



'Storying the leading':
curating narratives of leadership in conversation
with Vaughan S. Roberts and David Sims,
Leading by Story

Andrew Stobart (editor)

THE REVD DR ANDREW STOBART is Director of Research at Wesley House, Cambridge, and Commissioning Editor of *Holiness*.

Cambridge, UK
ajs324@cam.ac.uk

*This article has been developed from a conversation held and recorded at the Wesley House community in January 2018, as part of its regular Thursday evening Methodist Studies sessions. The session used Roberts' and Sims' recently published book *Leading by Story* to consider how leadership is embodied in ministry. Sharing stories of leadership in Wesley House's cross-cultural community led to significant insights, which arose as one particular leadership story was explored using Roberts' and Sims' central concept of 'curating stories'. This article offers the conversation as a reflective review of the book. Staff, students and friends of Wesley House present at the conversation represented many different contexts, including Methodist churches in the USA, Britain, Fiji, Hong Kong, Kenya, South Korea and Zambia.*

Leading by Story: Rethinking Church Leadership, Vaughan S. Roberts and David Sims (London: SCM Press, 2017), 256 pp, £25.00 pbk

LEADERSHIP • CURATION • CROSS-CULTURE • CONVERSATION • NARRATIVE

The value of stories

Over the past three decades, storytelling has become a key tool across a number of disciplines within theology and the social sciences. In their book *Leading by Story*, Vaughan Roberts and David Sims apply this 'narrative turn' to the concept of leadership, especially as it is understood within the Church. They note that this is an appropriate application, not only because of the prevalent understanding of the human person as *homo narrans narratur* (both a storyteller and a story), but also because the Church is specifically a community of disciples who follow Jesus, the storyteller par excellence.¹

Attending to the connection between leadership and stories – or, as Roberts and Sims pleasingly put it, 'storying the leading'² – offers a fresh approach that avoids the heroic nature of much leadership literature with its search for reliable leadership 'traits' or for the most effective psychometric combination. Stories, in contrast to traits, are able to contain multiple smaller interactions, and, crucially, allow numerous characters to play a part in leadership. Indeed, stories can themselves become 'the leader', as different people choose to embed their own actions within the story: 'The story is not just a vehicle for leadership; it is what leads.'³ In order to verbalise what kind of leadership is operative in any context, it is important to listen carefully to the stories that are being told to us, and the stories that we ourselves tell.

Engaging in cross-cultural conversation is a recognised way of exposing the values and perspectives that are otherwise difficult to see when we are only talking to people who share our assumptions. Telling stories of leadership – whether good, bad or otherwise – in a cross-cultural group setting enables us to begin to pick out the values embedded in those stories. A healthy practice, as recommended in a pastoral setting by Gordon Lynch, is to record leadership encounters verbatim in order to enable an interrogation of the interventions made, the ideas communicated and the patterns of language used.⁴ In a session at Wesley House, those gathered were invited to tell a story of leadership that had made an impression upon them. These are recorded verbatim below, and while this is second-order reflection (reflection upon reflection), it is a productive exercise to consider what themes are embedded in them as you read them:

- 'I'm in circuit ministry and within our circuit we have a leadership team which comprises the ministers and circuit stewards. We always meet in the afternoon because the circuit officers are retired and the presbyters, who have entire control over our diaries, quite like not to go out in the

evenings. A very able working-age person came to me and said, "I would love to be part of the leadership team and would love to help shape the vision of the circuit going forward." So I went to the leadership team and told them about this person who really wanted to be involved in what we do. They said, "But we would have to meet in the evening." And that was their resistance to having an able, working-age lay person involved in leadership in the church.'

