

What do people in the Church of England understand by the term Vulnerable Leadership?

A qualitative study of attitudes to vulnerable leadership from within the Church of England

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The Queen's Foundation for the degree of Masters in Theology, Mission and Ministry.

August 2022

The Queen's Foundation

ABSTRACT

This study explored how people in the Church of England define Vulnerable Leadership. Having reviewed literature on leadership and vulnerability, I adopted an inductive, qualitative methodology employing a mixed method design, which included questionnaires and interviews, to gain insights from clergy and laity within one Diocese in the Church of England. The study concluded that whilst the term Vulnerable Leadership is ambiguous, participants were still able to define the term and identified a number of characteristics: Vulnerable Leadership is collaborative; requires a leader to have more than good communication skills as they also need the ability to listen well. In addition, whilst Vulnerable Leadership was associated with weakness, participants suggested that this was not necessarily detrimental to effective leadership.

Chapter One introduces the research study. Chapter Two situates the topic of research within a wider context, exploring the development of leadership theory and considers the ways in which vulnerability has come to be seen as a positive and essential attribute for effective leadership. Chapter Three describes the research methodology: the underlying philosophy, data collection and analysis methods, methodological limitations and reflexivity. Chapter Four summarises and analyses the results of the data, leading into a more detailed discussion of the data (including theological reflection) in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six I reflect on the conclusions drawn from this research study, which suggest that VL offers a viable and appropriate leadership style for the current challenges that face the Church.

Whilst much has been written on leadership and there is an increasing body of literature around vulnerability, little empirical work has been done on Vulnerable Leadership in a Church context. The research highlighted a number of implications and I suggest that there is a theological imperative for all Church leaders to embrace Vulnerable Leadership within their own leadership practice, which will enhance their leadership and lead to a more fruitful and flourishing Church.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a development in leadership theory from the business world¹ as well as from within the Church² that believes that vulnerability is a key characteristic of effective leadership³ and that the traditional autocratic leadership style is no longer sufficient for our rapidly changing society⁴. For Christian writers such as Herrick and Mann⁵ and Bolsinger⁶, vulnerability is a leadership imperative, especially for Christian leadership.

Historically the term ‘vulnerability’ has had negative connotations (for example, a person being defenceless against external factors and in need of protection) and been associated with the idea of weakness or deficiency. However, thanks to the work of Brene Brown⁷ this has been challenged and there is now a more positive attitude towards vulnerability. “Blessed are the vulnerable . . . for theirs will be a leadership of freedom, creativity, and community”⁸.

I became interested in this development because of the mixed reactions I encountered when practicing vulnerable leadership (VL⁹) in a Church context. This led me to question if vulnerability and leadership are concomitant and whether it is incumbent of the Church to

¹ Brad Circone, ‘The New Ability Is Vulnerability: The Courage Attribute Of Great Leaders And Their Brands’, Forbes, accessed 8 August 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/09/08/the-new-ability-is-vulnerability-the-courage-attribute-of-great-leaders-and-their-brands/>. Accessed 14/7/22.

² Vanessa Herrick and Ivan Mann, *Jesus Wept: Reflections on Vulnerability in Leadership* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1998).

³ Justin Grossman, ‘Vulnerability Is Not A Weakness, It’s Core To Effective Leadership’, Forbes, 3 November 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/03/11/vulnerability-is-not-a-weakness-its-core-to-effective-leadership/>. Accessed 10/8/22.

⁴ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2019). Kindle edition.

⁵ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*.

⁶ Tod E. Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020).

⁷ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, First trade paperback printing (New York, New York: Avery, 2015).

⁸ Catherine Llewelyn-Evans, ‘Blessed Are the Vulnerable . . .’, Church Times, 5 October 2019, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/10-may/faith/faith-features/blessed-are-the-vulnerable>. Accessed 10/8/22.

⁹ Vulnerable Leadership will be abbreviated to VL

embrace VL leadership more openly as a mainstream leadership practice, rather than it being something 'done by leaders on the fringe' who are a bit quirky. I believe VL is important because of the way in which it does not seek to dominate or control. Being open and honest can create deeper relationships with people, where they can be more open and honest about who they are. Therefore, given the mixed reactions, I wanted to understand how people defined VL for themselves and whether there was a discrepancy between their definition of VL and my own.

The aim of this study is to facilitate a discussion around VL and gain a deeper awareness of how it is defined by people within the Church of England based on their personal experiences and/or the meanings they have assigned to VL.

By asking participants to respond to the research question, 'What do people in the Church of England understand by the term VL?', the research objectives are to explore what participants understand by the term VL, what participants perceive as key characteristics of VL and for participants to identify strengths and weaknesses of this leadership style.

There are a number of limitations to this study. Due to practical restrictions for this dissertation (time and word count) the research will be conducted in one Diocese in the Church of England and limited to three sample groups. In addition, for the above reasons, I have chosen not to conduct a comparative study between clergy and laity, nor have I explored the role that gender may play in terms of influencing a person's leadership style. These would be valuable areas for future research.

Another limitation, was that I chose not to provide the participants with a definition of VL, which was a risk because if people had not heard the term before then it might lead to them not answering the questions or questionnaire. However I felt it was a risk worth taking because I

wanted to try and tease out what other people understood VL to mean for themselves, without being influenced by my definition.

Given the significant challenges facing the Church, it is an apposite time to be exploring and contributing to a discussion around leadership practice in the Church, where we develop our leadership orthodoxy so that VL is taken more seriously in terms of leadership orthopraxis. This piece of research will contribute to the body of knowledge on VL within the Church and help address the shortage of empirical research in this area.

To achieve the research aim and objectives I have reviewed existing literature pertaining to leadership theory and vulnerability before discussing the methodology employed for this research. The results and a brief analysis of the data have been presented, followed by a critical and theological discussion of four key findings that I identified from the data (i) the term VL is ambiguous, ii) VL is collaborative, iii) VL embodies strength in weakness, and iv) VL involves active listening. Finally I will conclude by providing an overview of the research study, its limitations and recommendations for the 'next steps'.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wealth of literature on leadership and the importance of vulnerability as an essential characteristic in leadership but little literature on VL per se, which suggests that this is an emerging field. I have therefore located my research within the wider context, drawing on literature that focusses on leadership theory and the concept of vulnerability, from which a discussion around the term VL can take place and which forms the context for my research.

2.1 Introduction

Vulnerability appears across different disciplines, such as business^{10 11}, social sciences (influenced by the work of Brene Brown¹²), and the Church (e.g. Nouwen¹³, Herrick and Mann¹⁴): they share the common belief that vulnerability is a necessary characteristic of leadership, because of the way in which it fosters “connection, curiosity and new considerations”¹⁵.

Organisations are recognising that there is a need for human connection which is developed through open and honest encounters, where people are able to be themselves (authentic) rather than projecting an image¹⁶. Brown¹⁷, a significant contributor to sociological research on vulnerability, notes that vulnerability is at the heart of “human communication and

¹⁰ Laura Garnett, ‘Being A Vulnerable Leader Is More Important Now Than Ever Before—This Will Inspire You To Practice It’, Forbes, 16 July 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lauragarnett/2020/07/16/being-a-vulnerable-leader-is-more-important-now-than-ever-beforethis-will-inspire-you-to-practice-it/>. Accessed 14/7/22.

¹¹ Emma Seppälä, ‘What Bosses Gain by Being Vulnerable’, *Harvard Business Review*, 11 December 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/12/what-bosses-gain-by-being-vulnerable>. Accessed 8/8/22.

¹² Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

¹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, 1st Image ed (New York, NY: Image Books, 02).

¹⁴ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*.

¹⁵ Brad Circone, ‘The New Ability Is Vulnerability: The Courage Attribute Of Great Leaders And Their Brands’, Forbes, 8 August 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/09/08/the-new-ability-is-vulnerability-the-courage-attribute-of-great-leaders-and-their-brands/>. Accessed 14/7/22.

¹⁶ Seppälä, ‘What Bosses Gain by Being Vulnerable’.

¹⁷ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

connection”¹⁸ – where leaders need to “dare to show up and ... be seen”¹⁹. However, it is also recognised that vulnerability is not without its risks. Brown²⁰ writes in length about this, noting that courage is needed because of the way in which leaning into our vulnerability means we have to “embrace the messy side of life, venturing into the unknown”²¹. Lopez²² articulates this paradox of vulnerability (from a psychological perspective) as “a complicated dance between the possibility of exposure to attack and the chance for deeper human connection”²³.

2.2 Vulnerability Defined

Over the last thirty five years, the definition and subsequent meaning of vulnerability has undergone a significant evolution²⁴, becoming a multifaceted concept that is embraced in a variety of leadership contexts, including the Church (as seen in the work of Nouwen²⁵ and Herrick and Mann²⁶).

The term vulnerability has been widely associated with risk: being ‘vulnerable to’ personal and environmental factors²⁷ where a person has little to no control of their personal circumstances. Safeguarding policies have used the term ‘vulnerable adults’²⁸ to describe “individuals or groups who are deemed to need extra protection: for example, children, the

¹⁸ Brown, 12.

¹⁹ Brown, 2.

²⁰ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

²¹ Brown, 10.

²² Stephanie O Lopez, ‘Vulnerability in Leadership: The Power of the Courage to Descend’, *Industrial-Organizational Psychology Dissertations*, 1 January 2018, 80, https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1015&context=iop_etd. Accessed 13/7/22.

²³ Lopez, 3.

²⁴ Emily Havrilla, ‘Defining Vulnerability’, *Madridge Journal of Nursing* 2 (24 August 2017): 63, <https://doi.org/10.18689/mjn-1000111>. Accessed 11/7/22.

²⁵ Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*.

²⁶ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*.

²⁷ Havrilla, ‘Defining Vulnerability’, 63.

²⁸ Office of the Public Guardian, ‘Safeguarding Policy: Protecting Vulnerable Adults’, GOV.UK, accessed 8 August 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-policy-protecting-vulnerable-adults>. Accessed 8/8/22.

elderly, those who are physically or mentally handicapped²⁹ - although the term vulnerable adult is now been changed to 'adults at risk'³⁰.

However, the concept of vulnerability has evolved to incorporate aspects of resilience and is now seen to have a positive transformative power³¹ because of the way in which it creates an environment of openness and opportunity. This is evident through Brown's³² extensive research which has made a significant contribution to widening the definition of vulnerability. Brown³³ defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure"³⁴ and Herrick and Mann³⁵ echo this idea of being exposed as they define vulnerability as "an openness to being wounded (physical or otherwise) which is motivated by love of God and is the outcome of a voluntary relinquishment of the power to protect oneself from being wounded"³⁶. What is emerging through the literature promoting vulnerability in leadership is that vulnerability is essential to leadership because of the way in which it enables the person to adapt to change, engage in difficult conversations and look for creative ways in which to solve problems³⁷.

2.3 Leadership Theory

Although leadership has been the topic of conversation for centuries³⁸ it was the work of Kurt Lewin³⁹ in the 1930's, which began to examine the practical application of leadership and the identification of specific leadership styles (that is, a particular behaviour which is based on

²⁹ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*, 64.

³⁰ Office of the Public Guardian, 'Safeguarding Policy'.

