in dignified ways were characteristic of Jesus’ ministry. Intensive interaction is
but one example of how people with disabilities could help the church to be
present to God, one another, and ourselves in new and deeper ways. The pos-
sibilities which could emerge from able-bodied people giving up power are vast
and untapped. However, as Milcaere states in regards to Fikeshi dominance, it
will take a leap of faith or else the minority will, once again, be assimilated into
the status quo. Within the church this leap of faith is not only trusting people
with disabilities to lead with their own personal agency, it is also a leap of faith
in the God who has called us together into one body, in our rich variety, to be
his people and display his reconciling purposes to all the world. If churches col-
lude with the culture of consumerism that silently silences minorities, we will
not only continue to oppress people with disabilities, we will not seek repent-
ance, receive forgiveness, or be the promised new community of reconciled
persons in relationship with God and one another.

The church is called, in Christ and by the Spirit, to anticipate a different way
of being human together, a way which is the antithesis of empty spaces. The
church is called to be a community of meaning where people with disabilities
are no longer strangers or aliens, but fellow heirs, fellow members of one body,
and fellow sharers in the promises in Christ Jesus. As the church learns to be
God’s community of particular persons in relationship, it will be a community
of meaning in regards to human particularities, but also, and more significantly,
with regard to the gospel itself. The church will anticipate another way of being
human together; God’s intended way. And it will offer to God, in Christ and
by the Spirit, the sacrifice of praise that is the due human response to his wise
purposes in the beginning – to bring all things in heaven and on earth into
unity in Christ by the Spirit’s power.

6 Conversations with James
on Leadership
What Can We Learn about Leadership
and Personhood from People with
Severe Cognitive Disability?

Charles Hewlett

This is the transcript of a conversation I had with my son, James. James is a
21-year-old man who has profound intellectual disabilities. James has the
cognitive ability of a six-month-old, and depends on us to meet all his needs. How-
ever, this does not mean that James is merely a passive recipient of care. James
is a person, and he is an active contributor to our family life. This conversation
is a conscious attempt to recognize the contributions James has made to me,
and my understanding of leadership, and to take his non-verbal communication
seriously. In this conversation I offer five things I have learnt from James about
leadership and their significance for Christian leadership.

Introduction

James, it’s really nice to have you here with me – I am so proud of you, son.
There are some important people here in this room today. These men and
women have the responsibility for spiritually managing and directing an awful
lot of people. As principal of Carey Baptist College, I was invited to come along
and speak to them. And I thought they might benefit from listening to me
and you having a conversation about leadership. I appreciate that you are only
21 years of age, with the cognitive ability of a six-month-old baby, but James,
you have taught me more about being a leader than anyone else I know. Son,
I would not be the leader I am today without the way you have ministered to
me. I reckon that you might be able to help these people too, in their desire to
love and serve God.

Stop Pretending

One of the reasons I like spending time with you, James, is because I can’t
impress you. Well, unless I was holding a big piece of cake! I mean, it is so dif-
ferent being your dad from being the leader of a theological college. Often
being a leader is so much about performance, charisma, being able to motivate,
and cast impressive visions. It’s about being able to speak the right words, blog
the right thoughts, read the right books, and network with the right people. It’s about rubbing shoulders with academics, keeping up with the competition, and maintaining a glossy, well-run, machine.

I remember when I was pastoring in the local church: the pressure to keep up with that city church everyone talked about; the need to perform in the pulpit like that pastor down the road; having elders who wanted me to have the solution to every problem. And then the young people – they wanted me to be ‘wicked’!

But it’s so not like that with you, James! These things mean nothing to you. My leadership skills don’t impress you at all. And it’s so freeing. It’s so liberating. When we hang out, I don’t have to perform for you or pretend that I can. You don’t love me because of what I can do, you love me because I’m here, and that’s enough. I appreciate that a lot of these things are just part of being in charge, but James, you have taught me that sometimes these things can take over – and my whole job becomes driven by performance, the need to impress, and to look good. And my motivation can so easily get skewed; decisions become pragmatic and shallow, and looks become more important than depth and transparency, James, thank you for loving me simply for who I am. Thank you for challenging me to rethink the importance I place on performance, and for the encouragement to stop pretending.

Enjoy the Broken

Well, James, you really are broken, aren’t you? I remember that little rhyme I’d say when I was a boy: ‘When God passed out brains, I thought he said trains, and I missed mine.’ Well, James, you really did miss yours! We’ve laughed together a lot over the years about this, haven’t we? Remember the time you got stuck under the coffee table and couldn’t work out a way to get out – and we just had to laugh. I remember the time when we were pushing the trolley around Palmer’s Garden Nursery together and I wondered why you were moving so slow – I thought you must have been tired. After a while I looked, to see that both your trousers and your nappies had come down and they were caught around your ankles. James, you were walking around the garden centre in the starks! We joked all the way home about how those pretty young assistants were taking more notice of us than us!

Son, I like things that are broken, that can’t be fixed – things like you. Ha, we seem to live in a world that is very preoccupied with things being just right, and we struggle to cope with things that are somehow flawed. I get sick of being the leader who has to fix things all the time. There’s so much pressure: ‘What are we going to do about this Charles?’ ‘What ideas have you got to make us more successful?’ Present your solution to us at the next board meeting.’ And if I can’t fix it, then maybe I’m a lousy leader.

I love the fact that you are broken and I don’t have to fix you. There is nothing that can be done about your disability, and I have to accept it. You have made me realize that instead of resenting your brokenness, instead of wishing you were different, I can enjoy you and live in all the richness that your brokenness brings. It is through your disabilities that I have learnt the most about myself, about love, about living, and about God. Thank you for reminding me not to be sucked in by perfection and all of its glossiness and superficiality.

