



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop gave a short key note address at the [Church of England's National Education Conference 2023: Flourishing Together](#). This follows in full:

Sisters and brothers, it's a great joy to be with you and thank you so much first of all to everyone who's spoken, but also to the young people who've been leading our dance and our prayer and our worship.

As part of my curacy, I spent a morning each week in the Church of England Primary School in the parish.

It was a hugely enjoyable and challenging experience. I learnt a lot. Mostly about myself. But also, about how to lead and how to care.

One day, when I was probably about a year into my curacy and had gotten to know the school well and they me, I was leaving at lunchtime - like I always did - and exiting past the headteachers study. Her door was ajar. As she saw me passing, she called out and beckoned me in, though, I heard it as a summons. In fact, being a curate and still in my mid 20s - I'm afraid I'm one of those clergy who's never had a proper job - I felt closer in age, and certainly in attitudes to school, to the children I was teaching rather than the staff I was working alongside.

And certainly, the headteacher, who was probably only in her late forties/early fifties, seemed to me at the time - like it is when you're in your 20s - to be an incredibly old person. So when she called me into her study, I suddenly found all my anxiety levels rising. I had obviously done something wrong. I was about to be reprimanded. I felt like a child again.

I went into the study. I sat down. She went and closed the door. My anxiety levels rose higher. My knees knocked. She started to speak. I waited with bated breath to discover what misdemeanour or shortcoming she had identified in me.

But no. Of course not. She spoke to me about the pressures she was under. The demands of leading a staff team. The projections and endless suffocating expectations that go with leadership. The isolation. The sleepless nights. The desire to do well. And the reality of failure. The fact that because leadership can be lonely, she didn't really have anyone to talk to, and that was why she had asked me in. And as she spoke, she started to weep.

She was an absolutely brilliant headteacher.

This was a fantastic school. I loved being part of it and I celebrated the partnership that we had between church and school.

But leadership is hard. And it is demanding.

She wasn't having a breakdown. It was just a bad day at a bad time, and she need someone to talk to. Because sometimes, for all of us, the pressures get too much.

And what did I do? Well, to be honest I can't really remember. I think I probably just sat and listened. I hope I prayed.

But I did learn something in that moment - about myself, about leadership, and about what it is to be a headteacher. And I realised how important it is, that we support each other in the responsibilities we carry. That we work hard to ensure that people in positions of leadership have spiritual and pastoral as well as professional support. And I realised, perhaps, for the first time, that in order for any of us to lead well, we need to pay attention to our own flourishing and our own replenishing.

So in this little session, paradoxically, we're not talking about how children flourish. But how we flourish in the responsibilities we carry in order that we may build communities, and particularly school communities, where everyone flourishes.

For this to happen, two things are needed in particular.

First, dear sisters and brothers – especially those of you who carry responsibility for the leadership in our schools - we all need spiritual and pastoral support and it is not a sign of weakness to say we that we need help; and it's OK sometimes to cry, it means you care. And what I was called to offer in that moment, led me to reimagine my whole role in that school; that I wasn't just there to do an assembly and be with the children in the classroom, I had an important pastoral and spiritual role within the whole school, and particularly with the adults who worked there, be it the headteacher, the classroom assistant, or the cook. And, yes, we need people to take on that role as part of their specific responsibilities; and this surely is one of the great joys and advantages of a church school. But we must all be aware of the contribution each of us can make to each other's welfare.

Secondly, it is about taking responsibility for the resources and replenishing each one of us needs. Building our house on the rock, as Jesus put it.

So, I'm going to say to you this morning what I say consistently to all the clergy that I serve: the most important thing that I do each day is say my prayers.

I know that in order to function well and live my life well and do the things that I've been called to do, I need resources outside myself. I need a place where I am just Stephen before God, where I can be replenished by the affirmation of God's love for me and by God's purposes for my life.

Not only renewing my vocation, but giving me the energy of grace and affirmation of beauty and goodness and knowledge that I am God's beloved, that God is on my side, that God believes in me; that God wants to do wonderful things through me and then in the power of that affirmation, what is best about God fills me and overflows from me into the lives of others.

And I need, over and over and over again to learn the meaning of the first beatitude, which is 'Blessed, are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Which means, blessed are those who do not take themselves too seriously; blessed are those who know that they need resources outside themselves; blessed are those who are rich in God's replenishing goodness and mercy; who are not self-sufficient but by abiding in God are able to flourish and be fruitful. Dear friends, that is good for everyone and especially a school.

My time's up. You're probably thinking, 'Is that all he's got to say. Is that it? Say your prayers. Pay attention to your own need for rest and refreshment. Love one another. Yeah, that's it. But with these things, we can change the world, starting with our own hearts. Amen.

Photos Credit: Max Colson Church of England

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/foundation-educational-leadership-national-conference>