³¹ Havrilla, 'Defining Vulnerability', 64.

³² Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

³³ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (London: Vermilion, 2018).

³⁴ Brown, 19.

³⁵ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*.

³⁶ Herrick and Mann, 5.

³⁷ Brown, *Dare to Lead*.

³⁸ Eve Poole, *Leadersmithing: Revealing the Trade Secrets of Leadership* (London ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Business, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017).

³⁹ Christian Harrison, *Leadership Theory and Research: A Critical Approach to New and Existing Paradigms* (Springer, 2017).

certain characteristics and skill-set). According to Harrison⁴⁰, Lewin identified three main leadership styles: 'autocratic' (telling people what to do), 'democratic' (shared decision-making), and 'laissez-faire' (hands-off)⁴¹, from which we have seen many more styles and models emerging (e.g. charismatic leadership, transactional leadership, authentic leadership and servant leadership⁴²). In the following section I will explore the way in which VL might be exercised or possibly hindered by exploring two leadership styles: autocratic and servant.

2.3.1 Autocratic Leadership

Grenz⁴³ argues that the predominance of autonomous leadership was synonymous with the influence of Descartes philosophy ('I think therefore I am') which promoted the idea that humans are rational, autonomous beings⁴⁴, and consequently, focus is given to the sense of self as an autonomous individual at the expense of seeing oneself as a relational person in community with others. It leads to leadership becoming about "communication, co-ordination and control"⁴⁵. For example, when adopting an autocratic style, the power dynamic is one where the leader has positional power which is used to command and control others⁴⁶. Russell⁴⁷ describes this as "authority exercised from standing above [which] is enhanced through a capitalist model of power accumulation at the expense of others"⁴⁸.

⁴⁰ Harrison.

⁴¹ Harrison, 23.

⁴² Harrison, *Leadership Theory and Research*.

⁴³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Grenz, 70.

⁴⁵ Miguel Pina e Cunha, *Paradoxes of Power and Leadership* (London : New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 2.

⁴⁶ Cunha, *Paradoxes of Power and Leadership*.

⁴⁷ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1993).

⁴⁸ Russell, 56.

2.3.2 Historical Development of Leadership Theory

However, recent reflections on leadership theory and practice, as noted by Cunha,⁴⁹ have recognised the need for these characteristics to be supplemented with more relational and collaborate attitudes. With the rise of the social sciences, a new thinking emerged which recognised the limitations of focussing purely on the rational autonomous self and the benefits of developing the relational self. Poole⁵⁰ identifies the development as emerging from the social impact of World War Two which had an egalitarian effect as men and women of different classes worked side by side, and saw a “collapse of deference”⁵¹. What emerged was the awareness that people would not necessary follow; that people could not be forced or commanded to follow, but they might need to be persuaded to do so⁵². Leadership evolved from being leader-centric to follower-centric - it was recognised that “leadership is essentially an emotional process rather than a cognitive phenomenon”⁵³ and ‘Emotional Intelligence’ (EQ) was to be seen to be of prime importance to leadership theory and practice⁵⁴.

2.3.3 Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership, coined by Greenleaf⁵⁵, became “the leadership benchmark for many organizations”⁵⁶. It contrasts and challenges the traditional autocratic leadership philosophy because of the way in which it places an emphasis on the well-being of those being led, sees the leader as first and foremost being a servant of those they are leading and seeks to share power

⁴⁹ Cunha, *Paradoxes of Power and Leadership*.

⁵⁰ Poole, *Leadersmithing*.

⁵¹ Poole, 8.

⁵² Poole, 8.

⁵³ Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 13.

⁵⁴ Poole, *Leadersmithing*, 33.

⁵⁵ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Janet S. Jones, Samantha Murray, and Kelly Warren, ‘Christian Leadership in a Secular World’, *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2018): 99, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLAIiREM210331001399&site=ehost-live>. Accessed 8/8/22.

(which is different to traditional autocratic leadership which tends to be results focussed and accumulates power).

With servant leadership the power dynamic is not an imposed top-down approach – according to Greenleaf “The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first ... That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...”⁵⁷. Greenleaf⁵⁸ recognised that organizations also had the potential to be servant-leaders. The concept of shared power is also articulated by Russell⁵⁹ who, writing on feminist styles of leadership, reflects how they engage in partnership working where the power of the leader comes from ‘standing with’ those they are leading others and as power is shared it expands and empowers others⁶⁰.

Although Servant Leadership was adopted by the business sector, it has also been widely embraced by the Church because of its deep theological connection with the ministry of Jesus, who for Christians is the ultimate Servant. Christian leaders are called to follow Jesus as faithful disciples and learn from Jesus who teaches what it means to serve others (Mark 10:45 - “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (NRSVA). This is echoed by Paul who conveys the ethos of servant leadership when he writes to the Philippians urging them to let go of selfish ambitions, seek the wellbeing of others, and learn to find a humility that is centred on Jesus (Phil. 2:3-8).

⁵⁷ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 27.

⁵⁸ Robert Greenleaf, *The Institution as Servant* (Westfield, Ind.: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2012).

⁵⁹ Russell, *Church in the Round*.

⁶⁰ Russell, 57.

2.4 Leadership and the Church Today

Nouwen⁶¹ sought to explore what it meant to minister and lead when familiar ways of ministry were crumbling⁶². The same question is also pertinent for the current context - 'how are we to lead in the Church today?

Beaumont⁶³ writes how the churches she is working with are striving to “reverse decline and improve organizational effectiveness⁶⁴, but in their endeavour it seems that they were doing it in their own strength and that the organisational activity had usurped the spiritual heart of the church community. Beaumont⁶⁵ may have been talking about churches in America, but the same could be said within the Church of England which is facing significant challenges. It appears, as supported by Friedman⁶⁶ that our institutions such as the Church, are operating from a very reactive position⁶⁷.

The Church of England currently faces significant challenges and is focussing on reducing financial pressures by reducing stipendiary clergy numbers. This may be an over-simplistic response to a much more complex issue. Beaumont's⁶⁸ recent book is well timed to speak into the current context within the Church of England and Church leaders would do well to take note of Beaumont's⁶⁹ claim that the traditional autonomous leadership style is insufficient and ineffective in responding to an organisation operating in a season of liminality (the Church of England is very much in a time of transition). An “alternative way of being”⁷⁰ is now a necessity

⁶¹ Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*.

⁶² Nouwen.

⁶³ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2019). Kindle edition.

⁶⁴ Beaumont.

⁶⁵ Beaumont.

⁶⁶ Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*.

⁶⁷ Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 2.

⁶⁸ Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*.

⁶⁹ Beaumont.

⁷⁰ Beaumont.

and alternative leadership styles are very much needed, such as VL. Herrick and Mann⁷¹ present a convincing theological argument for those engaged in Church leadership to embrace vulnerability in their leadership practice and seek a more relational style (rather than the more impersonal autocratic approach), arguing that “a greater emotional response is not only acceptable but widely regarded as more healthy, more human and indeed more Christian”⁷².

However this may take some adjustment because, for example, VL can be more time consuming (in terms of collaborating with and listening to others) which is not necessarily seen as a positive thing when reacting to a crisis and needing quick results (which is a benefit of autonomous leadership). According to Russell⁷³ Church life has been dominated by autocratic hierarchical leadership; from the ranking of clergy (Bishop, Priests and Deacons) to the way the everyday church life is organised. The question of how to lead, in a particular context, at a particular time is not a new phenomenon, whether that is in the ‘secular’ world of business or within the Church. Given the current context for the Church of England, it is a very apposite time to conduct this research study, which seeks to understand people’s understanding of and attitudes to VL.

As previously noted, the traditional autocratic leadership style maybe a necessary, but not sufficient model, for the current context. Whilst servant leadership is worthwhile in the way in which it seeks to work with others and share power, there are negative connotations for some because they associate the term with slavery and bondage of the dark ages, and an assumption that the role of servant at the time of Jesus was the same as that of the sixteenth century⁷⁴.

⁷¹ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*.

⁷² Herrick and Mann, ix.

⁷³ Russell, *Church in the Round*.

⁷⁴ Sen Sendjaya, *Personal and Organizational Excellence through Servant Leadership: Learning to Serve, Serving to Lead, Leading to Transform*, 1st ed. 2015, Management for Professionals 86 (New York; London: Springer International Publishing : Imprint: Springer, 2015), 30.

Given the growing body of literature that recognises vulnerability as an essential characteristic of leadership, it is important to move from theory to practice and explore people's understanding of the term VL, because the evolution in the definition of vulnerable may not have reached people in our church congregations. This may impact people's receptivity to VL, not just among the people they are leading, but among their clergy peers and Diocesan Senior Staff (e.g. Bishop).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

The research adopts a phenomenological philosophy, seeking to explore participant understanding of a particular phenomenon: the term VL. This dissertation is located within the social constructivist paradigm (also known as interpretivism⁷⁵) which holds the view that reality is socially constructed⁷⁶ - individuals seek to make meaning of the world they live in, developing their own understanding of a particular phenomenon⁷⁷. However, as Alvesson and Skoldberg⁷⁸ point out, social-constructivism is not purely created by the individual, and recognises the importance that context and networks have on the development of meaning. The aim of the research is to investigate the meaning that emerges from the data through a dialogue between the researcher and participants⁷⁹, rather than seeking to identify generalizable patterns (as associated with positivist philosophy).

3.2 Research Type

I adopted an inductive approach (congruent to its phenomenological philosophy) because it seeks to develop a pattern of meaning(s) through exploration and insight⁸⁰. The hermeneutical process enables an investigation into what participants understand the term VL to mean, and by using an inductive (rather than deductive approach) I was able to examine the themes and

⁷⁵ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edition, international student edition (Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington DC Melbourne: Sage, 2018).

⁷⁶ Peter L Berger et al., *The Social Construction of Reality*. (EBOOK: Open Road Media, 2011), <http://www.totalboox.com/book/id-2116835652092477932>. Accessed 5/7/22.

⁷⁷ Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: Research Methods for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, Seventh edition, Open UP Study Skills (London New York, NY: Open University Press, 2021), 43.

⁷⁸ Mats Alvesson and Kaj Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Pub, 2017).

⁷⁹ Johannes L van der Walt, 'Interpretivism-Constructivism as a Research Method in the Humanities and Social Sciences – More to It Than Meets the Eye', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 8, no. 1 (June 2020): 61, http://ijptnet.com/journals/ijpt/Vol_8_No_1_June_2020/5.pdf. Accessed 29/6/22.

⁸⁰ Pat Cryer, *The Research Student's Guide To Success* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, n.d.).

categories which emerge from the ‘ground up’ i.e. the data⁸¹. One benefit of this approach is that reduces preconceptions⁸² which enables the potential for new understanding and insights to be generated, beyond the limitations of the researcher. It enables the voices of the participants to be heard, giving a platform for the feelings and thoughts of participants⁸³.

The inductive approach is not universally accepted in the research community because of the question of the reliability of the data. With its subjective focus and non-standardised instruments, the research data and findings cannot be assumed to be generalizable, nor representative of the wider population⁸⁴ (i.e. the Church of England). However, whilst reliability is questionable and the positionality of the researcher affects the interpretation of the data, it does not invalidate it⁸⁵. Objectivity in any research methodology is widely debated⁸⁶ – as Tindall observes, there is no “certainty in inquiry”⁸⁷.