You’ve helped me understand that there might not be a quick fix for that family struggling with marriage issues. You’ve helped me appreciate that there might be value in having that eccentric person as part of our team. You’ve helped me see that it doesn’t matter that the woman with mental health issues keeps interrupting the worship service. You’ve helped me realize that it doesn’t matter that the church foyer is looking a bit tired – in fact, it’s quite quirky (apparently it’s retro). And it doesn’t matter that our worship leader doesn’t look like a model, James, you have helped me to appreciate the ordinary, the different, and to accept things and people the way they are.

Slow Down

You love your cuddles, don’t you? Even now, as a big 21-year-old, you still love to sit on my knee and snuggle into me. You’d happily do that for hours. James, I think we need to talk to these leaders about slowing down a bit.

Now, I appreciate you can’t talk to me, that we can’t have a spoken conversation, watch sports together, or discuss politics. But I guess that’s your whole point, James, isn’t it? With you, it’s not about doing things, it’s just about being. In fact, time doesn’t mean anything to you. It stretches out between meals and snacks, and one hour blends happily into the next. For a leader, time can mean everything. We get so busy, James. Rushing from meeting to meeting, hurrying from problem to problem, from person to person. Phone calls, emails, organizing, planning, sermons. – we simply run out of time, and the quality of what happens in each hour gets diluted. We become driven and task-focused. Our big purpose even gets overrun by the nuts and bolts. We’re so busy perfecting the song progression that we forget to see God. We’re so busy trying to fix the mistakes of Christendom that we miss out on enjoying the richness of the body of Christ that we are part of. We’re so busy trying to get the sermon finished on time that we miss the very wonder of God’s Word itself. And we’re so busy developing the plan to reach the whole community that we miss the opportunity to share the gospel with our next-door neighbour.

James, you have taught me to slow down and become less task-focused. You’ve helped me to remember what really matters, to take a step back and to revisit the big picture, to pause and catch glimpses of beauty in the small things. James, you have taught me so much.

Get Excited

You’re very quiet today, James. Sometimes you can get pretty loud – and it gets us in a bit of trouble. I love it when we’re out in public and you unexpectedly
give out a big yell, and it makes people jump. We get some stares — but they don’t understand that it’s your way of showing us how excited you are. You flap your arms and yell out as loud as you possibly can. That’s one of the reasons I love visiting your school — Oaklyn Special School. You and your friends are crazy — in a nice way. You’re so easily excited with no inhibitions. If you want to do something, you just do it. If you feel like dancing, you get up and dance. If you feel like yelling, you yell. And you’re so rude — belching and farting in the middle of the graduation ceremony.

It makes me laugh when your mates come up and stare at me. They hold my hand, give me a hug, or ask me a question, it doesn’t seem to matter that I don’t know them. You’re young adults, but in many ways just little kids, little preschoolers. So trusting, so accepting, so naïve, so spontaneous, so honest. So easily excited, with no hang-ups or embarrassments or self-consciousness. James, I love these things about you.

It’s so easy to lose excitement when you’re a leader. You come into the job as a young pastor, ready to change the world — a risk-taker, a pioneer, an adventurer. You’re energetic, fired up, and excited. And then you slowly change. You get wise, you take a few knocks, criticism comes your way, you learn to pace yourself, you learn about self-preservation. We become self-aware, self-contained, and self-conscious. But I don’t want to be like that. James, I want to be more like you. I want to be a leader who is less careful, less politically correct, and less cautious. Thank you for reminding me that in my apathy and safeness I might just be missing out on the exciting things God has in mind for me.

Chill Out

People often compliment me and your mum on our patience in dealing with you and your disabilities. I wonder if they ever stop to think how patient you must be? I often try to imagine what it must be like not being able to communicate, not being able to easily express how you feel, what you need, and what you’re thinking. What’s it like to be constantly misunderstood? It must get pretty frustrating at times. I know I’m pretty thick sometimes, aren’t I? You push the drink away, and I keep offering it to you, just in case you change your mind. I bet you want to say; ‘Dad, I’ve already said no, OK!’ We try to make you eat more food, but you’re pushing the spoon away and closing your mouth tight. You’re saying no the best you can, but we keep trying to shove it in.

Then there’s this ongoing saga with your walking. That cast that went from your toes to your groin — those long months recovering in respite care, just lying on your back in bed. And now the weekly trips to Middlemore Hospital each Monday morning with Mum to have a new, slightly adjusted cast put on. You’re such a patient man, James. In all this, you don’t grizzle and grump, you don’t throw a paddy or give up. I seem to get so impatient when things aren’t going my way: ‘The elders, they just don’t understand me!’ ‘Why won’t they provide me with the resources I need to get the job done?’ And the way I complain to Mum when my mates in secular work upgrade their cars, move into a bigger house, and tell us about their planned overseas trip. Well, it’s not fair, James! James, I have watched the way you respond to the challenges, and I have learnt so much.

Thanks, too, for the reminder to listen well — that I need to take the time to listen properly instead of hearing what I think is being said. You have taught me to look deeper, below the surface stuff, and be more discerning, more insightful.

Conclusion

Well, James, I think we’ve run out of time. That wasn’t so bad after all. I wonder why we got so nervous? But these are the things you want to say to us as leaders: Stop pretending, enjoy the broken, slow down, get excited, and chill out.

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor 1:27)

And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9-10)