

ON TRUST

Words by Dr Kate Middleton
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“Spirit lead me so my trust is without borders...”

So goes a line in a popular, though slightly ‘retro’ now, chorus. And trust is a core skill for emotional wellbeing. As human beings we are designed to do life in companionship and connection with other humans. The ancient creation narrative in Genesis describes all the things about the world God made that were good - literally just the way they were supposed to be. But at first one thing was ‘not good’ (Genesis 2:18) - and it was because this new human God had created was disconnected, separated from any other humans, struggling with a kind of loneliness that couldn’t be fixed by the company of all the animals God brought to them (v19-20). What humans need is, according to the Genesis account, other humans to ‘help’ them - to provide practical support - but more than that, according to the Greek translation of the ancient Hebrew - someone who responds to this intrinsic, inner need we have to not do life in isolation. This is a reciprocal, emotionally connected relationship - about so much more than just practical need and problem-solving. We are designed to thrive in relationships of mutual trust and support.

We see the impact on people when those relationships are absent or thin on the ground - the negative consequences of isolation and loneliness on both physical and mental health are significant, and easily as great if not more so than many other things like smoking. But trust is a tricky subject. Leaning on others can be risky, and developing the kind of balanced, dependent relationship we crave is not easy. Humans are not perfect, and all too often we let one another down unintentionally, or in some circumstances may find ourselves made victims by people who deliberately manipulate or take advantage of our trust and vulnerability for their own gains. And church spaces are not immune to this - recent months have seen the media filled with stories of leaders letting others down, hurting and abusing people weaker than themselves, building platforms and ministries at the expense of people they break and damage and leave behind. Henry Cloud, in his recent book on trust, points out that almost everyone will have a story of trust broken, and friendship betrayed. Even God laments the devastation caused by the trust he has placed in humans being broken (Genesis 6:6).

So who and what can we trust in times when so much has changed or fallen apart? And when we read or hear stories of people we might have assumed we could trust but have failed or fallen, or have our own painful experiences where those we placed trust in let us down, can or should we trust again? Is it really realistic to aim, and even pray for a space where we trust without limits? And what does this mean for us as leaders, inviting people to place their trust in us, in the things we feel God is saying or doing? How should we talk about trust to those we lead?

Learning to trust

Trust is a skill that we learn, and like most emotional skills, the foundations of our adult trust are formed in childhood and adolescence. Some of our earliest experiences teach us about trust, when we are most vulnerable and dependent on the adults who care for us. If we're lucky, those experiences help us to learn about healthy trust, in the context of secure loving relationships with people who accept us as we are and help us learn and grow well. However sometimes things are less than ideal and those early foundations are only partly formed, or feel a bit flimsy.

A second significant stage in developing our ability to trust is adolescence - and most notably then the balance shifts from the relationship we have with our adult care-givers to the increasingly important friendships around us. Adolescence is a time for the first really significant friendships - the best mates and wing men and women who we do life with, share hilarious moments with and muddle through the highs and lows of life, love and secondary school. It's normal for that to involve some highs and lows as everyone is learning how to get on with one another. We learn not just how to trust but how to be trust-worthy - and it isn't always smooth. But we know these lessons are crucial, and for some who find themselves in really difficult situations, particularly where there is persistent bullying, it takes a real toll on our ability to trust.

And of course, the instinctive way we trust varies from person to person. As does what it means to us to trust. Some personalities are very open and external. They are much more likely to share thoughts with other people, and may even feel a need to bounce their thoughts off someone else regularly without thinking much of it. Others are much more internal. Their processing space happens inside their head and much more stays right there - inside! To share something therefore takes more of an intentional decision - meaning trust can feel like more of a live, everyday issue and something they regularly make conscious decisions about.

Finally, what we're learning in trust isn't just about other people. Often overlooked is that as our ability to trust develops, one of the most important things we learn is how to trust ourselves. Trusting our own instincts, our ability to make good decisions, and learning the balance between trusting and holding back to stay safe - these are all vital skills. We learn them through trial and error - but also through wise support. The lessons we learn through the adults and friends around us, the feedback they give us and their own reaction to our emotions and instincts really matters. If your emotions have been ignored, gaslit or criticised, it's tough to learn to trust yourself.

The good news is that we can learn to trust, and develop our ability to trust whatever life stage we are at. So if you know your ability to trust has taken a beating, or could use some work, don't despair.

Trust is non-binary

As Christians and church folk, we can be guilty of being over-simplistic in the way we treat a lot of topics - and trust is no different. It's easy to talk about trust as though it is something everyone should have for everyone, all the time! And where we know people struggle with trust, it's all too easy to come across as judgemental, and tell them they should just trust people more or better. But it's important to remember that trust isn't universal - and it must be earned. Wise trust can be cautious, and the level of trust we place in different people will vary. We need to learn how to be non-binary in our trust - it isn't just that we trust some and not others, nor that we trust some with all our secrets and others with none. Trust is nuanced, balanced and evolves. James 1:19 advises us all to be quick to hear but slow to speak - and this may be good advice when it comes to trust. We should be open to relationship with others but appropriately careful when it comes to placing trust.