It is worth noting that the inductive approach is commonplace within the discipline of Practical Theology⁸⁸ as it focusses on giving a voice to people’s lived experiences with its focus on reflexivity and praxis. Employing social scientific methodology within the field of theology is favoured by some theologians and scholars (Bennett et al.⁸⁹; Graham et al.⁹⁰; Moschella⁹¹).

⁸¹ Gary Thomas, *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017).

⁸² Stephen Goss, ed., *Making Research Matter: Researching for Change in the Theory and Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 97.

⁸³ Marguerite G. Lodico, Dean T. Spaulding, and Katherine H. Voegtle, *Methods in Educational Research: From Theory to Practice*, 2nd ed, Research Methods for the Social Sciences (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 146.

⁸⁴ Thomas, *How to Do Your Research Project*.

⁸⁵ Thomas.

⁸⁶ Peter Banister, ed., *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A Research Guide* (Buckingham [England] ; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994), 14.

⁸⁷ Banister, 143.

⁸⁸ Sung Kyu Park, ‘A Postfoundationalist Research Paradigm of Practical Theology’, *HTS Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (January 2010): 1–6, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S0259-94222010000200011&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=en. Accessed 1/7/22.

⁸⁹ Zoë Bennett, ed., *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁹⁰ Elaine L Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2019).

⁹¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

Graham et al⁹² believe that it develops a practical wisdom (*phronesis*)⁹³, based upon the reflections of people's lived experiences and practices (*habitus*), which can lead to a deeper understanding than might be afforded by the focus of traditional Western philosophy on propositional knowledge (*episteme*).

This view is not universally accepted amongst theologians: Milbank⁹⁴ and Hauerwas⁹⁵ are critical of qualitative methods and Guarino⁹⁶ notes that reacting against positivism and rationalism can lead to "esoterism and privatism"⁹⁷. However, we cannot ignore the importance the role of experience has in theological reflection⁹⁸, nor that this research is situated within the discipline of Practical Theology⁹⁹.

3.3 Research Strategy

I adopted a qualitative methodological approach which was congruent with my epistemological and ontological philosophy¹⁰⁰. A mixed method design was chosen for the research apparatus. Although Bryman¹⁰¹ highlights a couple of challenges when conducting mixed method research (it can be demanding on the researcher's time and skillset to apply and analyse the qualitative and quantitative parts of the research design), this posed more of an

⁹² Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*.

⁹³ Graham, Walton, and Ward.

⁹⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Reprinted, Signposts in Theology (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

⁹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between*. (Oregon: Wipf And Stock, 2010).

⁹⁶ Thomas G Guarino, 'Postmodernity and Five Fundamental Theological Issues', *Theological Studies* 57, no. 4 (December 1996): 654–89, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,uid&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001019605&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. Accessed 1/7/22.

⁹⁷ Guarino.

⁹⁸ John Pritchard and Paul Ballard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 2006).

⁹⁹ Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017).

¹⁰⁰ Goss, *Making Research Matter*.

¹⁰¹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

opportunity than a barrier as this research seeks to build a bigger picture and broader understanding¹⁰².

3.4 Data Collection Method

A pilot study of the research design, with an online focus group, began the research process in November 2021. Participants were purposefully selected in order to expedite the process – recruitment was based on my pre-existing relationship with them which enable me to know that they could offer constructive critical feedback, and had experience of working with each other in an online environment. The focus group helped to shape the next stage of the research process, as insights which emerged from the focus group were incorporated into the design of the main research apparatus (Appendix One). In February 2022 the second stage of the research project commenced and data was gathered by the use of a self-completion structured questionnaire and online semi-structured interviews (Appendix Two).

I distributed a paper based mixed-method questionnaire following a concurrent design (gathering both types of data at the same time) with the informed consent form, to people in the congregation of two church locations after the Sunday morning service. A paper based questionnaire was chosen for its ability to obtain information from a large number of people in a timely manner¹⁰³. Given the potential for ‘reactivity’ of participants, who might try and answer in a way that seeks to please the researcher¹⁰⁴, an attempt to reduce this risk was built into the design, which is why the questionnaires were to be taken away and completed anonymously. An electronic version was also available.

¹⁰² Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 176.

¹⁰³ Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Roger Gomm, *Social Research Methodology: A Critical Introduction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 167.

The questionnaire was also emailed out to the clergy in the local deanery to try and mitigate for a poor response rate from the two church congregations. If an adequate response rate was received from the congregations then the clergy data would not be included.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with two priests in the Church of England, online via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour – their purpose was to provide additional data, offset some of the inevitable researcher bias in designing the questionnaire and allow for triangulation. Some questions from the questionnaire were used in the interview to provide a degree of consistency across participants (those interviewed and those completing the questionnaire) and create a helpful starting point for the discussion. The interviews were influenced by the results of the questionnaire which helped when asking supplementary questions during the interviews.

There are several benefits to using the semi structured interview technique with open-ended questions. It offers a flexible approach in extrapolating the data¹⁰⁵ because ancillary questions allow for further clarification and exploration which in turn will reveal new ideas / meaning. It “allows for the *phronesis* of participants to be expressed, valued and heard, as insights are unearthed in the conversation that might have been previously unspoken or hidden”¹⁰⁶ which is not possible in a structured interview, nor in the use of a questionnaire which even when it employs qualitative questions, is unable to tease out further information.

¹⁰⁵ Guarino, ‘Postmodernity and Five Fundamental Theological Issues’.

¹⁰⁶ Victoria Day, ‘Research Proposal: A Qualitative Study of Clergy Attitudes to Vulnerable Leadership.’ (Birmingham, The Queen’s Foundation, 2020), 9.

Semi-structured interviews encourage a degree of self-agency of the participant which promotes the co-authoring of knowledge in the encounter (conducive to the research philosophy). In addition, it gives the researcher the opportunity to shape questions to the “level of comprehension and articulacy”¹⁰⁷ of the participants. Given that the interviewing technique is resource intensive (i.e. time to conduct, transcribe and analyse them)¹⁰⁸ a small sample was chosen.

3.5 Sampling Strategy

A non-probability sampling method was chosen, which is appropriate for a small scale research project¹⁰⁹ adopting an inductive approach. It is commonly used in qualitative research to explore findings which do not need to generate a representative sample¹¹⁰ and enables the researcher to create a ‘thick description’ of the phenomenon. A combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used.

Convenience sampling was used for the questionnaire because participants were easily accessible to the researcher¹¹¹ and it also enabled ease of distribution and collection. I was more likely to get a higher response rate because I was known to the participants. However, this has the potential to cause participants to respond in a way they think is favourable to me – this was mitigated against by being an anonymous survey.

¹⁰⁷ G. Nigel Gilbert, ed., *Researching Social Life*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 247.

¹⁰⁸ Loraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes, and Malcolm Tight, *How to Research*, 4. ed, Open Up Study Skills (Maidenhead: Open Univ. Press, 2010), 25.

¹⁰⁹ Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Thomas, *How to Do Your Research Project*.

¹¹¹ Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, and Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, ‘Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling’, *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (22 December 2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>. Accessed 31/7/22.

Purposive sampling was used for the interview participants on the basis of their knowledge of the subject and relevant experience to the issue being investigated which can “produce the most valuable data”¹¹². However, sampling is not without its ambiguities. Emmel¹¹³ makes the distinction between ‘purposeful sampling’ (a sampling strategy coming out of the application of grounded theory), and ‘sampling purposefully’¹¹⁴ (a pragmatic judgement from the perspective of the researcher). For clarification, I was ‘sampling purposefully’ because I chose the participants in light of the insight that I knew they would bring which would raise “issues of central importance to the research”¹¹⁵.

3.6 Data Analysis Methods/Techniques

Given the research’s phenomenological approach, the qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis through the coding of data. Analysis of the questionnaires followed an iterative process (conducive to inductive research), exploring categories and themes in light of previously identified categories and themes, and then making a considered decision on which categories and themes would become the prominent ones to proceed with. Once the qualitative data from the questionnaires had been coded they were then categorised to highlight key overarching themes. The interview data was analysed in light of the themes that had emerged from the questionnaire data, and a note made of any new themes that emerged independently of the questionnaire data.

A criticism of thematic analysis is that it is highly subjective and my analysis is heavily influenced by my own bias and assumptions. This is why reflexivity in qualitative research is so

¹¹² Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, 79.

¹¹³ Nick Emmel, *Sampling and Choosing Cases in Qualitative Research: A Realist Approach* (London: SAGE, 2013).

¹¹⁴ Emmel, 3.

¹¹⁵ Emmel, 3.

important. In addition, given the socio-constructivist nature of this research, a more ‘credible’ understanding of the phenomenon of VL will be achieved through triangulation¹¹⁶ to enable me to engage with different perspectives to my own. Triangulation was achieved by engaging with other data sources, which were the focus group and incorporating quantitative and interview data in my research.

3.7 Methodological Limitations

Sample / selection bias – the participant sample was skewed towards a certain ethnic demographic and church tradition because of the demographic of the two church congregations. The small sample for the interviews also created a challenge in capturing variations in experiences. A more diverse sample could be obtained through a larger scale research project (which was not feasible for this research study).

Paper-based questionnaire – responding to a paper-based survey may be impacted by people’s level of literacy skills and whether the participant has a health conditions which might impact their ability to write (e.g. impaired eyesight). To mitigate for this limitation, the questionnaire was available electronically.

3.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential to the whole research process¹¹⁷ because my personal bias and assumptions (worldview) mean I can be neither neutral nor detached¹¹⁸. Fenton¹¹⁹, when

¹¹⁶ Gayle M. Rhineberger, David J. Hartmann, and Thomas L. Van Valey, ‘TRIANGULATED RESEARCH DESIGNS -- A JUSTIFICATION?’, *Sociological Practice* 7, no. 1 (2005): 56–66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43735904>. Accessed 14/8/22.

¹¹⁷ Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*, Second edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

¹¹⁸ Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1996), 6.

¹¹⁹ Allison Fenton, ‘Meaning-Making for Mothers in the North East of England: An Ethnography of Baptism’ (Durham, Durham University, 2017), <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12045/>. Accessed 1/7/22.

reflecting on her own research, notes that “while this research would seem to be about others, it is also about me in that I cannot remove myself from it”¹²⁰. Theories emerge from the data, and meaning and understanding is constructed “through the reflexive acts of researchers and participants”¹²¹. Therefore it is my duty to acknowledge my ‘location’, my “power and privilege”¹²², not just in terms of my socio, political, economic and ethnic location (white, western, single, middle class woman) but also my theological, epistemological and ontological assumptions “which influence not only my construction of knowledge but also impact the co-construction”¹²³.

Whilst, the researcher’s participation can itself be a valuable resource that contributes to the research¹²⁴, reflexivity can lead to self-indulgence and introspection¹²⁵. Tindall¹²⁶ urges the researcher to maintain a “degree of critical subjectivity”, to avoid super-imposing one’s own meaning onto the meaning assigned by the participant. The co-creation of meaning cannot be equal between the researcher and participant because the “the production of knowledge is a dialectic loaded in favour of the researcher”¹²⁷ given their influence on research design and analysis.

