

Seeking God's presence in retrenchment

by Rick James

These are tough times for many Christian organisations. With income falling, many are having to make hard decisions about reducing staff numbers. We need God's presence to lead and guide such painful processes, especially when the decisions we make will affect peoples' livelihoods and lives. How do we create the space for God's guidance when difficult decisions have to be made?

Last month I was asked by a Christian NGO to facilitate a process that would get them into the right spiritual space for deciding which of the 10% of staff they would let go. They realised that income projections over the next few years meant they had no alternative, but to reduce headcount. They had already done quite a lot of thinking through strategic priorities and directions, but now needed to name names.

They had a two-day leadership team meeting and asked me to use the first half-day as a spiritual retreat. I had never done anything quite like this before, but together with the client we developed a short process, based on biblical principles. It seemed to go incredibly well. By the lunchtime many of the team said they felt that a massive burden had been taken off them. They felt in a much better space for the difficult discussions which were to follow. These headcount discussions went remarkably smoothly as a result.

There is clearly no blueprint, no magic formula, for coming into God's presence. It is not a conjuring trick, like Aladdin with a magic lamp. But here are the principles and processes we followed in case they prove useful to others:

1) Prior prayer

As a facilitator, it is humbling to be faced by such tough organisational situations. You clearly cannot 'fix' things. There is almost nothing you can bring from outside. What they needed was God's presence, not my ideas and wisdom. And we obviously cannot manufacture or control God's presence - all we can do is invite. I was profoundly aware that if God was not there, at best it would be a waste of time and money and at worst would damage the organisation and individuals involved.

When I realise how dependent I am for my work, I pray more. So I spent quite a lot before the meeting praying and got some friends to also pray specifically for this meeting. As I listened to God about the event I felt God want to reassure them: *'I know how hard this is. I know your pain. But I am with you. Be courageous'*. I went to the venue the evening before and prayed together with the meeting facilitator.

2) Building trust and setting the scene

Leading a spiritual process requires people's trust. Earning such trust in such a short time needs some divine intervention, especially in a diverse group. I find it helps if I am honest and upfront with the group about my own limitations. So right at the start I acknowledged my particular Christian tradition and language. I also sought to reassure them that I realised how painful the situation was. One of the quotes I had on the wall was: *'Nothing is more difficult than leading. Nothing else compares to the hardship of firing a friend or telling people that their work was necessary for a season, but their employment has now reached an end'* (Allender 2006:1). We have God's promise of his presence in this leadership crucible.

I also tried to emphasise that as leaders they were responsible for the mission of the whole organisation, not just their particular department or the needs of particular individuals. Yet at the same time as being responsible for decision-making, there is the paradox that ultimately the organisation was God's responsibility, not theirs.

Pruning is not necessarily all bad. Ecclesiastes says that there is a time for everything. Although it may not look like this today, in time individuals may see it was for their ultimate good. God may have something better for them. After all we believe that *'In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'* (Romans 8:28). For the organisation too, this process might be bringing them back to greater dependence on God. In the story of Gideon, God tells him to downsize by 99% reducing his numbers from 31,700 to 300. *The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'* (Judges 7:2). This process might be about surrendering to God again and remembering that God says: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Corinthians 12:8)

In making hard choices, some of the principles used to guide the discussions included:

- (a) courage to speak the truth as you believe it,
- (b) humility to recognise you might be wrong or only partially right,
- (c) honour each others' deep reservations and resistances,
- (d) feel the pain of others and intercede without paralysing decision-making.

3) Surfacing fears and strengthening courage

In the next session we sought to strengthen people's courage. I asked them to think of any leader in the Bible who resonated with them in some way. I then asked them two questions:

- Were they given an easy task?
- Is there anything you can learn from them that you could take into these two days?

People fed back some of their reflections in plenary. Connecting with these stories had much more impact on people than I had expected.

We then went into getting people to identify any underlying fears. For ten minutes people reflected on their own: 'What do I fear about this? What am I really worried about?' They then shared their thoughts with a neighbour before praying for each other. We closed with prayer. I like the quote from Anne Lamott, 'Courage is fear that has said its prayers.'

4) Letting go of self-interest

It is really dangerous to go into difficult decision-making that profoundly affect others' lives when we are strongly influenced by our own interests. As Ruth Haley Barton warns '*When we set out to do good, but carry out our attempts without the discipline of attending to our own stuff which lies beneath and opening ourselves up to God's presence, evil is always close at hand*'. We need to become indifferent to our ego, prestige, organisational politics, personal comfort, pet projects, even what others think of us. If we are human it will be there. If we are more aware of it, we are more likely to be able to manage it consciously rather than let it manage us subconsciously. If it is left invisible, it may manipulate.

So we sent people went off on their own individually, many going out for a walk. They asked God to search them asking:

- What interests, needs, self-centred desires do I bring into this situation?
- What needs to die in me in order for God's will to come forth here?

They then met up with someone else to share what came up, how much they felt able to lay down and to pray for each other.

5) Coming into God's presence

To come into God's presence again it is important to notice and remember the occasions he has been present in the past. This elicits hope and faith that he can be present in this situation. People noted down on Post-It notes any instances in the last couple of years where they had experienced God's presence in a powerful way at work. They put these on the wall and people wandered past reading them. It gave people great encouragement to be reminded of how much God had been involved in their day-to-day organisational life.

The final element of the process was to rest in God's presence. In Exodus 33:15 Moses says to God, "*If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here*". Again Ruth Haley Barton points out: "The greater the call for decisive action, the more we must be sure we have waited long enough to receive clear direction". For some people it may have just been about time to reconnect with God and say 'I've missed you'. For others it was perhaps some reassurance. For others it was just about having fun and laughter.

Conclusion

This is certainly not a blueprint for how it must always be done. But when we intentionally create space for God, he certainly seems to honour our efforts. While God did not remove them from having to make painful decisions, nor the even

greater challenges of implementing them, people felt strongly that God's presence was with them.