

# Outside the Box... with Adele



**Adele Blakebrough reveals the lessons about leadership that can be learned from the life of a much-loved London priest**

**F**ive hundred yards from my house is the ancient church of St Mary's Rotherhithe. It was from this historic and beautiful peninsula on the south side of the River Thames that the Mayflower set sail for America. The captain of the ship is buried somewhere beneath the church.

I'm not an Anglican, but when we moved to Rotherhithe three years ago I fell in love with the place. Not only the building, the work of a pupil of Christopher Wren, but also a remarkable and diverse community of people – from first generation West African immigrants to company directors and dockland characters. But the biggest character of all was the big, red-faced parish priest, known to everyone as Father Nick.

When we moved in, Father Nick was already in his 27th year of service. A literate man, with a gift for poetry, he was also a one-man tour guide and Neighbourhood Watch scheme. One evening we found him in conversation with a gang of youngsters – the sort who like to roar around the narrow streets on illegal motor scooters. 'I was just saying to them,' he told us, 'to be sure to let me know if they saw anyone near the church looking at all suspicious.' It was his way of co-opting the most unlikely security officers to his cause.

He understood profoundly how important it was to be constant in ministering to people; many testify to his faithfulness. This was so much part of his character that we all relied on his constancy. The regularity of his habits also ensured that he was very well known in a number of local pubs. He had the unusual gift of being able to meander in his Sunday homilies between the state of the church finances, the latest bureaucratic outrage of the local council and the nature of meditation.

What a shock then to find that within a few days of returning from our summer holidays he had been found dead in his home.

As a minister myself, I've seen plenty of funerals, but nothing to beat the turn-out for Father Nick's. On a Friday morning, the church, the churchyard and nearby streets were packed; people stood, in silence, for an hour and a half.

One tribute came from Simon Hughes, our constituency MP, who confirmed the range of Father Nick's civic influence through his work in schools and countless other places. Nick's friend Father Simon pointed out that, like most real saints, Nick had never progressed up the church hierarchy. Another priest spoke of Nick as the Great Connector, drawing people of all ages, races and

social backgrounds together with his mischievous blend of humour and concern. Around Father Nick we could all unite.

Today everyone in Rotherhithe will tell you that we have lost a great leader. What do people mean when they say that? I think they mean that the best leaders are the least visible, enabling others to own the vision and the purpose for them. A great leader doesn't boss you about; he gives voice to what you feel. It's only when such a leader disappears that we sense the foundations start to creak.

Is that what's happening in politics now as the Blair-Brown drama moves into its final act? Will there be a big hole in our lives when Tony Blair stands down?

Whatever you may think about Blair's policies on, say, Iraq, there's no doubt that in his almost ten years in Downing Street the social sector has done well. This is not to say we haven't encountered difficulties or that our achievements are down to the political climate, but under Blair we've been taken seriously, enjoyed support on some crucial issues and been given opportunities to grow.

I'm no political expert, but I gather that both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown see themselves as part of a 'progressive consensus', one to which, it seems, David Cameron also aspires. That, I'm sure, helps explain why all three of the big political parties have gone out of their way to declare their support for social enterprise.

We certainly shouldn't take it for granted that this will continue, though there's every chance that it will, so long as we think clearly and make our arguments strongly.

The success of social enterprise is built upon something much bigger than any individual act of political leadership, but I think we should recognise the part that Tony Blair has played in helping create the conditions in which social enterprise has thrived.

The hole that Blair will leave in our national life when he steps down may not strike the same emotional chord for you as Father Nick's death has for me. But we shouldn't be cynical about good leadership, especially in politics.

Without the connections that great leaders make and the voice that they give to our concerns, communities and countries don't know where they're going.

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