3.9 Ethics

This research project was conducted in accordance with the Research Ethics Policy of the Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, and with the approval of the ethics board for each phase of the research. Informed consent was received from every participant and

¹²⁰ Fenton, 9.

¹²¹ Emmel, *Sampling and Choosing Cases in Qualitative Research*, 4.

¹²² Tina Miller, ed., *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed (Los Angeles, Calif: London : SAGE, 2012), 127.

¹²³ Miller, 133.

¹²⁴ Banister, *Qualitative Methods in Psychology*, 14.

¹²⁵ Gayle Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice* (Buckingham: Open Univ. Press, 2003), 1.

¹²⁶ Banister, *Qualitative Methods in Psychology*.

¹²⁷ Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*, 9.

in light of Miller's¹²⁸ statement, that consent needs to be ongoing throughout the research process (where possible), I reconfirmed consent to conduct and record the interviews with the participants before the interview began. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and the way in which they could access the results. The study adheres to the newly implemented General Data Protection Regulation (2018) and paper based and electronic data (excluding informed consent forms) will be destroyed once the MA is conferred. Informed consent forms will be retained in line with the Queen's Foundation record retention timeline.

¹²⁸ Miller, *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, 61.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

In total eight five questionnaires were handed out: seventy one paper-based questionnaires were handed out across the two churches and fourteen were emailed to clergy in the Deanery. Of the fifty six returned (66%), fifty one (91%) questionnaires returned were from across the two church congregations and five (9%) were from the clergy in the Deanery.

There was a very positive return rate amongst the two congregations. This is an area that regularly trains curates, and takes an active role in supporting the curates in their training. They are used to being involved in giving constructive feedback and therefore less pressured to try and answer in a way that they think I would want them to answer.

The clergy data (from the deanery) was extracted and not included in the research data, because the high response rate from the two church congregations yielded more than sufficient data, and the return rate from the clergy was so low that it did not appear to add anything to the research data at this time. There is the potential for further research to explore and compare the attitudes between ordained and non-ordained people in the Church of England to establish whether this impacts their attitude toward the concept of VL, but that will not be explored in this piece of research.

Research conducted by the Centre for Creative Leadership revealed that “the best leaders consistently possess these 10 essential leadership qualities”¹²⁹ (Appendix Four). I chose to apply this list of characteristics when thematically coding Q1, Q2 and Q4 because I was curious to test

¹²⁹ Leading Effectively Staff, ‘What Are the Characteristics of a Good Leader?’, Center for Creative Leadership, 23 August 2021, <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/characteristics-good-leader/>. Accessed 23/3/22.

the data against a set of criteria established by a secular organisation with knowledge and experience in the field of leadership.

Full details of the results and accompanying graphs can be found in Appendix Three.

Question 1. List 3 characteristics / values required for anyone in leadership outside the church

Applying thematic coding, the predominant characteristics from the data were 'integrity' (most frequently referenced), 'communication' and 'managerial competence'. 'Influence' and 'courage' were only referenced a few times and 'self-awareness' and 'gratitude' were not mentioned at all. Two new categories emerged: 'managerial competence' and 'vision'.

Question 2. List 3 characteristics / values required for anyone in leadership in the church

The main thematic characteristics were 'integrity' (most frequently referenced), 'communication' and 'faith' (which is a new category). 'Influence' was only referenced a few times and 'self-awareness', 'gratitude' and 'courage' were not mentioned at all.

'Integrity' and 'communication' are the top predominant themes of characteristics for leaders regardless of context (secular or religious). However a new category of 'faith' emerged from the data, although it is not surprising that participants would expect faith to be a characteristic of someone leading in the church.

It is interesting that 'managerial competence' has become less prominent and it is surprising that participants do not acknowledge that it is a characteristic of a leader in the Church. However, findings from a Church of England survey (analysing the time clergy spent on

various activities) identified that “administration and organisation continues to be the activity forming the greatest part of the [working] week for clergy ... particularly for stipendiary ministers”¹³⁰. This raises questions as to whether the majority of lay people in the Church of England appreciate the amount of time clergy spend on managerial tasks, especially as there are an increasing number of multi-church parishes and many parishes are unable to afford paid support.

Question 3a. – Have you heard the term Vulnerable Leadership?

	Yes	No	Not sure	N/R
Total	12	31	4	5
%	26	56	7	11

It was interesting to note that one participant selected ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and added a comment “not previously heard the actual term but I have met and discussed what I understand as the principles during my mentoring on the current Growth in Leadership course being held across our 2 churches”.

Based on the data provided, over half of the participants had not heard the term VL before. A comparison between the data from Q3a and Q10 did not reveal a correlation between whether people had heard the term and their leadership position.

Question 3b. Please describe where you heard it and what do you understand it to mean

There were two parts to this question.

¹³⁰ Dr Michael Clinton, ‘Experiences of Ministry Survey 2015: Respondent Findings Report’ (London: King’s College London, 2016), 5, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/respondents_report.pdf. Accessed 27/7/22.

Where participants heard the term (of those who responded to the question):

Internet search	In church when research announced	Resources (research / books)	Course / training	No response	Not sure
4	3	2	2	3	1

What participants understood the term to mean:

The qualitative responses varied in detail supplied: from one very brief response (“Partners v workers”) to one very extended response (a paragraph of text), whilst the majority provided a couple of sentences of explanation.

Due to the nature of the responses I chose to let the themes emerge from data rather than applying the pre-determined categories as in Q1, Q2 and Q4, although I would still have been influenced by them. The top three themes to emerge, were i) recognising their own limitations (e.g. “being prepared to admit weakness and lack of experience”), ii) showing humility (e.g. “willingness to be humble and empower others gifts”), iii) being collaborative (e.g. “leading in community as part of a team as opposed to from above from the top”).

Question 3c. If you heard church leaders talking about Vulnerable Leadership, what do you think it might mean?

Forty six participants attempted to define what VL might mean. As the majority had not heard the term before, this was a positive result because it would have been easier to not respond at all.

What emerged from the thematic coding of the data, was that the term VL is ambiguous with a couple of participants writing “leading vulnerable persons or someone vulnerable leading?” and “Leadership of the vulnerable in society or leadership by the vulnerable”. Whilst

most people have attempted to define the term for themselves, there appears to be some confusion over its definition. A significant number of participants would be aware of the term 'Vulnerable Adults' as part of the Church's safeguarding policies.

The pre-determined categories of Q1, Q2 and Q4 were not applied to the data. The top three themes to emerge from the data, in seeking to define VL were i) recognising their own limitations (e.g. "it could mean someone is aware of their own frailty but has enough confidence to be able to share it"), ii) having an openness (e.g. "Anyone, leader or otherwise, can show vulnerability and in doing so allows them to be open to help from others. Vulnerability allows Jesus to work in you), and iii) being relational (e.g. "Ability to connect with congregation through listening and sharing leaders own experiences. Moving on to how the bible and Christian faith can help in everyday life").

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When the themes from Q3b and Q3c were combined, they revealed that the top three themes overall, emerging from the data, indicated that participants understood VL especially in the context of the Church to be about recognising their limitations, being collaborative and being open with others in terms of being open about their own character (e.g. "Being of open character – not wearing a mask") but also being open to others and what they have to offer (e.g. "To be tolerant and to listen to others and be prepared to modify attitudes and goals").

Question 4. List 3 key characteristics that you think would demonstrate Vulnerable

Leadership

Applying thematic coding, the predominant characteristics from the data were 'integrity' (most frequently referenced by a large majority), 'listening' and 'empathy'.

The characteristics from the initial list (Appendix Four) that were not mentioned at all, were 'courage', 'respect' and 'gratitude'. Given the recent increase in mental health and wellbeing literature around the importance of developing a practice of gratitude it seems strange that 'gratitude' is not mentioned. One possibility is that the idea of 'gratitude' is more conducive in third sector organisations where employees are rewarded for their performance by bonuses. However, showing gratitude for one another might actually be important in the Church, because it recognises and affirms people.

Three new categories emerged: 'listening', 'collaborative' and 'weakness'. Listening has become its own category, because unlike responses to Q1 and Q2 where it was specifically mentioned ("listening skills), it was not mentioned as frequently (sixteen times) when compared to "communication" (twenty one times). Given that 'listening' can be considered part of a wider communication skillset, this became the overarching theme. However, in Q4, 'listening' becomes much more widely used (fifteen times): "willing to listen to others", "listening ear", "listening before leading off immediately". 'Communication' remains a theme as this is a broader category which includes more than listening.

We also have 'collaborative' emerging as a stronger characteristic, which is much more than being relational and seems to convey something about how participants saw power being exercised and how it opened up a space for others to participate in a way that is not always available with autocratic leadership. For example, "to be inclusive of all involved in planning", "sharing responsibilities", "formulation of a vision / plan / strategy which can be owned by all, not imposed by one leader". It is also worth noting the emergence of a theme / category called 'weakness' which seems to imply a negative aspect or characteristic of VL, for example "over friendliness", "mental weakness", "weakness in typical leadership qualities"

By Q4 some participants are providing a bit more text in their responses rather than only using one word answers, which might be because the previous questions have helped them make some sense of what they are being asked to do and therefore be able to offer some sort of response. There is still some uncertainty in answering the question as can be seen in the table below, which details the number of characteristics that people input in response to the question. The majority (84%) were able to list the three characteristics as requested, but a number of people (10%) provided additional data.

	No of characteristics input			
	1	2	3	4
No. of people	1	2	42	5
%	2	4	84	10

Question 5. How do you feel about the idea of Vulnerable Leadership

This question was designed to explore the emotional response to the concept of VL. Many participants did not appear to respond to the question using ‘feeling’ words, and there appeared two distinct categories, one being people who responded in an abstract manner (for example: “People tend to like a leader who leads rather than someone open-minded. However a vulnerable leader is more likely to identify with others, relate better to others and work well with everyone”) and the second being participants who used ‘thinking’ descriptions for their response (for example a number of participants thought it was “a great idea”, and others “think it’s important”). This rational rather than emotive response may be because the rest of the questionnaire was asking what they thought about leadership and VL and therefore it was hard to switch to a different mode of question (i.e. seeking emotional description), but it may also be that participants may not be used to writing openly about their feelings.

There were some responses which did describe how participants felt, with most describing positive feelings (“happy”, “like it”, “very comfortable”), however two participants

expressed concern (“It is very dangerous as the leader can be influenced into criminal actions or can make the wrong decisions or administer the wrong advice”, “If my views and interpretations of it are right it would worry me to be led by a leader like this”).

Overall, from my perspective of analysing the comments, there appeared to be more participants who took a positive response to it, whether that was in terms of relating to the term VL in an abstract way or in terms of their emotional response. However a few participants seemed to have mixed views and a couple of participants had a negative response to it.

