

# Ready to Lead

Growing Leaders – Youth Edition

Ruth Hassall

*To the young leaders of St Tee's,  
my joy and my crown!*

*(Philippians 4:1)*

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# Introduction

In my diary I have a letter that I have carried around with me every day for the last 13 years. It's now looking dog-eared and worn and the words are pretty faded from having been read and re-read, and, to be honest, it's looking pretty grotty. However, that letter is one of the most important things that I own, partly because of who it's from and partly because of what's written in it.

You need to understand that leadership was never something that I had anticipated getting involved in. As a young teenager, I was far more willing to be led than ever to take the lead, in anything. Where others went, I followed. Yet something bizarre started to happen: other people seemed to see in front of them somebody who was completely different from the person I thought I was. Little by little, with their encouragement and their ability to see what I might become, my leadership journey began.

As I look back over the years that have passed since then (and there have been a few, though not that many!), it's amazing to see the way in which leadership opportunities have opened up—things that I could never, in my wildest dreams, have imagined. In fact, one of my mum's favourite phrases, when we look at different things that I've been part of, is, 'Well, who would have thought!' Not because they were opportunities that made headlines, but simply because I know that without God's intervention I would never have been part of them.

For me, youth and children's ministry has always been what's fired me. From a young age I was involved in youth and children's groups and it was within this area that I realized God was asking me to take a lead. So I started looking into how I could prepare for the role, and the answer seemed to be teacher training. It was really bizarre, as I knew I didn't want to be a teacher, but that was the option that seemed to fit best. So off I went to teacher training college, full of enthusiasm and excited about what the following years would hold.

The enthusiasm lasted for all of about six months, when I suddenly

lost sight of why I was there, felt as if I was drowning in lesson plans, and couldn't think, for the life of me, what had prompted me to do this. I was ready to give it all up and make my way back home... when the letter arrived.

A friend, knowing something of what I was feeling, had written me the most timely letter that I have ever received. In it she reminded me of who I was as a child of God, she reflected on the skills and abilities that she could see in me, and she inspired me to look forward to what God had in store for me, taking me back to the Bible as the source of God's word and his promises. For me, that letter made all the difference. Today, I still read it because it is so full of wisdom and constantly points me back to God.

Throughout this book we're going to be looking at excerpts from another couple of letters. These letters were written in the same sort of vein as the one that I received. They are letters from an older Christian leader to a younger one, passing on all the wisdom and insight that he had gained over the years, and constantly pointing to God as the one who works through us in all that we do.

These letters were written by a man called Paul to a young friend of his, Timothy, and are found in the Bible, cunningly entitled 1 and 2 Timothy. We're going to take some time to unpack the wisdom and encouragement that Paul offers to Timothy and look at what we can learn from them for our leadership journey. What Paul had learnt in different situations he now wanted to pass on to Timothy, showing him what it means to be a godly leader.

The letters were written towards the end of Paul's life, so there's a sense of urgency about them. He wants to make sure that Timothy, although still quite young, knows that he is called by God to be a leader, and he wants to be sure that Timothy is well resourced in different aspects of leadership.

There are many possible reasons why you're reading this book. Maybe someone has given it to you as a present, having recognized in you an ability to lead others. Maybe you've picked it up yourself because you're already in a leadership role, you know that God has called you to be a leader and you want to grow as a leader. Maybe you don't see yourself

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as a leader at all, but there's something inside you that wants to find out more. Maybe you're in a leadership role in your school or sports team and are wondering what difference it should make that you're a Christian in that role.

Well, this book is written for you if you find yourself in any of those categories. Leadership is such an important issue, and one of the greatest privileges of my life has been to be part of the development of younger leaders. I worked for a number of years as a youth pastor and I know that some of the leaders who most inspired me were those members of the youth group who were responding to opportunities to lead. Their energy and vision for what God could do as we worked together was just incredible. A lot of what is written here comes from the journey that we took together as we looked at what it meant to be a young Christian leader in our homes, schools, colleges and churches.

I'm so glad that you're joining us too.

## What is Christian leadership?

Dear Ruth

Hi! How are you? Was good to see you last week. I was wondering if you could help me with something? As you know, I've been helping out with the children's after-school club at the local primary school for almost a year now, which I really love. The thing is, the leaders have asked me if I'd like to be part of the team who run it. It's great to have been asked, but I'm not sure how to respond. I enjoy going along each week, and I've started organizing some of the games and leading some of the activities but I'm not sure that I could be one of the leaders. I mean, they're all so much older than me and I'm not sure that I'm a leader like them. What do you think I should do?