- 'A similar story: I'm a Circuit Steward and the only woman officer on the team. I thought it would be nice to have another woman – and someone who is below the age of about 50 – and so I asked a capable young woman I knew if she would be prepared to become a circuit steward. She thought about it a long time, and then she came back and said "Yes". But when I brought it to the meeting of the circuit stewards, one of the stewards said, "But she has a baby! So how are we going to cope in the meeting if she brings her baby?" That was the reaction I had.'
- 'The church where I had the pleasure of working was a medium-sized church, but there were a lot of volunteers. The church office was essentially run by volunteers. One man in particular would always come in at least two or three times a week to ask if anyone wanted coffee. He was retired, and had been a very accomplished journalist for the major local paper, reviewing art, music and other entertainment. He would serve by going to get coffee for anyone who wanted it. He would be the first person to greet people coming to the church. He would also very dutifully and kindly edit the worship bulletin, and fold all 160 copies of the bulletin each week. He was an amazing person, who passed away recently. He was a very durable saint.'
- 'I have something to share about one of the ministers in the church in my country [a southern African state]. He's retired now, but I want to share the story of when he disobeyed an instruction from the President of the country. It was common practice in the 1980s, if a minister of the government died – whether he or she was a Christian or not – the State would simply instruct one of the churches and say, "Conduct a service for this person. It will take place, so get organised." One of the government ministers died, and the office of the President instructed that this particular church, which could accommodate about three to four thousand people, should organise the service. The minister of the church received a phone call from the office of the President to say, "Would you

prepare a church service for this government minister tomorrow. He is being given a state funeral at your church.” The pastor asked for the name of the official who had died, and when he was told, he said, “Let me first check through my records and see if this person is a communicant member.” The policy of the national church was that the body of the deceased could not be taken into a church if that person was not a communicant member; those were the regulations. This particular government minister was not on the roll of the church, so the pastor responded saying that he did not qualify to be brought into the church, and the church service could not be conducted there. However, the state representatives insisted that this was an instruction from the President, so he should just go ahead and obey. So the minister said “OK”, but the following day he locked up the church building, and left. As far as the government was concerned, everything was arranged, so when the body was brought up to the church building, there was confusion because they found the door locked. Even the state President was there. So they got the police to come and break into the church, and the service went ahead. Afterwards the President instructed the leadership of the national church to deal with the minister of the church. That very night, the minister was transferred out from that congregation to a very far-away place. I’m just sharing that story to look at the cost of his actions, whether they were brave, bold, courageous or fundamental!

- ‘This story made a profound impression upon me: it must have been about 1956 when our very first long-playing record player was delivered to our house. Of course, the new player couldn’t play our old records, so we had to buy our very first long-playing record. My parents bought a record of the songs from the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *The Gondoliers*. In *The Gondoliers* there is a character called the Duke of Plaza-Toro, and there is a song about what a wonderful duke and general he is. There is only one line that I remember from this song, but at the age of six or seven it made a huge impression on me. It said, “He led his regiment from behind, he found it less exciting.” I have a feeling that this line has actually shaped my style of leadership throughout my ministry!’
- ‘The principal of a Methodist theological college in the South Pacific really impressed me as a leader. He lives in one of the most conservative societies that I’ve ever encountered and, as principal of the college, acts like a chief. He runs the college to make sure that in every detail it fits in with the protocol, ritual and tradition of the local culture. At the same

time, he is leading the college on a path of excellence in academic work and is being quietly subversive. For instance, he is bringing people in to run seminars on postcolonial biblical study and is making suggestions about ways in which women can move into leadership in the Church. He says "While I can't change the culture on my own, I can do something to make things a little better."

- 'My story is of a minister who recently requested to be moved, even though he was in a good circuit that had plenty of resources to pay him well, which is rare in my country in East Africa. He is serving with another minister, who is his superintendent. When I asked why he wanted to be transferred, he told me that he doesn't want to reach a point where he would disagree with the superintendent minister, which might taint his ministry for the future. He told me that he had better leave that circuit and go to another where he would feel comfortable serving, without any issues with the superintendent. I asked him if he was sure he was not the problem, and then he shared with me the reasons he had at first been reluctant to share. Finally I told him, "Fine, if you feel that is what is going to make your ministry good, then so be it." He replied, "I would like to continue serving my present circuit" – it is very lively (and in fact he is loved by the people) – "but I mean to sacrifice this and leave for the sake of my ministry." I prayed for him that when the time comes he will leave properly and comfortably.'
- 'My story is from East Belfast, where I was minister of a church for one year. During that year the Boys' Brigade celebrated their eightieth anniversary and we had a big celebration. After the service there was a supper and I was walking around, talking to all the old boys of the Boys' Brigade who'd come back. Many of these men were very successful in their careers, and by the end of the evening my cassock pockets were full of cheques that they wanted to give to the church to say thank you for what the Boys' Brigade had done for them. That evening a story emerged of a Boys' Brigade leader who, throughout the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which lasted more than 30 years, would drive the church minibus around every night to transport boys from the community to activities connected with the Boys' Brigade. Those boys, who were now men, kept saying to me, "If it had not been for him, I would have been in the paramilitaries. I might even be dead by now." A day or two later I told this man, who was now a church steward, that I'd heard all these stories, and I said, "That's amazing!" And he said, "Well, anybody would have done