Question 6. What would your attitude be to someone in the church demonstrating

Vulnerable Leadership (where 1 is strongly disapprove and 5 is strongly approve)

Table to illustrate % of attitudes on a Likert scale

	1	2	3	4	5
Vicar	2	2	4	29	55
Reader (LLM)	2	2	8	24	57
Churchwarden	2	4	14	20	53

The majority of participants selected that they would ‘strongly approve’ and ‘approve’ indicating participants would have a positive attitude towards someone in a leadership positions in the church demonstrating VL. However, there appeared more uncertainty regarding the participants’ approval if the person was a Churchwarden. Few people ‘strongly disapproved’ or ‘disapproved’ which suggests a receptiveness to a church leader modelling VL.

Question 7. Please list the advantages of Vulnerable Leadership

The predominant thematic characteristics that I identified as being advantages of VL were ‘relational’, ‘openminded / openness’, ‘enables others’ and ‘fosters collaboration’. It is

interesting that 'enables others' appears to be a predominant advantage considering it has only appeared as a thematic characteristic identified in Q3b and Q3c. This might in part be due to the fact that an external list of characteristic criteria was used for Q1, Q2 and Q4, but not Q3. However, the terminology relating to 'enables' (e.g. enable / enabling) did not appear at all in Q2 and 4, and only a few times in Q1.

Question 8. Please list the disadvantages of Vulnerable Leadership

By applying thematic coding, the categories of disadvantages that I identified were 'deficiency', 'identified as weakness', 'loss of status of leader', 'negative impact on leader' and 'negative impact on others'.

Whilst some disadvantages were seen in terms of the negative impact on other people (e.g. "a person may feel uncomfortable with risk taking and being able to speak freely and seeing church leaders behave in this way", "sharing private personal information"), participants also acknowledged the impact on/to the leader themselves ("losing self-worth", "burnout", "open to being hurt and manipulated"). It is interesting that participants included disadvantages for the leader themselves because this perspective was not evident in the participants responses to the advantages of VL – i.e. in Q8 the responses for advantages focussed solely on the advantages to/for other people and not the leader themselves.

Question 9. Are you ordained?

Of the fifty six returned (66%), fifty one (91%) questionnaires returned were from across the two church congregations and five (9%) were from the clergy in the Deanery. The clergy data was extracted and not included in the analysis of results because of the low response rate (five questionnaires in total).

Question 10. Are you currently in a leadership position?

	Yes	No	Not sure	N/R
Total	25	23	2	1
%	49	45	4	2

People self-identified and leadership position could mean a variety of roles in the Church, such as: Licensed Lay Minister (Reader), Churchwarden, House group Leader, Youth Leader etc. This was included to see whether there was any link between whether they are in a leadership position and if they had heard the term before. Analysis of the results revealed no clear correlation between these two factors.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 The term VL is ambiguous.

5.1.1 Introduction

The purpose of the research was to explore participants' understanding of the term VL, a term that I had adopted to describe my leadership style and the findings have been helpful in highlighting a potential barrier when communicating my leadership practice to others. In this section we will explore how the term itself was understood by the participants, and the role that language plays when co-creating meaning including where it might be a barrier to what is being communicated.

5.1.2 Exploring the ambiguity

The majority of participants (61%) had not heard the term VL before and therefore one might argue that the term VL is a niche term which is not universally understood. This is supported by the lack of literature to be found on the specific term of VL and was also corroborated by interviewee 1 (INT1¹³¹), who was not aware of its usage in Church leadership within the Church of England. The more traditional models of 'servant leadership' and 'shepherd' tend to be the norm. Despite the majority of participants not having heard the term before, they did provide a response and attempt to define it.

For example, one participant wrote "I understand each word perfectly well but together they make no sense. It seems to mean that a leader may have some vulnerability". This was a very helpful comment because it highlighted that the person understood what the terms 'vulnerable' and 'leadership' meant to them and was able to assign each term meaning,

¹³¹ Interviewee 1 will be abbreviated to INT1

independently of each other, but putting them together any sense of meaning was now lost.

Despite seemingly descriptive, the term is vague and lacking a precise meaning for that participant, and that can lead to its application having blurred boundaries¹³² which is problematic in terms of communicating the concept.

Another issue that the data highlighted was the term ‘vulnerability’ having ‘lexical ambiguity’¹³³ (i.e. ambiguity arising from multiple meanings) - this is not an uncommon situation given the size of vocabulary to describe it. For example, one participant wrote “leading vulnerable persons or someone vulnerable leading?” whilst another noted how the term itself is problematic because of the tension between the dictionary definition of vulnerability as being “weakness” but how “in secular management vulnerability can be viewed as a strength as a communication tool, and as a way of getting to know the people in the organisation, as a way of gaining trust where leaders aim to be authentic, trustworthy, open and honest”. It is worth noting that the difficulty in defining VL was also experienced by both interview participants, despite them having heard the term before.

Therefore, it is important not to dismiss the difficulty that people can face in trying to define what the term VL means. Given the different definitions that can be applied to the term VL, it is helpful to be aware of possible misunderstandings when engaging in conversation about leadership practice.

Having undertaken this piece of research I am much more aware of the complexity in defining the term VL. As Havrilla¹³⁴ notes, “terminology associated with vulnerability is fluid ...

¹³² Gary James Jason, *Critical Thinking: Developing an Effective Worldview* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2001), 86.

¹³³ Jason, 98–99.

¹³⁴ Havrilla, ‘Defining Vulnerability’. Accessed 11/7/22.

[and] concurrent meanings of vulnerability continue to exist”¹³⁵. Whilst the concept of vulnerability may be universal, its meaning and application is not. It is important we acknowledge this issue if we are to have meaningful conversations with other leadership practitioners / those we are leading. There is a growing body of literature which argues that demonstrating a degree of vulnerability when leading, is not just necessary but essential.

5.1.3 Conclusion

The findings have led me to question whether the term VL is meaningless jargon – an attempt to succinctly convey a leadership style or theory that in reality ends up being obscure. As a term it is not sufficient to convey the style of leadership that I seek to model. However, one may argue its ambiguity and vagueness provides the opportunity to open up conversations and contribute to the evolving discussion around appropriate leadership styles within the Church.

5.2 VL is collaborative

5.2.1 Introduction

Whilst the ‘ability to delegate’ in leadership (as per the Center for Creative Leadership’s¹³⁶ list of characteristics) seemed an appropriate category to begin with, when the concept of VL was introduced the data suggested that people understand VL as being about collaboration rather than delegation. In the following discussion we will explore some of the characteristics (power and partnership) of the collaborative nature of VL and consider the theological imperative for a Christian leader to embrace VL.

¹³⁵ Havrilla, 64.

¹³⁶ Leading Effectively Staff, ‘What Are the Characteristics of a Good Leader?’ Accessed 23/3/22.

5.2.2 Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership can be understood to mean different things. One definition is that collaborative leadership “is a process in which individuals use their skills and expertise within a network to contribute to the overall leadership function and work toward shared goals”¹³⁷. Within the Church it has been associated with terms such as every-member ministry or engaging the priesthood of all believers¹³⁸, where gifts and skills of the laity are developed and exercised. According to Pickard¹³⁹, the collaborative development of others involves a degree of “self-forgetfulness”¹⁴⁰ in the desire for more ‘togetherness’.

There has been a growing trend in the secular world to value collaborative leadership¹⁴¹ over autocratic leadership because organisations have recognised that joint action between people accomplishes more than the efforts by individuals. The ‘expert’ opinion of a few autocratic leaders is seen as less effective in responding to the complex needs created by our fast paced, changing, dynamic world. Collaborative Leadership has also become a buzzword in the Church of England¹⁴² as it seeks to respond pragmatically to the reduction of resources (clergy and finance) and encourage ‘every member ministry’¹⁴³. There has been an increase in literature (as noted in the literature review) exploring the way that leadership styles within the Church must adapt, providing a theological basis upon which to expand that discussion beyond the pragmatic sensibilities¹⁴⁴. There are a number of characteristics that make VL (with its

¹³⁷ Amanda Holst, ‘Collaborative Leadership and the Role of AI’, 15 October 2021, <https://blog.webex.com/video-conferencing/collaborative-leadership-and-the-role-of-ai/>. Accessed 19/7/22.

¹³⁸ Sally Nash, Paul Nash, and Jo Pimlott, *Skills for Collaborative Ministry* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2011), 1.

¹³⁹ Stephen K. Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology (Farnham, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ Pickard, 7.

¹⁴¹ Holst, ‘Collaborative Leadership and the Role of AI’.

¹⁴² Andrew Dawswell, ‘A Biblical and Theological Basis for Collaborative Ministry and Leadership’, *ANVIL* 21, no. 3 (2004): 165, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/21-3_165.pdf. Accessed 19/7/22.

¹⁴³ The Church of England, ‘Setting God’s People Free’, 2017, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-2056-setting-gods-people-free.pdf>. Accessed 19/7/22

¹⁴⁴ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 379.

collaborative nature) different to autocratic leadership: the location of power and way that people participate.

5.2.3 Power

A key aspect that emerged from participant's responses was the way in which power was exercised by VL. One participant saw VL as "leading in a democratic way not autocratic". Another participant noted that VL is "not being directive – able to be open to opinions of others etc. and be influenced by them" which highlights an interesting point about the difference in the ways in which way in work / tasks are distributed and dealt, between autocratic and collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership focusses on working 'with' others and fosters a sense of cooperation whereas autocratic leadership, focusses on delegations i.e. "task assignment"¹⁴⁵, and whilst it may look collegial, as Pickard¹⁴⁶ notes the power dynamic is that people will work 'for' a leader rather than 'with'.

Situational power was expressed by one participant who saw an advantage of VL as being a "positive move from the top down authoritarian approach which imposes plans or ideas to one which encourages corporate decisions and enthusiasm for implementing them". With hierarchical, autocratic leadership, power is associated with a person's position of authority whereas with collaborative leadership (and by association VL) power is shared and is collective within the team.

Brown¹⁴⁷ refers to Christine Day, a CEO, who realised that by embracing being collaborative, she moved from a position of power that was controlling to one that was engaging

¹⁴⁵ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*.

¹⁴⁷ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

which leads to creativity and innovation¹⁴⁸. However changing the location of power can be challenging, because as Brown¹⁴⁹ notes, the move towards being collaborative as a leader can leave us feeling powerless¹⁵⁰ because we have to let go of our ego and the need to be the person with all the answers, we do not have to always be right. As one participant noted, VL involves the “willingness to be humble and empower others gifts” – the sense of ‘empowering others’ was a theme that seemed to run throughout the data with another commenting that VL is about “empowering others to exercise gifts of ministry”.

However, as Pickard¹⁵¹ notes, there have been challenges to collaborative ministry in the past, in part because of the way in which power has been exercised between clergy and laity, where one has dominated the other and vice versa. Whilst clergy may have positional power in terms of their title (Incumbent or Priest in Charge), in practice the positional power may lie elsewhere (e.g. Churchwarden, organist etc). Another scenario may be where clergy do not actively pursue collaborative ministry because of a lack of resources (time, people), ecclesiology or theology.

There is also the challenge that whilst power can be distributed and shared, people still look to ‘one person’ to take charge and control. This desire may be subconsciously related to decades of social conditioning in a White Western Culture epitomised by autocratic and patriarchal leadership styles both in society and the Church. It may also be fostered because of the organisational nature of the Church which is governed by committee, where the clergy (along with the PCC) carry legal responsibilities.