Look forward to hearing from you...

### Mmmmmm, how to respond?

What do you think? Would you suggest...

- that they shouldn't give it a second thought and say 'yes'?
- that they wait until they're a bit older, because as a young person they can't really lead?
- that they're right—because they're not like the other leaders, they shouldn't really join the team?

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- that they ask the leaders why they've been invited to be a leader?
- that they talk to their parents or another adult about it?
- something else?

\*

There is no shortage of ideas on who or what is a leader. Many people are willing to be very vocal on their thoughts about what makes a good or, more often, a bad leader. The press is full of stories about those who we feel are failing in their roles as leaders, whether they're football managers, politicians, bank managers or church leaders.

Many would agree (both those within the church and those in the business world) that one of the greatest leaders of all time was Jesus. Here was one man who gathered together the most unlikely group of people and turned the world of his day upside down through his teaching and actions—and he continues to do so today. With some two billion people still following him today right across the world, it's hard to argue that Jesus isn't a great leader.

## Spiritual giants?

As you begin this book, you may have questions in your mind about whether you really are a leader and whether God can use you to make a difference among your friends, in your school, at your church, on your sports team or whatever situation you may find yourself in. We can tend to think that God uses people we think of as spiritual giants—those who get up before it's light and pray for hours before the rest of us even make it out of bed, those who are strong and confident and never have a moment's doubt about their ability to lead. You may feel that you fit into that 'giants' category, and if you do, excellent—you may be highly confident about your leadership ability and wonder what this book could possibly have to offer you. Can I suggest that you suspend judgment for a moment and

keep reading? However, my guess is that most of us don't feel that way, yet would love for God to use us to lead people for him and to him.

The great news is that throughout history God has chosen people like you and me to be those that he uses in leadership roles. Let's take a quick wander through the Bible and have a look at some of the leaders we meet along the way:

## Moses

If there was anyone who really didn't consider himself to be a leader, it was Moses. In Exodus 3 and 4 we overhear an ongoing conversation between Moses and God, as God calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and Moses gives many excuses as to why he's not the man for the job. His first excuse is that he's not the right person to stand before Pharaoh. Next, he doesn't think the people will believe him when he says that God has sent him, and finally he launches in with the argument that he's not a good speaker—very clumsy with words, so obviously not the right choice. At this point God gets a bit annoyed with Moses and agrees to let his brother Aaron act as his spokesperson. But God is adamant that it is Moses who is to lead the people, despite all his arguments. And he does!

## Deborah

Deborah played a unique role in the life of the people of Israel. She was the first and only female military leader in the Old Testament, and her story is found in Judges 4 and 5. The people of Israel were suffering badly under the rule of King Jabin, who had invaded their land. He was a violent and harsh ruler and the people were desperately afraid and unhappy. Unable to take this any more, Deborah calls the people to action and, under her command, another military leader, Barak, gathers together an army of 10,000 men.

Deborah calls the army to the top of Mount Tabor and King Jabin quickly follows. The Israelite troops charge down the mountain and drive

King Jabin and his army into the River Kishon, where they get stuck and are rendered completely powerless. Excellent! This is what the people of Israel said about Deborah: 'There were few people left in the villages of Israel—until Deborah arose as a mother for Israel' (Judges 5:7).

## Esther

Did you know that Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God? Yet God is at work in the most amazing ways throughout the story of Esther's life and the lives of the Jewish people. God chooses this young Jewish woman to outwit the Persian king's evil right-hand man, Haman, who is intent on wiping out the Jewish people. Risking her own life, she steps up to the challenge and takes on the enemy of her people—and wins!

## David

God's people, the nation of Israel, decided that what they really needed in order to live well was a king. Until this point they had had a number of judges (people like Deborah and Samson, whom you might also have come across in the Old Testament), but they felt that this system wasn't working and a king would do a much better job.

So the last judge, Samuel (whom God spoke to in the temple when he was a young boy), goes to find them a king. First, he anoints a man called Saul as king, but that doesn't turn out very well, so God tells him to go to a man called Jesse, who has eight sons. One of these young men is to be the chosen king.