that." And I said, "No, they didn't, you did!" He was actually awarded the MBE for that work a couple of years ago. He had no idea of the worth and the impact of the way he had led that community to keep their children out of the paramilitaries.'

- 'I want to tell you a story. My friend led a mission trip to a Central African state. He went with his generator and his PowerPoint and his very slick talk to tribal groups in villages in Central Africa. They went as a team and they set up their tent and generator outside the village and my friend waited for people to come and sit where they'd provided some seating. The first day came and went, and no one came. The second day came and went, and no one came. On the third day he thought, "Well, I might as well make use of the generator." So he got his hair clippers to clip his hair. As he started, some small boys came out of the village to see what he was doing. They sat on the seat and pointed to their hair. And he thought, "I don't want to cut their hair – it's never been cut. It will be like cutting a bird's nest." But then he thought, "Well, I somehow have to communicate with these people." So he started to cut their hair, and as soon as he started to cut the first boy's hair there was a queue right back to the village. He was thinking, "My poor clippers! They will never be the same again after cutting all this hair that's never been cut before!" The next day, the chief came out of the village, got in the queue and sat on the seat. My friend thought, "This is the chief." So he asked, "What can I do for you?" And the chief replied, "Cut my hair." So he cut the hair of the chief, and when it was done, the chief said to him, "What have you come here for?" He replied, "I came to tell you about the love of Jesus." The chief said, "Now you have cut our hair, we will listen to you."

By paying attention to the way and words in which these stories were told, a number of themes began to emerge, which can be understood as the values that have informed why these stories were chosen as stories that in some way exemplify leadership. The following themes were initially identified:

- 'One thing I noticed is the role that *humility* plays in leadership. Several stories had that theme. So, for example, if the church volunteer were to know that we spoke his name in this context of leadership, he would be shocked – he would not believe that we would think of him. But God uses very humble people doing small tasks to make a difference in people's lives.'

- 'We talked about *risk*, being willing to go to a place where you're not going to be in control.'
- 'We talked about leadership being *gifted*. In other words, it is not something that we assume ourselves, but rather something which is granted by the church or whatever other organisation we lead.'
- 'We talked about the potential misuse of power, and the *responsibility* of using leadership to make bridges between different camps. In a way, the stories illustrated how to bend the rules when needs arise.'
- 'We talked about the way we all made up our minds and came to our conclusions about the *motivations* for how people acted (or didn't act) in the stories. The more we talked about it, the more we realised that there were far more possibilities underneath the surface than the ones we leapt on when we first heard the story.'
- 'We recognised a *diversity* of leadership styles, whether it's a chief leading from the front, or, like the song lyric, from behind, or a kind of servant leadership which would not see itself as leadership but which is yet still a style of leadership.'

Multi-storied stories

Storytelling is a powerful heuristic tool to examine leadership. As we have seen above, the particular way a story of leadership is told will inevitably foreground one or more themes or values while obscuring others. One of the contributions made by Roberts and Sims is their nuanced approach to such stories. Stories can be told about beliefs, buildings and people; about the past, present and future; to protect identity, encourage transformation, or rally supporters. Importantly, the nature of stories means they are rarely monolithic. However much we may resist the notion, as Roberts and Sims insist, 'We live simultaneously in many different stories.'⁵ Developing narrative leaders whom we trust to tell stories that include us and the things that are important to us is only possible when we recognise that we inhabit a kind of 'narrative ecology', in which different stories can live alongside each other, interacting in convergence, healthy contest and fruitful clarification.⁶ The possibility that stories may be told differently, to foreground different themes or values, provides the space in which leadership can exercise its gift to enable a community or organisation to thrive.