¹⁴⁸ Brown, 209.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

¹⁵⁰ Brown, 209.

¹⁵¹ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*.

5.2.4 Partnership

Participants also noted that an aspect of VL's collaborative approach is the way in which it seeks to develop partnerships with people. One participant wrote that they understand VL to mean "partners v workers" whilst another participant provided a more expanded explanation, that it is "a more participatory style of leadership which brings in church members with specific gifts. This should lead to the formation of a specific team of Christ centred people with skills and gifts who all have a common mind and the same theological position, able to work together, in the planning and organisation of all the different aspect of church life". Collaborative participation involves people in vision planning rather than it being a 'fait accompli' being imposed by the leaders.

This inclusive participation was expressed in terms of "sharing responsibilities" and "others taking a lead": VL is about "allowing others in the church to take on roles and responsibilities such as preaching and leading, running housegroups". Fostering this sense of shared participation as equals, was seen as being a strength of VL because of the way in which it enables "gaps in leaders abilities [to] be filled by others (team work) but also the way in which is "encourages meaningful debate and discussion leading to fresh learning and understanding".

This concept of enabling, i.e. the sense of togetherness and how the 'team' is built up was also expressed by participants noting that the advantages of VL include how it "provides greater scope for teamworking / team building", "encourages reflection and team ministry" and how "everyone has the opportunity to develop their calling and their gifts". This idea of improved teamworking also came up in the interviews – INT1 commented that "if it's always the leader that can do it all and manages everything and is the person that can cover everything, that's not a great enabler of other people".

Collaborative working is seen as being beneficial to both the wider organisation and the people within it because of the way it provides mutual enablement. Success depends on the quality of relationships that the leader fosters, building an environment of mutual respect and trust, where all people can openly contribute¹⁵². This is supported by Patrick Lencioni¹⁵³ who notes that vulnerability is important when building trust, which is a key base layer for creating a functional team.

However, this mutual style of leadership has not always received well. For example, in response to a change in the way American Catholic Bishops have prepared teaching letters to try and “mediate gospel values to daily life”¹⁵⁴ the mutual style of leadership was rejected as it was perceived to demonstrate weakness¹⁵⁵. This was also found in the data from participants. For example one person thought that VL “could be exploited by those who are seeking to take advantage”. Another participant saw a disadvantage of VL, as being the inability to handle “domination by a member with strong and firmly held views” which they felt needed “definite and skilful”. This was echoed by another participant who highlighted an issue, the “danger of loudest and/or most intimidating / charismatic subordinate hogging meetings, policy direction”. There is a concern that by adopting a more democratic style of leadership that VL will result in chaos, and that other people will ride roughshod not just over the leader but also other team members.

¹⁵² Oxford Leadership, ‘Collaborative Leadership’, White Paper (Oxford Leadership, 2016), <https://www.oxfordleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OL-White-Paper-Collaborative-Leadership.pdf>. Accessed 22/7/22.

¹⁵³ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

¹⁵⁴ James D Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *The Promise of Partnership: A Model for Collaborative Ministry* (Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse.com, Inc., 2000), 136.

¹⁵⁵ Whitehead and Whitehead, 137.

5.2.5 The Social Trinity

According to Pickard¹⁵⁶ collaboration is an “alien experience within the competitive environment of modernity”¹⁵⁷ which is where we can draw upon the theological wisdom that can be gleaned when engaging with the social trinity which provides a theoretical heuristic framework¹⁵⁸ and offers a model for human community¹⁵⁹ that dialogues with the way in which power, participation and relationships are exercised between persons.

The debate about situational power has been prevalent within the Church (both theologically and ecclesologically) and continues today. Thanks to the work of Moltmann¹⁶⁰ and Pannenburg¹⁶¹, “the concept of relationality had indeed moved to central stage”¹⁶² because a greater focus has been given to the social relationship of the Trinity, which challenges authoritarian rule by one person/leader, promoting an open inclusive community¹⁶³. However, there is some criticism¹⁶⁴ that the social trinity reinforces the patriarchal¹⁶⁵ and hierarchical relationship of the ‘Persons’, thereby supporting the hierarchical nature of the Church with its system of ecclesial ministries¹⁶⁶ (e.g. Threefold order). Kilby¹⁶⁷ voices a different concern, regarding the way in which we project human limitations on the Trinity because of the way in which we understand relationships.

¹⁵⁶ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*.

¹⁵⁷ Pickard, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1st ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 379–81.

¹⁵⁹ Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 118.

¹⁶⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM, 1981).

¹⁶¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

¹⁶² Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 117.

¹⁶³ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2000).

¹⁶⁴ LaCugna, *Freeing Theology*.

¹⁶⁵ LaCugna, 84.

¹⁶⁶ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*.

¹⁶⁷ Karen Kilby, ‘Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity’, *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (1 November 2000): 432–45, x.

However, Carr¹⁶⁸ and LaCugna¹⁶⁹ argue that the social trinity actually confronts patriarchal concepts because of the way in which the social trinity embodies characteristics of “mutuality, reciprocity, cooperation and unity ... that are feminist ideals and goals derived from the inclusivity of the gospel message”¹⁷⁰. There is still much we can learn by engaging with the social trinity because as Phan¹⁷¹ argues, it is by its very nature that the social trinity promotes equality and communion (as characterised by the relationship between the three ‘persons’) and therefore challenges structures that leads to domination¹⁷². Collaboration focusses on cooperation, of working ‘with’ others, which requires a degree of humility by the leader, in being able to recognise their own weaknesses whilst at the same time, building other people up to exercise their strengths. The collaborative nature of VL results in it being a relational leadership model which encourages partnership and participation rather than dominion and coercion.

Participation is another important aspect of the ‘social trinity’ because it urges us as Christian disciples and Christian leaders, to move beyond the “solitude of One to the communion of the divine Three”¹⁷³ and challenges our leadership practice. “Mutual relationship stands at the very centre of an understanding of God as Trinity”¹⁷⁴ and we can draw upon the nature of *perichoresis* to illuminate what it might mean to be drawn together (the leader and the team), in a sense of one-ness. Moltmann¹⁷⁵ defines *perichoresis* as “the mutual indwelling of Trinitarian persons in each other – “unitedness, at-oneness of the triune God [where they are] as much united with one another and in one another”¹⁷⁶. This suggests something about their

¹⁶⁸ Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (London: Continuum, 1996).

¹⁶⁹ LaCugna, *God for Us*.

¹⁷⁰ Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience*, 156–57.

¹⁷¹ Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁷² Phan, 25.

¹⁷³ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Phan, *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, 283.

¹⁷⁵ Moltmann and Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*.

¹⁷⁶ Moltmann and Moltmann, 150.

union and unity coming from their fellowship with one another rather than the identity of a single person. One might argue that the same can also be said of the way in which VL collaborates with others: united in their fellowship with others rather than focus being given to their specific position.

As Boff¹⁷⁷ notes, perichoresis also conveys something about the mutual permeation of each divine person¹⁷⁸. Being in communion with other people, even as a leader, is more than coming alongside and being 'with'. It is being open to being changed by the encounter with the other person. We do not exist as isolated individual units, but we seek an interdependence – where we are open to being changed by another.

5.2.6 Conclusion

We have explored how VL is characterised by being collaborative, and how by engaging with the social trinity we can learn more about what it means to be collaborative for the leader – the letting go of positional power, the investment in relating to others and opening up of oneself to seek interdependence with others. The research also revealed that VL is more than being collaborative, as another key characteristic identified by participants was the way in which the leader openly acknowledges their weaknesses and limitations - although this has the potential to be both an advantage and disadvantage which we will explore in the next section.

¹⁷⁷ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*.

¹⁷⁸ Boff, 14.

5.3 VL embodies strength in weakness

5.3.1 Introduction

A significant theme emerging from the data, was the way in which participants associated 'weakness' with VL, and responses revealed that this was seen in both a positive and negative light. In the following discussion I will discuss what participants said about weakness being both a negative and positive aspect of VL and what we can learn about weakness from Jesus.

5.3.2 Negative aspects of weakness

When exploring participants perceptions of characteristics associated with leadership, specifically VL, I identified a new characteristic of VL from the data which appeared to highlight a range of negative aspects of what participants understood 'weakness' to be. For example, one participant associated weakness with the leader's personal character, commenting that a characteristic of VL was that the leader would "lack of moral courage, mental weakness, short temper, easily stressed".

Weakness was also perceived by participants, in terms of the way in which a leaders ability to lead was detrimentally affected by their VL. For example, one participant saw VL as "being seen as a weaker leader ... others ideas becoming dominant ... others taking a lead" and another that is was "not standing up for beliefs". This appears to suggest that a weakness in leadership qualities will result in their role as 'leader' being usurped, providing an opportunity for other people to dominate the situation. However INT2 did not view VL as being synonymous with weak leadership and both interviewee's reflected that practising VL requires courage and strength because of the way in which the leader operates with integrity and self-awareness (i.e. being open to admitting to themselves and others, their weaknesses and limitations). It raises

this ongoing tension around how to lead effectively in a collaborative way (as discussed in the previous chapter) that does not result in inaction and confusion.

The data suggested that participants were concerned that VL would result in leaders being too open and honest (oversharing), for example: “weakness in typical leadership qualities ... sharing personal problems”. There appears to be a concern that others may take advantage if a leader is open about their weaknesses, for example, the “risk of being taken advantage of”, whilst another expressed a disadvantage of VL being “people knowing more and misusing power risk of those who are forceful and dominant by nature i.e. strong personality types - risk of some members having their own agenda”. This is supported by Pohl¹⁷⁹ who notes that “when we [the leader] publicly acknowledge our frailties and temptations, other people, if they choose, can take advantage of our transparency and vulnerability”¹⁸⁰.

However there is a fine line between inter-dependency and total dependency – the former being about building up and enabling all people involved, the latter about an unhealthy imbalance and dis-abling in the encounter. One participant saw a disadvantage to VL as “laying burdens on those you’re leading” which is why the idea of ‘appropriate vulnerability’ is so important as noted by both interviewee’s. It’s not about ‘letting it all hang out’¹⁸¹ where you over-burden another person. In addition, VL could also be seen as being “self-serving or self-indulgent” (as identified by one participant). This was echoed by INT1 who referenced Nouwen’s¹⁸² work, that “open wounds stink and do not heal”¹⁸³ and how there is the danger of “spiritual exhibitionism”¹⁸⁴ where the leader will sympathise with someone in order to talk about

¹⁷⁹ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012).

¹⁸⁰ Pohl, 124.

¹⁸¹ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

¹⁸² Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*.

¹⁸³ Nouwen, 88.

¹⁸⁴ Nouwen, 88.

our own problems. The challenge for the leader is finding a balance in how open they are as participant responses indicated that they did not want a leader who was totally exposed, but neither did they want one who was totally hidden.