In 1 Samuel 16 we read how Samuel goes to Jesse and asks to meet his sons. One after another they are presented before Samuel, but none of them is the one that God wants. Samuel can't quite understand what's going on because, to his mind, they're all good men, strong and courageous, but God reminds Samuel that his way of choosing is different from others'. While people look at the outward appearance, God is far more concerned about what is happening on the inside, how their

heart is (v. 7). Finally the youngest son is brought out, a young shepherd boy that his father has almost forgotten about, and God says to Samuel, 'Yes, this is the one that I want you to anoint as king.'

## Gideon

The story of Gideon has to be one of my favourites. Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress, trying to stay hidden from the hostile raiders who are harassing Israel at the time. Without any kind of warning, the angel of the Lord appears to him and greets him by saying, 'Mighty hero, the Lord is with you!' (Judges 6:12).

Gideon has to do a double take to see who the angel is talking to! Him, Gideon, a strong and mighty hero? His clan is the weakest of all the clans, and within his clan he is the weakest person. How can he be the one that God will use to rescue the people of Israel from their enemy, the Midianites? But he was God's choice and he did exactly what God had promised—ran the enemy right out of town. (See Judges 7 for the full story.)

It would seem that the Bible is full of people who didn't really recognize themselves as leaders, yet God chose them and used them anyway. And he continues to do so. Here's Sarah's story:

*I never would have thought of myself as a leader, but as a teenager I was encouraged to get involved in leading on holiday clubs and, later, on youth camps. I would completely recommend taking up these opportunities as, being quite a shy person growing up, they gave me so much confidence in myself and highlighted abilities I didn't even know I had. I'm now in my 20s, still involved in youth leadership. I've grown so much in speaking to large groups, working with new people, and now have such an excitement in seeing potential arise in the next generation of leaders.*

## Definitions of leadership

Before we go any further, I think it's worth taking a few moments to think through what we mean when we talk about leadership. Often, the images we have in our minds of what a leader is will influence us in our understanding of what it means to be a leader. They might even stop us from taking up the leadership challenge because we don't think we match those images.

Think about these four questions for a moment.

- What words come into your mind when you hear the word 'leader'?
- Who do you think of when you're asked to think of a leader?
- Who is the leader who has most influenced you? (It could be someone famous or someone from your local situation.)
- What is it about this person, do you think, that makes them a good leader?

I asked a few of the teenagers in my church a couple of these questions. Here are some of their responses to question 1:

A leader is...

- '... someone who shows people what to do'.
- '... someone people listen to, respect and learn from'.
- '... someone others follow'.
- '... someone who takes charge and inspires people'.
- '... someone who makes things run smoothly and properly in a certain situation'.
- '... someone who inspires those around them to achieve their potential'.

As you can see, people have varying views on what a leader is. Throughout history, people have studied this subject. Here are a few definitions that others have given:

*A leader is 'the person who leads or commands a group, organization or country'.*

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

*My definition of a leader... is one who can persuade people to do what they don't want to do, or do what they're too lazy to do, and like it.*

HARRY S. TRUMAN, US PRESIDENT 1945–53

*Leadership occurs when one person induces others to work toward some predetermined objectives.*

ROBERT K. MASSIE, PRESIDENT OF THE AUTHORS' GUILD 1987–91

*Leadership is the ability of a superior to influence the behaviour of a subordinate or group and persuade them to follow a particular course of action.*

CHESTER IRVING BARNARD (1886–1961), PRESIDENT OF NEW JERSEY BELL TELEPHONE COMPANY AND THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

*Leadership is the art of influencing and directing people in such a way that will win their obedience, confidence, respect and loyal cooperation in achieving common objectives.*

US AIR FORCE

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.*

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, US PRESIDENT 1825–29

The truth of the matter is that there is no one type of person who is a leader. Leaders come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, so rather than thinking who or what is a leader, perhaps it would be more helpful to define what leadership is made up of.

Here are three key things that leadership is about: influence, role and ability.

## Influence

At its most basic, leadership is about influence. On this level, pretty much all of us are leaders as we all have the opportunity to influence other people—whether for good or for bad. So the first question to ask is, ‘Do I influence other people?’ However, there is more to leadership than influence alone.

## Role

A great way of growing in leadership is to have a role of responsibility. That might mean helping to lead a children’s group in your church, being captain of your sports team, leading a peer cell group, taking on the role of class president or any number of other situations where you find yourself taking on a lead role.