Chapter 5, 'Who Owns the Story?', contains significant insights that inform the development of narrative leadership in the remainder of the book. Roberts and Sims note that stories lend themselves to being polyvocal and multi-authored, meaning that their ownership is often unclear. As a story is passed on and told by a variety of people, it can in fact take on a life of its own, moving out of the close control of the original narrator. Such stories, which 'refuse to be disciplined';⁷ are often the most exciting and interesting stories for all concerned. However, they can be troublesome for those who are seeking to lead narratively in their context or organisation, because stories that invite participation and interaction cannot be tightly monitored or regulated. This is an issue worth noting and exploring. Narrative leadership 'works best' when the story has 'a measure of independence from the person who is telling it'.⁸ So, narrative leaders require a generous dose of *humility* – disciplined attentiveness to the stories that are being told, retold, and reshaped in the retelling by others, as well as oneself.

The concept that Roberts and Sims reach for to summarise this complex process is 'curation'. Leading by story is compared with curating an exhibition:

The art of curating is not only the selection of objects, but the creation of a story that puts those objects together, that turns them into a narrative. So curating is itself a way of crafting the story, both by the selection and encouragement of some elements of the story, and in giving a plot line to the way that the elements of the stories are seen together.⁹

Curation, by its nature, recognises the broad narrative ecology mentioned above. There are many different kinds of story that might sit alongside one another and interact in meaningful ways. Roberts and Sims develop an ecology that acknowledges three main genres of story that are present in churches: interpretive, identity and improvised. Interpretive stories give a big picture of the mission and work of a church. Identity stories provide self-understanding in particular local contexts. Improvised stories are 'stories being cultivated or improvised in local churches which – depending upon specific climate and conditions – can grow in a wide variety of different ways'.¹⁰ Over three subsequent chapters, these genres are further subdivided:

Interpretive stories:

- Theological narratives
- Ecclesial narratives
- Liturgical narratives

Identity stories:

Historical narratives
Organisational narratives
Personal narratives

Improvised stories:

Finance
Architecture
Governance
Pastoral
Mission
Education
Media
Art
Untended narratives

In Chapter 9, Roberts and Sims offer a case study of the introduction of Natural Church Development (described as a 'managerialist approach to ministry'¹¹) to a Church of England diocese, in which Roberts himself participated with his congregation. Their experience of the process is helpfully mapped on to the narrative ecology delineated above, and significant gaps in the NCD approach are identified by the kinds of stories that were left underdeveloped or omitted entirely. By contrast, where the NCD approach generated fruitful results in Roberts' local context, this is attributed to the more narratively holistic way in which it was implemented there. In particular, five practical points about leading by story are illustrated by this worked example:

1. Leaders need to be aware of stories circulating.
2. Leaders can modify negative stories.
3. People are empowered if they can contribute to the story.
4. Leaders need to know that all their actions can become stories.
5. Leaders recognise multivocality.¹²

A curated leadership story

Recognising the rich ecology of narratives that populates the landscape of our churches is one of the significant lessons to be learned from Roberts' and Sims' book. In our exploration of leadership narratives at the session at Wesley House, we tested the fruitfulness of this approach by choosing one of the stories that

had been told, considering the different narratives that were at play within it. Considering the stories that were present in the situation – and those that were hidden or absent – led to a careful interrogation of the leadership that had been offered, and stimulated a more holistic, contextually aware approach. The story we considered was that of the minister who refused to officiate at a state funeral. Here, the stories identified by the Wesley House group have been recorded according to the narrative ecology outlined above.

