

Seeing beyond our fears

I can't help but marvel at the way this letter and article, as well as the booklet on Churches in development have been so real to me in these last two weeks. This was through an experience I went through as a member of the governing committee of a local church.

Missing money

I sit on a governing committee for a local church and recently a substantial amount of money went missing. The person directly responsible for keeping this money came forward and alerted our Chief Executive to its disappearance. He admitted that he had 'made a grave mistake of not keeping the money in the safe deposit box and hence it had gone missing from his drawer.' What made matters worse was that this was the third time that money had gone missing under similar circumstances. The Chief Executive who happens to be a clergy man was panic stricken, he got extremely upset and wrote a very strongly worded letter to the 'culprit', and immediately suspended him.

Decision time

The governing committee was called for an urgent meeting. The young man was summoned to give his side of the story. He humbly confessed to being very negligent and asked for forgiveness. He was then excused from the meeting. Members were given the space to express themselves. Tempers flared: 'How could he be so grossly negligent..?', 'What will the congregation say when they hear this..?' 'They have a right to know that 'their' money is lost'..., 'He must be punished very severely and made to pay...' Others raised concerns on how the 'culprit' would be supported in a pastoral and Christian way. Still others pointed out that 'he should consider himself very lucky - if this was a secular organization, he would have been imprisoned immediately whether he was guilty or not. But we were struck by the young man's humility, honesty and 'Christian virtue' in admitting his mistake and begging for forgiveness.

Finally after the long discussion, we agreed that he should be stripped of all his responsibilities and be assigned other duties until his contract expired. His job would be split into three and advertised, but he was not eligible for any of the positions...

But during the discussion we realized that despite this being the third time such a thing had happened, there had never been any formal warning to the staff member - a requirement in the Human Resource manual. We realized that although our systems and

procedures existed in well-bound written documents, we had no supervisory mechanism to ensure that there were being followed. Council members also recalled that for almost a year, we had noted that this particular staff member was bearing a workload that would ideally be carried out by two or three people. There had been recommendations of splitting the jobs and recruiting people for the new positions but this had not been done. These were not comfortable issues for us as the committee to accept. But overall we felt that ‘we had been wronged and let down, and so were right in disciplining’ the young man.

Self-reflection

After the meeting, there was this deep gnawing in my mind that this was not a correct decision. But as I was not sure what direction to take, I decided not say anything more. That evening I went home and found the letter with the article on facing fears and taking responsibility. It was a ‘word in season’. Yes, we had faced and expressed our fears during the meeting, but I sadly realized that as a committee we had made our decisions based on those fears and emotions at the time. They had blinded us to our own failures and weakness as a governing committee, which probably contributed to what had happened. With all these thoughts running through my mind, I could not help it but pray very earnestly that God would speak to the other members as well. Needless to say I had a sleepless night, but decided not to say much even the next day. Somehow I was not sure about what to share with the others and feared to appear like I was coercing members to change their decision. I decided to trust that God would speak, and indeed he did!

Taking responsibility

After two days, I decided to talk with the chair of the committee. He said I was not the only one struggling, about three quarters of the members, including the Chief Executive, had each gone through a similar self-reflection process and had approached him privately. There was a unanimous feeling that the decision that had been taken needed to be retracted, in light of the fact that as council we too had to take responsibility for our failures. We realized that we could not hold someone accountable and ‘discipline’ them when we ourselves had not been disciplined to follow through our own decisions that would have helped avoid the incident...

Growth points from accepting our failings:

Through taking responsibility for our own role in the problem, our church is developing much more than if we had simply blamed the young man. We realized that:

As a church, we have grown in number and so have the needs of the congregation, therefore our human resource needs have grown as well. We are taking deliberate steps to address the gaps in our human resource capacity as well as reviewing the job profiles of the staff to ensure that the work is evenly distributed among them. In the same vein we have been sadly reminded that not everyone who comes to Church is able to resist the temptation of stealing- even Gods' money! So we are taking serious security measures in this regard.

Secondly, we were reminded that when we set standards and institute systems and procedures, we need to support one another to see that these are implemented by both the staff and the governing committee; otherwise we will fail to hold one another accountable in this regard.

We also realized that the staff of the church need mentoring and coaching support in their work and personal development yet we had overlooked this need. Measures are being taken to ensure that this happens.

Last but not least, and on a personal note, the value and power of self reflection whether as part of a formal OD process or by the Spirit's leading like in my case above, cannot be underestimated for individual growth and when working with churches. It is a humbling experience as one faces their mistakes, and yet it is an experience that sets one free to make things right and better. It also provides space for grace to work in personal and organizational growth. When you take time to reflect, you realize more than ever that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We do not have the right to judge one another and we should not respond punitively to problems.

It reminded me of the prophet Nathan opening David's eyes to the sin he had committed with Bathsheba. David took personal responsibility and acknowledged that he had sinned against God and in that, lay his salvation. As Nathan said God spared his life. It appears that when one takes personal responsibility, it is easier to accept the consequences as well. David was forgiven and his life was spared, but there are many consequences that followed as a result of his disobedience. Nevertheless David did not express bitterness to God because he accepted that he had sinned. This is why after he had prayed in vain for his son to live, he was able to get up, get cleaned and go to the house of God and worship. There is transformative power in accepting personal responsibility in any growth process because that is where the energy and stamina to change begins.