectiveness in mission as a result.

The cowshed in Hinckley was a 1950s church building constructed on the model of agricultural style barns. It held 100 chairs, had a kitchen that had been condemned and toilets that should have been. The roof was past its sell-by date and the floors, heating and windows were all on the way out. The children’s work took place in a series of second-hand portacabins and caravans. Yet within such humble surroundings God was building together a very special group of His people. The church grew and reached the capacity of the building, and at that point we had a decision to make – move and build, or simply repair the building thus limiting future growth. We took the decision to create the physical capacity for us to grow as a church, and decided to knock down our building and build a new church centre. Over the next three years we met in a local school which gave us new space to continue to grow,

and we began to develop plans and raise finance. In March 2008 the new centre was opened after a congregation of about 100 adults had raised £500,000 with an additional £200,000 borrowed from the Diocese.

## God's miraculous provision

The provision of God had been truly miraculous with the vast majority of that money having been given by church members. The results were remarkable too and the church saw rapid growth in youth work, and in the size of the congregation size which now had space to grow. New ministries developed and the church experienced the largest Alpha course we had ever seen. The words from the film 'Field of Dreams' are corny but they ring true in my experience; 'If you will build it they will come'.

## Visionary space

Vision has been described as having a picture of a 'preferred future'. As a leader begins to outline how a preferred future might look like space is created between the current reality and that future possibility. Into this space people can enter with faith, prayer and ideas. New energy and engagement are released as people begin to see how they could make a difference and be part of this better future. The experience for the leader is like digging ditches in the desert when the outcome is still uncertain Faith and wisdom are needed to manage such a process.

However, it isn't the case that God will fill any space we create. The story from Jehosophat teaches us that we need to seek God and grasp His vision. But it is still the leader's task to apply the practical understanding gained, and the guidance of the Spirit, and say 'this is where we are heading'.

Vision was a key aspect in the church growth in Hinckley and Hounslow and as I begin a new ministry as vicar of Holy Trinity Leicester I am once again living the process of seeking God's plan for us. We are only just beginning this but it has been a joy to see the level of faith, hope and engagement of church members rise within the church as we explore the two areas of God's call - to mission and maturity in Christ. Once this picture of the future is agreed and communicated it becomes new ground for us into which we can enter into with God.

## Structural space

This is about creating a new ministry or new leadership structures within a church's life and mission. It might involve multiplying a cell group, starting a new parent and toddler group, or beginning a group for teenagers. It might be the establishment of new lay-leadership positions or the appointment of new staff. All of these were part of our story at Hinckley and each new structural development came out the desire to see God enter into it. I remember meeting Albert who was in his 60s and being told that he 'never prayed out loud' but just did practical things in church. By the times we left the church, he was someone who had led a cell-group, prayed out loud with confidence and discovered that God gave him prophetic words for the church. It all started because his cell group multiplied and he felt called (he might say 'press-ganged!') into leadership. New structures create space for God to work in people's lives. It also enables numerical growth as new capacity to integrate people into the church is created.

So whatever position of leadership you might hold, I encourage you to hold together a desire to grow in the practical skill of leading others with a belief that God is a space-filling God. It is not all up to us and our leadership abilities, but he does call us to lead by creating the space that He longs to fill. So let's get our shovels out and dig some ditches!

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