- *The story of the deceased (Identity Story>Personal Narrative)*
The story of the government minister who had died was notable for its absence in this situation. It was pointed out that the deceased's wishes had not been part of the consideration of the funeral arrangements, since it was government policy at the time that any government minister who had died, Christian or not, should have a Christian state service. This person had not, to the knowledge of the narrator, been to any church in his life as a regular worshipper.
- *The story of government policy (Improvised Story>Governance Narrative)*
The 'disappearance' of the personal narrative of the deceased indicates the precedence of the story of the government and its policy of state funerals. This is an improvised story because it arose in the particular circumstances that prevailed at the time: while there were many stories of government corruption circulating at that time, the Church and State were not in conflict at that moment, providing a rationale for the state funerals to be conducted; while all Christian denominations were included in the policy, this particular church was used regularly because of its ability to accommodate a large congregation. Following this incident, the government began to use a different church building instead, and this church was no longer approached to conduct state funerals.
- *The echo of a story (Identity Story>Historical Narrative)*
This incident prompted one British participant in the conversation to reflect on the only state funeral they had witnessed in person: the state funeral of Winston Churchill in 1965. Churchill was not a Christian, and did not express sympathy with the Christian faith, and yet St Paul's Cathedral must have been approached in a very similar way to the church in our leadership story. It is easy for us to balk at the practice of this southern African state; however, it has formed part of the history of the United Kingdom, and other places, too.

- *The story of funeral practice (Interpretive Story>Liturgical Narrative)*
The story of a church that has a policy of only holding services for people on the roll is of significant interest. This practice was brought into sharp relief by the experience of one participant who that day had conducted funeral services in a church for two people who were not members of the church, neither of whom would have expressed an explicit Christian faith. Further conversation clarified the practice of the church in the leadership story. The national policy was that if a person who was not a believer died, then their body could not be taken into the church building for a funeral service. This policy stood, even when the close family members were believers. In that case, support would be offered through prayers at the home, but no church funeral service would be conducted.
- *The minister's espoused rationale (Improvised Story>Pastoral Narrative)*
The minister in this leadership story was basing his actions on the notion of justice in applying the church's policy. According to our narrator, he had explained his rationale in the following way: 'For the sake of justice, if I have denied some members of my congregation who have lost their dear ones, saying that the body of your relative is not going to pass through the church, then why should I allow this person simply because he is a government minister? I cannot do that for the sake of justice.' The minister was bringing a wealth of other pastoral narratives into play, weighing the demands of the situation against integrity towards the other stories he had been part of over his ministry in that place. And he stood his ground, even when instructed by the state President, arguing that there were no exceptions in the policy for government ministers.
- *The story as kingdom parable (Interpretive Story>Theological Narrative)*
The new insight brought by the preceding information began to transform our understanding of this leadership narrative, by highlighting the theme of justice towards other people. Now, the stories of other people – 'little people' – who have had the church's policy applied to their loved ones are recognised, and it is perceived important that their stories are not to be diminished by changing the rules for someone else, just because that person is significant in the government's eyes. As one participant notes, 'I think for me it suddenly becomes something of a parable. I could almost imagine reading it in the Gospels!'
- *The congregation's story (Identity Story>Organisational Narrative)*
It is interesting to consider the response of the minister's congregation

as this story unfolded. They apparently had no issue with the decision that he had made, since they had all in some way been affected by the policy in the past. When they understood that their minister had been pressured to bend the rules for someone 'important', and that he had instead stood his ground, they were adamant that the minister had been right: 'The minister is correct that we are all equal in the eyes of God.' This view was shared by other members of the clerical fraternity too, who had also upheld the policy in their own churches. The ministry of the church 'organisation' had been shaped by this policy over many years, and the minister in question was now throwing light on an ill-considered attempt to undermine it.

- *The story of the Church's relationship with the State (Interpretive Story> Ecclesial Narrative)*

The actions of this minister had repercussions because the national church leaders viewed the incident through the lens of the Church–State relationship. There was concern that his subversive actions would reflect badly on the Church, especially if it were perceived that the Church sanctioned what he had done. Therefore, the national Church moved quickly to discipline the minister, responding also to the request of the State that the minister be transferred immediately. The Church could not readily dismiss or discharge the minister, since he had in fact only been upholding their own policy; instead, they removed him from this prestigious church and sent him to a far-flung rural appointment. The minister reluctantly agreed to the move, but was clearly unhappy, exclaiming that it showed the Church 'was a Church led by cowards'. In his mind, the repercussions showed that the church leaders were operating under the State's tutelage, rather than as an autonomous Church whose freedom from interference was protected by the Constitution. The failure of the Church to challenge the government's attitude therefore indicated a more syncretist operant relationship.