5.3.3 Positive aspects of weakness

However, participants noted that there were also positive aspects associated with a leader admitting areas of weakness. Only one participant specifically used the word weakness: “capable of showing weaknesses / strengths”, however, the responses implicitly alluded to it because of the positive aspects mentioned. For example, one participant wrote “admitting you're not an expert on everything” and another wrote “honesty about own abilities and limitations”, highlighting the importance of the honesty of the leader. Other responses included, “being confident enough to share concerns and ask for help”, “being honest about personal struggles” and the “ability to admit to things you find difficult”.

When participants began to discuss what they understood VL to mean, there was a general sense that it involved the leader being open and honest about their weaknesses and shortcomings. There appeared to be a correlation between the openness about their weaknesses and limitations, and them not inhabiting the situational power position of ‘expert’. For example one participant wrote how VL is “leaders who confess weakness, failures, problems - ones who don't think they know all the answers”.

When, as one participant wrote “leaders admit to their shortcomings”, the data appears to suggest it can lead to a way of enabling others. For example, one participant who had heard the term before, wrote that VL was the “willingness to be humble and empower others gifts. Being prepared to admit weakness and lack of experience”. This correlation between the

openness and honesty of one's weaknesses and shortcomings which can enable others, was echoed by INT1 who claimed that through VL the leader would "share their own difficulties and be honest about where they are ... allowing our weaknesses to play out [it] enables the gifts and skills of other people". INT1 saw that through the practice of VL, where the Church leader is open and honest about their own weaknesses and difficulties, such as living out their faith, that it can lead to other people being able to be more open and honest about their own struggles.

Another aspect that emerged from the data was the importance of the leader being more approachable. One participant saw an advantage to VL being a "real positive in being open and developing trust as an organisational value. Reveals the leader to be human, and therefore approachable/trustworthy. Honesty in admitting shortcomings, rather than seeking to bluff it out". I would suggest that this is different to the autocratic leadership style which can feed into and over-inflate our ego because of the position of power we wield which is built upon our title and role, especially when we are held up as the 'expert' which again can cause problematic issues of misuse of power when others are belittled for not being an 'expert'. Another participant wrote that VL would lead to "closer relationships between leader / led". I would argue that this cannot happen when both the leader and those being 'led' do not relate to one another from a place of openness and honesty, whilst maintaining healthy boundaries and appropriate vulnerability.

The varied responses from participants reveal the tension that exists regarding what we perceive as 'weakness', and whether we see weakness in a negative or positive light. Brown¹⁸⁵ challenges the myth that vulnerability is a dangerous weakness¹⁸⁶ arguing that "we feel

¹⁸⁵ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

¹⁸⁶ Brown, 33.

contempt when others are less capable or willing to mask feelings, suck it up, and soldier on”¹⁸⁷.

This can result in a judgemental and critical attitude towards others, who are open about their weaknesses and shortcomings, rather than appreciating their courage. In childhood we develop coping strategies to deal with being hurt and put up barriers to protect ourselves. As adults, we need to “take off the armour, put down the weapons, show up, and let ourselves be seen”¹⁸⁸.

For Christians, letting ourselves be seen and embracing our weakness was something actively encouraged by Jesus and St Paul.

5.3.4 Modelling the vulnerability of Jesus and St Paul

Right from the start, we are confronted by Jesus’ vulnerability through the mystery of the incarnation¹⁸⁹. God choose to come to the world not as a military leader or a king, but as a baby; a powerful image that speaks about vulnerability as a defenceless new-born baby is dependent on others for care. Herrick and Mann¹⁹⁰ notes that it is too easy to forget the context into which Jesus was born – not a safe sterile environment, but as a temporary refugee under an oppressive rule to an unmarried mother. We continue to witness powerful moments of Jesus’ vulnerability through his life which culminate in his crucifixion and death.

Early on in Jesus’ ministry we see him being led into the wilderness where he is vulnerable to temptation (Matthew 4), where he would have been physically and emotionally and mentally weakened by fasting, but remains spiritually strong as he turns to God. As Cleverly¹⁹¹ notes, we also see Jesus being emotionally vulnerable with emotions ranging from anger (Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple in Mark 11:15-18) to grief (death of Lazarus

¹⁸⁷ Brown, 33.

¹⁸⁸ Brown, 114.

¹⁸⁹ Herrick and Mann, *Jesus Wept*.

¹⁹⁰ Herrick and Mann.

¹⁹¹ Anita Cleverly, ‘The Vulnerability of Jesus’, *Preach magazine*, 24 October 2018, <https://www.preachweb.org/blog/vulnerability-of-jesus>. Accessed 30/7/22.

John 11:35). Jesus' emotional vulnerability is also very present through the synoptic gospels as they write of his anguish awaiting his arrest (Matthew 26:38, Mark 14:33,34, Luke 22:46). As Walker¹⁹² points out, Jesus' strength and power was exercised through his vulnerability and weakness, through Jesus' self-sacrifice. Jesus chose to accept what was to happen to him - Jesus' own people had plotted against him, one of his disciples betrayed him and one disciple denied him and yet despite knowing all of this, Jesus allowed it to happen. Not taking a defensive stance can be seen as being weak and powerless¹⁹³ and yet this was quite the opposite. Jesus embraced his human weakness and vulnerability for much higher spiritual purposes: that God's Kingdom would come and through him all creation would be redeemed.

It would be reasonable for us to look at Jesus as a model for VL but INT2 suggests a degree of caution to seeing Jesus as a vulnerable leader, because "there's an agency about Jesus choosing to be vulnerable that lots of vulnerable people don't have". Jesus was both human and divine, which we are not, and Jesus could choose to be as vulnerable as he was (in a way we cannot be), because he was firmly grounded and resolute in his mission: to make the love of God known for creation and for the kingdom of God to be revealed to humanity, which would be done through his life, death and resurrection. The sense of a person's agency with respect to their ability to be vulnerable raises an important point. As discussed previously, there are different types of vulnerability and a leader may experience different layers of vulnerability: by being at risk to external factors whilst also seeking to make oneself open to develop relationships. For example, being a woman in leadership does not itself make me vulnerable, but it does when I am impacted by unjust social structures which reinforce prejudice and sexism¹⁹⁴ and which can make it more difficult to model VL.

¹⁹² Simon P Walker, *The Undefended Leader: Leading out of Who You Are : Leading with Nothing to Lose : Leading with Everything to Give* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions, 2010).

¹⁹³ Walker, 278–79.

¹⁹⁴ Greg Bankoff, Georg Frerks, and Dorothea Hilhorst, *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People* (London; Sterling: Earthscan, 2013), 178.

However, Jesus' vulnerability does create a paradox from which Christian leaders can draw wisdom: we are strong when we are weak. This idea that weakness is strength was also something that St Paul explored in the letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians). St Paul is writing to encourage the new believers that adversities will continue despite their faith in Jesus, but it is through God's grace that strength can be gained through our weakness (also link to Philippians 4:13 'I can do all things who strengthens me'). It is when we stop relying on our own strength, and draw on the power of the Holy Spirit to empower us through the times of trial, that God is known¹⁹⁵, which is why St Paul wrote, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30 NRSVA). Instead of seeing weakness as a negative aspect of VL, we can draw on the teaching of St Paul who actively embrace weakness, even boasting of it (2 Corinthians 11:30) - "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10 NRSVA). It is through our weaknesses that we become more open to what God is doing in and through us – we are reminded that God is at the centre of our lives not us: our ego is put in check.

As Christians we are called to be in relationship with God and with each other, and I see the way in which we are open about our weaknesses as being a way in which we embrace and live out the 'Great Commandment' (Mark 12:28-34) - to love others as ourselves. When we can live in acceptance of who we are, we are more able to be accepting of others and their weaknesses. Furthermore, we gain a strength from our vulnerability because when we embrace our weaknesses and allow space for others to come alongside, then we grow in interdependence and fully inhabit what it means to be the Body of Christ, where all parts of the Body are working together.

¹⁹⁵ Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace & Community* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

5.3.5 Conclusion

VL calls for us to attend to the inner life by recognising our weaknesses and limitations and rejecting this ideal of perfectionism which seems to be constantly perpetuated by our Western media with the pressure to look perfect and where people can feel burdened and shamed by failure¹⁹⁶. If people can see someone they trust and respect, being open and honest about their weaknesses and limitations then it makes it easier for them to be open and honest about their own. This means there is something about VL which goes beyond being open and honest about the leader's own weaknesses because of the way in which the leader also inhabits the "role of listener ... to hold a space where something less than perfect is acceptable"¹⁹⁷ which in turn will enable others to be able to be more fully who God is calling them to be.

5.4 VL involves active listening

5.4.1 Introduction

By the time we come to the characteristics of VL in Q4 (as noted in the analysis section) participants are using the word 'listening' more frequently than 'communication', which is an interesting finding. Participants understand VL as being more than an effective communicator: listening is important and people want to be heard. In the following chapter I will discuss what participants said about listening and explore the concept of listening as a theological imperative for Christian leaders.

¹⁹⁶ Caroline Brazier, *Listening to the Other: A New Approach to Counselling and Listening Skills*, 1. publ (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009), 185.

¹⁹⁷ Brazier, 185.

5.4.2 Active Listening

Participants appeared to point towards the nature of the leader themselves as being important to the process. The words used by participants were active rather than passive descriptions, for example “be an active listener”, “be tolerant and to listen to others”, and “willing to listen to others”. This suggests that participants expected someone modelling VL to be actively engaged in the process and encounter. In other words, it is more than hearing what people are saying: there is a connection with what is being said and also with the person saying it. As Miller beautifully puts it, “you can listen like a blank wall or like a splendid auditorium where every sound comes back fuller and richer”¹⁹⁸.

There is also something about the potential for the leader to be changed as a result of the encounter, which was expressed by one participant who wrote how VL was about “able to be open to opinions of others etc. and be influenced by them”. This idea of being influenced by other people’s opinions was seen in both a positive and negative way. In the previous discussion, exploring the concept of ‘weakness’, I noted how some participants believed that a person modelling VL could be influenced by others which would be detrimental to their leadership ability (also noted in the responses to Q8 looking at the disadvantages of VL). However, participants also expressed how VL enables the leader to be much more open to the views and opinions of others and not only be able to listen to what is being said, but being prepared to change their idea or opinion based on the new information gained (“willing to listen and accept new ideas”).

The ability to change an opinion by the leader, comes out of a process of reflexivity, where self-reflection plays a part. A person is unable to embrace the ideas of others and change

¹⁹⁸ William R Miller, *Listening Well: The Art of Empathic Understanding*. (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 26, Kindle Edition.

their own understanding, if they have not first gone through a process of synthesis between their own ideas and the new ideas being presented. A leader will need to be self-aware during this process, to recognise any barriers to embracing the new information (such as emotional, theological and psychological). The importance of self-reflection (inner listening) was identified by both interviewees, but not mentioned by participants' responses to the questionnaire which is itself interesting, given that listening is a Christian discipline undertaken by disciples.

I wonder if participants do not perceive the primary function of a leader as being first and foremost a disciple of Jesus, and therefore the spiritual life of a leader is not an immediate function of their leadership. In addition, as Graham et al notes¹⁹⁹, self-reflection can become narcissistic and self-indulgent, because it makes a person too inward looking, which is not a healthy leadership quality.