Taking care with trust

This means the process of building trust is often quite rightly gradual. As leaders it is tempting to try to grab people's trust with impressive displays, promising big results or coming across as all powerful, polished and impressive. But to truly trust us people need to get to know the authentic person we are - and that takes time. There are no shortcuts to healthy trust. This is particularly the case if people are vulnerable, shaken or struggling. Think about Elijah after he has been totally overwhelmed with fear and exhaustion in 1 Kings 19. It takes a long time before he is ready to build trust with the Lord again and pick himself back up. Firstly he needs to restore his physical and emotional reserves with good rest and food. Then there is a long journey before he can start to communicate well with God again. And how does the Lord choose to approach this broken, uncertain man? By demonstrating that he is not in the dramatic moments, the noise, the fuss and fluster but in a still, small, calm voice speaking through whatever life chooses to stir up. That gentle consistency is a beautiful demonstration of how we build trust: quietly, calmly, non-demandingly, as a gentle presence by someone's side.

Be wary of people who tell you to trust or put you under pressure to do so. Trust shouldn't make you feel overwhelmed, weak or fearful. It shouldn't over-ride your instincts - if you need to take it slow, do. Trust shouldn't leave you feeling controlled or manipulated, or silenced - or require you to do any of those things to other people. And trust levels vary - we don't open the same level of trust to everyone. Take Jesus' example - he had 12 friends he spent a lot of time with - but in the really intense and emotional moments he only took 3 of them with him - Peter, James and John. He didn't share everything with everyone. And of course, in Gethsemane, even they were at a distance - close enough to be supporting him (although of course, in a very human way, they fell asleep!), but not part of the intimate conversation he had with God.

As leaders we must be careful not to ask or require people to place universal trust in us. People can choose NOT to share things with us and we must trust that this might be the right decision, or an important step for them on a journey of gradually figuring out who to open up what to.

Trusting yourself

Sometimes the person we struggle most to trust is ourselves. When we have let ourselves down or acted in ways which were not what we would have hoped, when we've made mistakes or failed or it is us who have fallen, it's hard to trust ourselves again. Importantly, trusting others requires us to trust ourselves - to feel able to rely and act on our instincts about who is good for us, whose company and care will help us flourish, where to invest our energy, when to try harder and when to walk away. If you are finding trust hard with other people maybe the first step is to take a look at how you feel about yourself.

When you struggle to trust yourself, remember God believes in us even when we cannot believe in ourselves. Peter's journey in the new testament is a powerful story of a man who hoped he would be a better person than he turned out to be. In Matthew 26:35 we see Peter boldly proclaiming that he will never leave Jesus, will follow him to death if he has to. Famously, Jesus warns him in fact that very night he will deny three times even knowing him - which of course is exactly what happens. But Luke's gospel records another thing Jesus says in that earlier conversation when he warns Peter that his trust even in himself is about to be shaken. "When you have turned back" Jesus says "strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:32). Jesus knew Peter would fail and fall but he also knew he would get back up again. When trust is broken, what really matters is what happens next.





As leaders it is common to hit crises of confidence in ourselves - in our judgement or abilities, our wisdom or actions. If you're finding it hard to trust yourself, think about what you need to do to work through what has happened. Sometimes we need to learn from our mistakes, grow through times of struggle, find out something new about ourselves or about God. You may find a therapeutic space helpful for this.

Rebuilding Trust

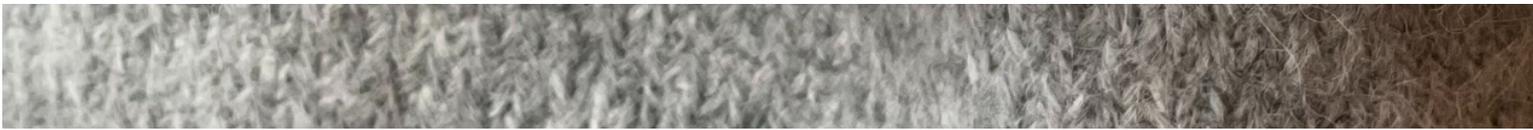
Sometimes trust is broken - and we can feel left reeling by the after-effects of being let down. Maybe the people you thought would be there for you weren't. Maybe someone you placed trust in turned out to be hiding things, or not as genuine as they seemed. You may have found yourself the victim of someone who took advantage of your trust. If you know you have good reason to struggle with trust, or a difficult history of broken trust. Its ok to take the rebuilding stage slowly. At first it may feel impossible to even contemplate trusting again - and that is ok. The initial stage of responding to trauma is all about finding absolute safety - and it is important people have time for that sense of shock and pain to settle.