- *Future stories (Improvised Story>Untended Narrative)*

Having considered the various narrative strands that were present at the time of the situation, it is interesting to think about the 'future stories' that encapsulate the expectations of the characters at the time, and the reality of what became of those expectations. So, for instance, the national church leaders anticipated that their disciplinary action against the minister would regain the trust of the State; but, in actual fact, subsequent state funerals were held in another denomination's building, and didn't

return to this church, despite the building's merits as a venue. The minister's own narrative was dramatically impacted by the incident. From an initial move to a different province, he was supported by the national Church to study overseas for a doctorate, and then seconded to another national Church for theological education. It could be argued that, rather than being curtailed, his scope of influence expanded as a result of this situation. These may be characterised as 'untended narratives' since they recount the consequences of the choices made by both Church and minister that were not perceived at the time.

There are undoubtedly other strands that could be extracted from this densely woven narrative. However, the value of the approach offered by Roberts and Sims is not merely in the identification of these varied strands, but especially in noting the way in which they were curated together. There are, of course, two levels at play. First, and most immediately, there is the way in which this leadership moment was narrated to the group at Wesley House. Comparing the initial telling with the list of further narrative strands identified above provides an indication of the leadership themes that were important to the initial narrator, and those that were hidden or absent. This brings into focus cultural differences in the aims and practice of leadership: for instance, the story of the deceased man and his family, which was absent from the initial telling, was considered to be of crucial significance for the discussion group members who had experience of ministering in the British context. Noting this in turn challenged both assumptions: the one is challenged to consider where room might be found for the deceased and the grieving in a story that is otherwise about Church–State relations; the other is challenged to look beyond immediate pastoral concerns to the influence of funeral practice on the wider church community's thinking and being. 'Storying the leadership' is thus an important reflective tool to interrogate one's own leadership priorities and assumptions. Whose story is being told? Whose story is being muted? What themes are highlighted or obscured by the way I curate stories of leadership?

Second, reflecting on this leadership *narrative* in turn provides a platform from which to interrogate and reform leadership *practice* itself. This is one of the most significant contributions to be developed from Roberts' and Sims' book. Observing the gaps in a particular curation of a leadership narrative sends the reflective leader back into practice, alert to the different stories they might now want to 'curate into' the story they are leading.

Conclusion: leadership as curation

In order to apply Roberts' and Sims' work to their own leadership practice, the group at Wesley House was asked to reflect on alternative ways of responding to the narrated situation that would have led to a differently curated leadership story. This led to three significant observations that were considered to be conclusions drawn from the discussion, and areas for further reflection and research.

First was the role that *consultation* could have played in this situation. As one group member said, referring to their own experience of curating art:

When you curate something, as I have, you are conscious of some factors, but there are other factors of which you are not conscious. I wonder if there are unconscious dimensions to this situation to which the minister himself was not alert. So, for instance, he may or may not have been alert to his instinct not to consult, but it seems to me that that is a feature of the way he curated the stories – he acted out of his own principles, and did not consult to find out what perspectives other people had on the situation.

Consultation may have brought new insight, or at least a greater awareness of the other narratives at play. Wise curation acknowledges the need to consult with others whose stories are intertwined in the situation. Leaders who 'lead by story' are thus not simply good storytellers; they are also good facilitators and listeners: 'Leading needs to involve enabling people to tell their stories, hearing the stories that are being told, and enabling others to hear the stories too.'¹³ Leadership is therefore not a set of principles to follow, but rather a skill to cultivate – a wise marshalling of the various narrative strands that are present in any moment in order to curate a faithfully innovative story for the future. By consulting and learning from a wide range of perspectives, especially cross-cultural, the repertoire of possible narratives available to a leader expands, increasing the opportunity for effective leadership.

The group identified a further important leadership exercise: the *rehearsal* of leadership narratives. Had the minister in this story rehearsed what he was about to do with others in leadership around him, his eventual response might have been helpfully modified or moderated. Rehearsing a leadership response in a safe, intentional context helps to avoid distorting the experiences of those we are leading, and to reduce unintended consequences. It is one of the many

things that can usefully be included in the practice of regular pastoral supervision, which is currently being implemented in the British Methodist Church.¹⁴

Finally, understanding leadership as curation highlights the *shared holding* of an organisation's or community's story. So often leadership literature focuses on the person or persons who hold responsibility, who can reasonably talk about 'my leadership' or 'our leadership'. Leaders who are curators, however, are keenly aware that the stories they curate do not belong to them. In other words, leadership is not owned, but *held*. On behalf of others, the leader listens and tells and retells – curates – the various narrative strands that exist in a situation, so that those others may ultimately find themselves again in the new, shared narrative.