We can read about leadership, and that’s always useful and a great way to learn, but to learn to lead properly we need to have a go at leading.

*Leadership, like swimming, cannot be learned by reading about it.*

HENRY MINTZBERG

As a teenager, I was very shy and never imagined myself as a leader at all. Every year in the church where I grew up, we held a holiday club for children from the surrounding villages. This had run for a number of years and I’d helped out at it a good few times. Then one year we hit a bit of a problem: the guy who usually led the holiday club had moved to a different part of the country so was no longer able to continue in that role. A new leader needed to be found. I was completely stunned when the minister asked me and another teenager if we would take on the overall leadership for the event. To be honest, I was scared silly. I did a pretty good imitation of Moses in the excuses department, and my friend was close behind. However, in the end we both took on the role and, looking back, I am so grateful for that opportunity because it was a key time for me in growing as a leader.

A number of years later, I was working as youth pastor in a church and we had started running holiday clubs in our town. Again, all was going smoothly until the week before the event was to happen. Out of the blue, I was struck down with appendicitis. There was a fair amount of panic—who was going to lead it now? I got together (in my hospital bed) with a few other members of the team, and we agreed that the best person to take my place was Jonny, a 16-year-old church member. He had served faithfully as part of the team for years, he knew how it worked and what needed to be done, and we felt he had the skills needed to lead the team. He did a brilliant job—in fact, in my opinion, too good a job, as I had a hard time convincing the team that I should come back! Now in his 20s, Jonny looks back to that time as a key experience for his growth in leadership.

So we have influence and we have a role to play. It doesn't end there, though. I guess we can all think of people who have a leadership role but who aren't particularly good at it. I started training as a primary school teacher and on one of my teaching placements I was put in a class with a teacher (who shall remain nameless) who very obviously didn't like children. She had the role of leadership but I'm not convinced that she was the right person for it. That's because, along with the role, we need something else.

## Ability

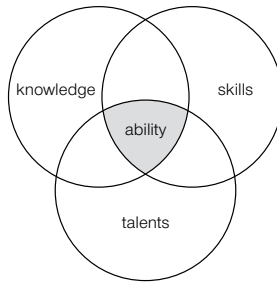
Ability is made up of a number of different things.

- **Skills:** things that you can learn to do through training—for example, learning how to put a good team together for a football match or how to lead a Bible study.
- **Knowledge:** things you can learn in theory. A key part of gaining knowledge is learning to ask good questions, and then listening to the answers.
- **Talents:** particular gifts that you have, like being musical or sporty or great at maths. A helpful way of understanding a talent is that it's not necessarily something you can do, it's what you can't help yourself

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doing.<sup>1</sup> For instance, if I'm in a small group that's meant to be doing something, and nobody takes a lead, I just can't help myself doing just that. Maybe, for you, it's making people feel welcome, or being unable to resist turning anything and everything into a football. The interesting thing about talents is that they are generally formed in us by the time we reach our late teens. During your childhood and teenage years, you can continue to develop new talents, but research has shown that once you are over 20 it becomes incredibly hard to develop a new talent. This is really bad news for those of us who passed the 20 mark some time ago, but for you it means there are still opportunities to develop in new areas. So this is a great time for you to be thinking about leadership and trying out new things.

The combination of these things—skills, knowledge and talents—makes up your ability.



To grow as leaders, we need to be people of good influence, we need to have an appropriate leadership role and we need to be growing in our leadership ability by adding to our skills and knowledge and developing our talents. We'll be looking at how we do this in Chapter 5.

## Distinctives of Christian leadership

To sum up so far, then, leaders come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, a range of personality types and with different gifts and skills. Leadership is

about being able to influence others positively, having a role to play and growing in the ability to play that role.

We need to take this a step further, though. If we are serious about being a Christian leader, then we need to look closely at Jesus' leadership requirements for those who follow him.

Christian leadership is not just about leading in church groups or services. If you are a Christian and are growing in leadership, then you are a Christian leader wherever you find yourself. One of the aims of this book is to explore how we can be Christian leaders in all the different roles that we play. What does it mean to be a sports captain, or a head girl, who is a Christian? Does it differ from the way we lead in what we see as 'Christian' situations? In fact, wherever we lead, we will always be a Christian leader by virtue of the fact that we are following Christ. So what does a Christian leader look like?