When the time feels right to start to build trust, its important to remember it is a gradual, slow, process. And it isn't easy - so requires lots of space to ponder, process and think carefully about decisions that need to be made. Many people find a therapeutic space invaluable - both to learn to trust another person, in the safe boundaried space of that therapeutic time, and to explore who and how to rebuild trust with others in everyday life. Therapy can be individual - safe space for you to better understand what happened and what it means to move on well - or together with a person when a relationship has been broken. However, its important to be aware that in some situations it isn't appropriate to have joint therapy with someone - for example if there has been abuse or deliberately manipulative behaviour. If in doubt take some time on your own - and don't feel you have to rush into 'solving' something.

So what about when trust has been broken? Can and should we trust again? Here it's important to remember that there are some circumstances where trust should not be offered again in the same way. People who have a history of abuse should not be placed in situations where they are trusted again: this is to protect all those who might be vulnerable, including that person. Forgiveness does not mean that we must open up the same level of trust again. And it's important to remember abuse is not always about physical contact: emotional and spiritual abuse carry just as great an impact on those they impact. It is appropriate and important that we all show wisdom and caution where any form of abuse or control has occurred, particularly in situations where a person has been in, or seeks to continue to be in any kind of position of power or authority.

Outside of abusive circumstances, the process of rebuilding trust is slow and often challenging. Trust can only be fully restored if both parties understand and acknowledge what has been done, and can fully own what happened. This alone can be difficult and painful. All parties need to be committed to the slow and gradual restoration of trust, which is hard work. Very often this is either aided by or has to include a third party who can mediate and help all those involved journey to full understanding. Forgiveness should not ask someone who has been hurt to swallow that pain or anger at what has been done, but is about finding healthy and appropriate ways difficult emotions can be expressed and heard. Only then is it possible to consider whether any form of reconciliation and return to relationship is possible.





Anchors for Trustworthiness

Not all the responsibility for gaining trust lies with the person trusting. We all need to be aware of what it feels like to be on the other side of relationship with us - and the things we need to do to be trustworthy. Consistency is important: reliably continuing to offer what you promise. Note that this may mean you need to be careful not to promise too much - it is better to reliably do what you say you will than to promise more and let people down. Be realistic! Gentleness is also important, allowing people to find their own path and resisting the temptation to take control or push people forwards. We might encourage people, or help them figure out steps to take but the control must always be with them. And most of all authenticity means people can trust us because what they see really is what they will get. But sometimes the pressure to present something better or more perfected than reality is very strong - particularly in a social media dominated culture. Its important to put time into understanding yourself, so you can develop the ability to be authentic. And of course - trust goes both ways - as leaders we shouldn't feel under pressure to share our entire emotional selves with everyone. Making good decisions about what and how we share is an important trust skill that enables people to learn to lean on us.

Think of trust a bit like going rock climbing. Over time you learn how much weight you can lean or rest on a particular anchor - and some are stronger than others. In making good judgements about trustworthiness, it is important to recognise the difference between what is SAID and what is DONE. Someone worthy of gaining or regaining your trust demonstrates this in actions, over time. A trust-worthy person will be willing and patient in allowing you to take the time you need to let that trust develop healthily. They will not put pressure on you, rush you, or verbally require or push you to share or step forwards in trust before you are ready. Be wary when a person or system places huge pressure on appearances and you feel under pressure to trust before your instincts are settled with it.

Ultimately trust must be build on real life, not promises. Christian leader and author Steve Cuss talks about the wisdom of looking for patterns rather than potential. Ask yourself: what is the pattern here? Do not let appearances, narratives people are sharing, external pressures or the hope or promise of something good hurry you.

Trust is tricky - but so are relationships. And people do fail, and fall, and sometimes it is in the road beyond that people find something of real value, a trust that has weathered a storm, a relationship that has loved through let down and people who have been there in spite of life's roughest roads. Perhaps it is in this most of all, where the circumstances are right and trust can be rebuilt, that we need God's help most of all and his perfecting of our humanly limited ability to love (and re-love). Sometimes that agape love, the decision to love when we might not be feeling it, particularly when that feels like an act of defiance in the midst of darkness or difficulty that has drawn people apart, has to get us through.

Ultimate Trust

Human love has limits, but there is one source of love, acceptance and support we can trust entirely and know will not let us down: God. The psalms sing again and again of how we can trust God's steadfast love, through adversity, through tough times, through the seasons where other people seem against us or have let us down. Psalm 28:7 says "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me." God is 'ever-present', a constant and consistent source of help in trouble (Psalm 46:1). He is unchanging, reliable (Hebrews 13:8) - the ultimate anchor for our soul (Hebrews 6:19). That, of course, is what the chorus means - it is a prayer for us all to find a space where we can learn to place an absolute trust in the only place this is possible - in God.

But of course, that doesn't mean it will all be easy. Jesus promised us that in this world we would experience trouble and challenges. And sometimes those seem to centre on who we can trust and turn to and rely on. When we doubt ourselves or struggle to know what to do or whether our own instincts are right, Proverbs 3:5 says we can trust in God's wisdom beyond our own. Sometimes the most difficult decisions about who and where to trust need to be taken to God in prayer - perhaps time and time again. And in the process of doing so, we are promised we can experience a peace beyond our own understanding. When your brain seems to struggle to trust that it can let go of worries, handing them over to God can help us find rest.