Vaughan Roberts and David Sims have offered a profound insight into the nature of leadership that both provokes and requires further reflection and experimentation. *Leading by Story* is an eminently readable book, full of vivid examples and quotations that locate the argument in the wider leadership literature. It would make an excellent resource for leadership teams seeking to explore and expand their own understanding and practice.

Two further comments may be made by way of review of Roberts' and Sims' book, as a result of our shared reflection at Wesley House. First, the conversation that Wesley House hosted was made possible only because of its cross-cultural richness. As noted earlier, intentional cross-cultural dialogue is a reliable way of both observing and moving beyond the hidden assumptions that we often operate with in a particular setting. Cross-cultural stories do not figure prominently in this book, which is essentially located in a Western and Northern church context. How might we be more intentional about hearing *global* stories of leadership? Where might we access them if the kind of cross-cultural conversation enabled at Wesley House is not on offer to us locally? How much energy are we willing to give to find a range of conversation partners who can help us to consider and curate the leadership that our churches (and other organisations) need?

Second, Roberts and Sims are to be encouraged to be bolder in holding out their work as a tool for church leadership today. In their conclusion they note: 'In offering a narrative understanding of leadership in churches, we are not saying that here, at last, is the true understanding of how to lead.' Their motivation is, of course, commendable; they do not wish to claim a false monopoly of the field, and so they simply wish to add narrative leadership 'as

a contribution to the menu of ideas and options that you bring with you to situations in which you wish to lead or to support leadership'.¹⁵ This might, however, claim *too little* for the role that narrative leadership could play as a heuristic tool for leaders today. Leaders as 'curators' may well be better placed to receive insights from other leadership styles than if curation were simply one in a menu of many equally valued approaches. The concepts of curation and narrative ecology helpfully open up space in which varied kinds of leadership can be recognised, explored, critiqued and re-membered as part of the ongoing life of the Church. 'Storying the leading', then, surely, is essential for all leadership today, if the Church is to be self-aware, globally conversant, and open to the many gifts that God gives through others.

Perhaps the most telling commendation of this book is the observation that Roberts' and Sims' idiom – leader as curator – has trickled into the shared discourse of Wesley House. It is not uncommon to hear it used in conversation, in sermon or in committee.¹⁶ While this is by no means the most prominent conclusion of Roberts and Sims themselves, it is the notion that has stuck most firmly with the group who told stories of leadership together that night in January. 'Curation' is a profoundly generative idea, capable of steering leadership discourse in a new direction, with new language and fresh possibilities. In the midst of today's 'narrative turn', the challenge for leaders set by Roberts and Sims is not merely to understand the stories by which people give meaning to their lives but also to become competent and confident curators of these stories, as so many items in the exhibition of God's good news.

Notes

1. Vaughan S. Roberts and David Sims, *Leading by Story: Rethinking Church Leadership*, London: SCM Press, 2017, pp. 24–25.
2. See Chapter 2, 'Leading the Stories and Storying the Leading'.
3. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 49.
4. G. Lynch, *Pastoral Care and Counselling*, London: Sage, 2002, p. 27.
5. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 57.
6. This concept is taken from Yiannis Gabriel, 'Narrative Ecologies and the Role of Counter-Narratives', in S. Frandsen, T. Kuhn and M. W. Lundholt (eds), *Counter-Narratives and Organization*, London: Routledge, 2016. See Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 70–72.
7. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 73.
8. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 82.
9. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 86.
10. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 125.
11. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 151.

12. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 169–176.
13. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 199.
14. For an example of 'rehearsal' within the context of pastoral supervision, see Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook*, 2nd edn, London: SCM Press, 2015, pp. 152–156.
15. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 181.
16. Or even, thanks to the Principal, on BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day', 22 January 2018.

