

Steven's story

Soon after being stationed to a new church, Steven noticed that some church members were openly racist to others who were from ethnic minorities, refusing to listen to anything he had to say and belittling his contribution to church life. Unfortunately, this group is over-represented in the leadership of the church, despite being a minority within the congregation itself.

Steven is appalled by this behaviour, but unsure as to what to do to change people's attitudes. When he spoke to others within the circuit about it, all he got in response were platitudes like "There's a lot of that around, isn't there?" Without any support from his colleagues (and for the sake of those affected by the racism) Steven has resorted to suggesting that the affected church members join a different church. The whole situation has led Steven to question his calling.

Questions

Experience

- Who has failed Steven in this story, and how?

Learning

- What could have been done differently?

Action

- How does your church seek out a diverse range of people and talent in leadership roles?
- When new people take over roles, what support systems are in place in your church? Do the systems work? What could you do to make them work?

Karen's story

Karen had been asked several times over a number of appointments to think about becoming a superintendent. She had thought long and hard about it, but each time she came back to the same old thoughts: that not only was the role male-dominated, but superintendents were expected to be domineering – which was just not her style. It was not until she was stationed with a woman superintendent that Karen felt she had finally found a role model who could help her rethink how she too could do the role. Her superintendent was supportive and persuasive, encouraging her to realise her potential. Karen is now an active and engaging superintendent, committed to her work and to ensuring that women have equal access to role models.

Questions

Experience

- What were Karen's reasons, initially, for not wanting to be a superintendent?

Learning

- What were the traditional images of leadership in Karen's mind?
- What, if anything, do you think is different about Karen's leadership?

Action

- How would you and your church ensure that women are actively supported in their ministry?
- How would you support women or men to explore different styles of leadership?

Harry's story

Harry is six years old and has Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). As a result, he lacks understanding and awareness of other people's emotions and feelings, and he finds it difficult to start conversations or take part in them properly. He also has a habit of tapping repetitively. Julie, his mother, has tried to explain Harry's ASD to the members of her local church, as he is regarded as strange because he "doesn't look disabled" (as one person put it).

Though most of the parents within the church are supportive of Julie and Harry, they feel uncomfortable with Harry playing with their children. Harry tends to give the children nicknames which are "not always kind", and to shout these out at them. Harry also finds it very difficult to sit still in church, and though Julie brings a box of small toys to keep him occupied, he sometimes gets very angry or noisy. Julie regularly has to explain that he is not being naughty. She is finding coming to church very stressful.

Questions

Experience

- How do people's attitudes towards Harry affect Julie? How might they affect Harry?

Learning

- What could have been done differently in this story?

Action

- What could you and your church do to make it a more inclusive place, where people like Harry and Julie can be heard and all feel welcomed?
- What could you do?

Francesca's story

Francesca has recently moved to a new area, having started her first job after leaving university. The church she has joined does not have many young members, although the leadership is keen to change this. As soon as Francesca was accepted into the church community, members and stewards started coming up to her and asking if she was interested in working with the children and young people. Francesca has been politely refusing, as she doesn't believe that is where her talents lie. Despite mentioning to the minister and members of the church that she has a passion for outreach and that she would be very happy to be involved in this area of the church's ministry, people continue only to consider her for children and youth work.

Recently, Francesca has started to hear comments about how young people are selfish and won't give their time to the church. This has left her frustrated and hurt, and she is considering moving to another church.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions have been made about Francesca?
- Why do you think people have those assumptions?
- Have you noticed or experienced people making similar assumptions?

Learning

- What could be the consequences of Francesca's experience – both for her and for the local church?
- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions have people in this story made?

Action

- What could the people in this story have done differently?
- Now thinking about the situations you experienced or noticed personally, what would you do differently?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church, or others that you know, and who can help them? Consider what you will do.

Peter's story

Peter was born into a very large family, as the oldest boy with five sisters; he had throughout his life been not just a brother, but a mother, father and friend. With such a large family, it went without question that he helped out his mother and sisters. From an early age Peter would set up Sunday school in the kitchen and read from the children's Bible, then get his sisters to draw pictures which they all loved. This pattern continued until all the children became adults.

At church, Peter decided to put himself forward to teach Sunday school, as this is where he saw his calling. He approached the minister to discuss this, but was told that for safeguarding reasons, the church had decided that only women could be Sunday school teachers, as parents were uncomfortable with men in this role. The minister suggested that Peter should work in the youth club with the football team instead. Peter was quite upset by this response. He felt saddened that the minister's decision was wrong, but decided not to challenge it as he had already been made to feel bad for suggesting working at the Sunday school in the first place.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions were made about Peter because he is a man?
- If you were told that you couldn't do something "for safeguarding reasons", how would you feel?
- Have similar assumptions been made in your church?

Learning

- What could have been done differently in this story?

Action

- How would you and your church ensure that it could use the skills and expertise of someone, regardless of their gender?
- How would you inform people about gender equality?

Jim's story

Jim works full-time and has two children. Having recently gone through a divorce, Jim is greatly thankful to his church and its members, and feels that he wants to give something back and help the church. The church recently established a 'mission committee' to try to help the church be more of a presence in the community and attract a broader demographic of people. Jim saw this as the perfect opportunity and was gratefully accepted into the group. However, when Jim received the notice of the first meeting, he saw that he would be unable to attend as it was scheduled for during the working day.

When Jim pointed this out to the chair of the group, he was told that almost everyone who volunteers to be on committees is retired, and that they do not like to be out in the evenings. When Jim raised the problem with the minister, she was sympathetic but said that church meetings had always been held during the day, and she couldn't afford to lose the support of the older members. Jim was forced to withdraw from the committee and now gives his time volunteering with a local charity.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions have been made in this story, and about whom?
- Has anything similar happened in your experience?

Learning

- What structural, cultural, institutional or personal assumptions were made by people in this story?
- How could a situation like this, or others that you can think of, impact people like Jim?
- How would this impact on the mission of the church (eg what has the church lost by not having Jim involved)?

Action

- What could have been done differently?
- Who is responsible for making those kinds of changes in your church, or others that you know, and who can help them? Consider what you will do.