When Jesus talks about leadership, there is only one word that he repeatedly uses. For Jesus, being a leader is about being a servant. He makes this very clear to his disciples in a number of situations.

One day the mother of two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, came to ask him if her boys could sit in the places of honour in his kingdom. This was Jesus' response: 'You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave' (Matthew 20:25–27, NLT, 1996).

'Among you it should be quite different.' Jesus was turning everything they'd ever known upside down. To be a leader in his kingdom, as one of his followers, they needed to be prepared to serve. This was radically different from the leadership they'd experienced from the people around them. Surely, leadership was about power and authority and ordering people around? But Jesus was saying something quite different.

It's interesting that when Jesus wanted to teach the disciples something, he often used stories or parables to make his point. When he was teaching them about leadership, though, he didn't tell a story. He acted it out for them:

*Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him. (John 13:3–5)*

Can you imagine how the disciples must have felt? Here was Jesus, the Son of God, the one who had healed the sick, raised the dead and taught the crowds, kneeling in front of them and washing away the dirt of the day, taking on the role of the servant. Jesus made it very clear in Matthew 20:28 that this was why he had come: his purpose was to serve, and ultimately this would lead him to the cross, where he would serve the greatest need of all people—providing a way for them to be right with God.

In Jesus' mind, serving and leading were totally connected. He wanted his followers to be very clear that this was what leadership should be about for them, too:

*After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, 'Do you understand what I was doing? You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and you are right because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.'* (John 13:12–15)

Serving others is at the heart of Christian leadership, not just for the first disciples but for us today. The apostle Paul emphasized this when he challenged the Christians at Philippi about their behaviour: 'You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being' (Philippians 2:5–7).

If we want to be leaders, we really need to understand this: we need to learn to lead like Jesus, by serving others. As we do this, not only will we have the chance to lead but we'll also have the chance to change the

nature of leadership in our churches, our schools, our homes and our teams. Leadership, in Jesus' opinion, is not an opportunity to exert power and boss others around: it's an opportunity to serve.

But let's just press the pause button for a moment. Being a servant leader does not mean that we take any and every opportunity to literally wash people's feet! That was just the example that Jesus gave because it was appropriate in his context. The 12.5es knew that he was 'Teacher' and 'Lord'. They also knew that washing feet was the task reserved for the lowest of all servants. Jesus was trying to demonstrate to them that the two go together. Secondly, being a servant leader does not mean that we do whatever anybody asks of us. There were times when Jesus said 'no' to people because, as servant leaders, we're serving God first and foremost, so we do what he asks of us. What could this sort of leadership look like for us? Here are a few examples:

- The captain of the cricket team, having led his team in victory, returns to the club house with players and parents and is the first to take round the sandwiches, ensuring that everyone has something to eat.
- The person leading the children's group stays behind to wash up the glue sticks and paintbrushes that have been left in a sticky state.
- The avid footballer, desperate to get outside for a kickabout, chooses to stay in to help a little brother with his homework.
- The head girl, rather than getting younger pupils to clear litter in the playground, goes around and clears it up herself.

Do you get the idea? Yes, leadership is about upfront stuff, it's about leading the way, but it's also about being willing to play the role of the one who serves others.

### Definition of Christian leadership

As we come to the end of this first chapter, before moving on to a deeper understanding of leadership, I thought it might be helpful to pull it all together into a definition of what we mean by Christian leadership. It is:

## What is Christian leadership?

- ... an attitude of servanthood
  - ... using the ability that God has given
    - ... to lead others in a way that shows God's love
      - ... and achieves God's goals.

Christian leadership isn't about position or power; it's about serving God and others. The challenge is to keep growing and learning and looking for ways in which you can lead through serving others.

## Wrapping it up

So, are you a leader? I hope that, after reading this chapter, you will have seen that there is no one type of person that is a leader. Above all, God is looking for those who are willing to serve others; in his mind, those are the real leaders. Is that you? Would you like it to be? If so, read on—God has great adventures in store for you!

## Ready to lead

### To think about:

- Has your understanding of leadership changed in any way? If so, how?
- As you think through your week, what opportunities do you have to serve others?

### To do:

- Write out the definition of Christian leadership (or your own interpretation of it) and put it somewhere so that you'll notice it often.
- Find a friend or another leader whom you can talk to about what you're reading in this book.