In addition, listening does not automatically result in the outcome changing to the outcome desired by another person. INT2 discussed this aspect when seeking to make the distinction between weak leadership and VL; when inviting feedback a leader must be prepared to listen, but in the end the overall decision remains with the leader. When reflecting on a situation where this had happened, INT2 noted that the opportunity for sharing had not inevitably changed the outcome, but people had felt that they had been heard. In this scenario, because INT2 had actively listened to them and did not try and console or respond to defend the organisation which was under scrutiny, it fostered an environment where people could be open and honest.

¹⁹⁹ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*.

Participants highlighted how listening benefits other people because of the way that it can build trust, foster good team-working and enable others to develop. Participants noted that listening to others was important, for example “being willing to listen to other points of views / willing to wait for others to express ideas / beliefs”. The data also expressed something about the way in which active listening fosters other positive aspects, for example, one participant felt that an advantage to VL was the “growth of respect, listening to and understanding each other in all members”.

By actively listening, there is a ripple effect and wider reaching consequences into the development of behaviours and characteristics of the team (both the leader and team members) because of the way they feel validated and empowered²⁰⁰. This was noted by one participant who wrote “I like the idea of being part of a congregation where comments and criticism are listened to and valued”.

It is interesting to consider a point made by INT2, who reflected on the impact that modelling VL had on herself because by creating a space for people to share openly, it resulted in receiving some “robust feedback” from people. Whilst there are positives for other people, in being heard and being able to express themselves openly, the reality is that this does come at a cost for the person at the receiving end - especially if the person talking is projecting their own issues and insecurities and not providing constructive feedback or criticism. This highlights the cost associated with VL to the leader when they are actively listening, because as INT2 suggests, VL is about “being prepared to put yourself in a place where you seek out feedback / criticism on your where you are ... [that you’re] held to account by somebody else for your leadership [but it] can be frustrating [that things] get projected onto you”.

²⁰⁰ Katie Columbus, *How To Listen*. (London: Kyle Books, 2021), 11, Kindle Edition. Kindle Edition

5.4.3 Listening and the 'Great Commandment'

Listening is more than a psychological act²⁰¹, it is also deeply theological. Active listening is at the heart of the Christian faith and of fundamental importance for Christians because it can be transformative, for both the person speaking and listening, and transformation is part of the Christian narrative. Lunn²⁰² notes how listening is about paying attention and is of fundamental importance to Christian ministry because of the way in which it attends to the nature of, and interface between, God and humanity²⁰³.

In the following section, I will explore the theological nature of listening through the lens of the 'Great Commandment' (Matthew 22:36-40) because I believe that VL, especially in the Church context, has an inherently theological role in living out the 'Great Commandment' through listening to God, others and ourselves.

To God: Christians believe that God speaks through both the written Word (Scripture) and Living Word (Jesus) and for us to develop a relationship with God, we are called to make a response which involves us listening to what God is saying to us. Scripture includes numerous stories where God spoke and the people listened (for example God's call on Abraham – Genesis 12:1-9). There is an expectation that God speaks and for us to listen, pay attention and be open to what God says, which may not always be easy. For example we see Moses struggling to listen in his encounter with God as he kept trying to argue why he couldn't lead God's people out of Egypt (Exodus 3-4).

²⁰¹ Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 245.

²⁰² Julie Lunn, 'Paying Attention: The Task of Attending in Spiritual Direction and Practical Theology', *Practical Theology* 2, no. 2 (August 2009): 219–29, <https://doi.org/10.1558/prth.v2i2.219>. Accessed 13/8/22.

²⁰³ Lunn, 219.

Listening strengthens relationships because by paying attention to the other person it shows a sense of care and respect. By listening to Jesus' voice, we may know God for ourselves – we can know God's love and care. It is in the listening, when seeking to know God, that we hear the call of Jesus to follow Him, just as the disciples did when working on their boats (Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:2-11) – when we are listening we are not only able to hear the call to 'come and follow me', but respond to the invitation and embark on an "adventure of Christian discipleship"²⁰⁴. We can follow the example set by Samuel, 'Speak, for your servant is listening'. (1 Samuel 3:10 NRSVA).

To ourselves: As followers of Jesus, we are engaged in the multi-faceted aspects of what it means to live out our Christian faith. Our discipleship adventure requires us to pay attention and actively listen, to be a 'reflective disciple'²⁰⁵, and engage in contemplative listening. It is the act of 'faith seeking understanding' which is at the heart of our theological endeavours because as Christians we are in a living relationship with God. We engage in reflection to sustain us in that ongoing relationship, so that we can learn what it means to be disciples and live better lives accordingly.

However discipleship is not easy. We only have to turn to Jesus' words of caution to the disciples to see this - "'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it'" (Matthew 7:13-14 NRSVA). When we are able to listen to ourselves (cultivating self-awareness) and to God, we can be open and honest about our weaknesses and hurts rather than living in fear of condemnation, and be more

²⁰⁴ Andrew Roberts, *Holy Habits* (Herts.: Malcolm Down Publishing Ltd, 2016), 17.

²⁰⁵ Roger Walton, *The Reflective Disciple* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

accepting of others²⁰⁶. Kelly²⁰⁷ notes how pastoral and spiritual care begins with our own self-awareness and not with the other person's needs, because it is only when we are aware of "the prescription of our lens: our text, our story informed by our experience"²⁰⁸, that we can have a meaningful encounter with another person.

Whilst contemplative listening is helpful to many Christian's, it not universally accepted, because it is generally rejected by those who are resolute in their belief that revelation cannot come from human experience²⁰⁹. This raises the question, as to whether a Church leader's theological tradition would affect their ability to adopt a style of VL. In other words, where theological views held by the church leader are more fundamentalist, would this limit their ability to model VL with its openness to listening to others.

To others: VL engages with people through active listening, thereby living out God's call to grow in relationship with one another. Russell²¹⁰ claims that the concept of interconnectedness is "a crucial aspect of action and reflection in communities of faith"²¹¹ - active listening plays an essential part in developing that sense of connection. This is seen through part of the Church's pastoral ministry, such as chaplaincy, spiritual direction, bereavement support and home visiting.

When we learn to listen to others we let go of our egotistical drive. When seeking to listen without judgement we are better able to value difference and diversity, rather than

²⁰⁶ Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

²⁰⁷ Ewan Kelly, *Personhood and Presence: Self as a Resource for Spiritual and Pastoral Care* (London ; New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2012).

²⁰⁸ Kelly, 2.

²⁰⁹ Hans Evers, 'Contemplative Listening: A Rhetorical-Critical Approach To Facilitate Internal Dialog', *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 71, no. 2 (2017): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305017708154>. Accessed 1/8/22.

²¹⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*.

²¹¹ Russell, 21.

seeking to diminish and control. Miller²¹² argues that listening is “a prerequisite to clear communication”²¹³ because it recognises the limitation of our own knowledge, position and understanding. This is highlighted by Dahlman and Heide²¹⁴ who, when referring to the ‘Iceberg of Ignorance’²¹⁵, claim that problems arise because of a lack of listening by middle and senior management “who often lack sufficient information and therefore make their decisions on the wrong grounds”²¹⁶. Therefore, VL is essential to the future of the Church and the Church of England, which itself could be at risk of being impacted by the ‘Iceberg of Ignorance’.

The consequences to a lack of listening by Church leadership was identified in the Church of England’s ‘Setting God’s People Free’²¹⁷ report, which claimed that lay people in the Church of England had not effectively been equipped for mission and ministry in the life of the Church because their perspectives and needs had not been listened to, or understood²¹⁸. This listening deficit by leaders was also highlighted in Fenton’s²¹⁹ research, as she identified that there has been a dismissal of voices deemed ‘unorthodox’ in the church (i.e. the mothers in her research) and that “clergy may just be revealing their own vulnerability when they stop listening to their parishioners”²²⁰. However, in light of my research, I would suggest it is out of the clergy’s lack of engagement with VL which leads them to dismiss the mother’s understanding of baptism, because of the way in which the clergy do not engage in active listening and therefore do not “take the meaning-making of these women more seriously”²²¹.

²¹² Miller, *Listening Well*.

²¹³ Miller, 12.

²¹⁴ Susanne Dahlman and Mats Heide, *Strategic Internal Communication: A Practitioner’s Guide to Implementing Cutting-Edge Methods for Improved Workplace Culture* (Abingdon, Oxon : New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), Kindle Edition.

²¹⁵ Dahlman and Heide.

²¹⁶ Dahlman and Heide.

²¹⁷ The Church of England, ‘Setting God’s People Free’.

²¹⁸ The Church of England, 15.

²¹⁹ Fenton, ‘Meaning-Making for Mothers in the North East of England: An Ethnography of Baptism’.

²²⁰ Fenton, 239.

²²¹ Fenton, 239.

Another positive aspect of VL is realised in the way it also listens for the benefit of the other person. This is evident in the context of Chaplaincy, when contemplative listening is employed because of the way it helps the person speaking to “calibrate their picture of their life experience and to translate it into words that they themselves understand and can communicate to others”²²².

5.4.4 Conclusion

Listening itself does not make us a ‘good Christian’ but it develops in us the Christian values of love, compassion and grace and enables relationships to flourish, with God, with ourselves and with others. VL engages with a listening practice that goes beyond the superficial, and seeks to discover meaning and understanding that lie beyond the leader themselves. An underlying assumption of VL is that there is value in listening to others and leaders are forced to suspend their ego by admitting that other people can teach them things²²³, which in turn leads to a valuing of difference and diversity. This is in stark contrast with an autocratic leadership style which does not seek meaningful input from others. This highlights another paradox in the Church which is still dominated by autocratic leadership styles (in part because of the Church of England’s institutional structure) and yet seeks to encourage meaningful input from people in the church communities as disciples. In response to the ‘Setting God’s People Free’²²⁴ report, what is needed is not more courses on helping people to talk about their faith, but instead an environment where Church leaders embrace VL and create an environment where meaningful input and the practice of reciprocal listening is encouraged.

²²² Evers, ‘Contemplative Listening’, 114.

²²³ Miller, *Listening Well*.

²²⁴ The Church of England, ‘Setting God’s People Free’.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This research study aimed to explore what lay people within the Church of England understood the term VL to mean. Despite this being a limited research study, the qualitative data has raised some interesting issues of leadership for the Church.

The four key findings I chose to discuss were: i) the term VL is ambiguous, ii) VL is collaborative, iii) VL embodies strength in weakness, and iv) VL involves active listening. There were additional themes which emerges as I analysed the data, for example the importance of integrity as a characteristic of VL, which would offer a good subject for further research.

The ambiguity that surrounds the term VL led me to question whether VL is a meaningful term or meaningless jargon. Whilst it would be easy to use a different title, such as ‘undefended leadership’²²⁵, or even the more theological term of Servant Leadership which was discussed in the literature review. However, I believe VL’s ambiguity provides an opportunity for an open dialogue to enlighten people about the evolution of leadership theory surrounding VL. In addition it also asks us to reconsider the needs of the Church and whether it is time to more fully embrace a new way of leading.

A key characteristic which my participants identified is that VL is collaborative, which was seen positively because of the way in which it enables and empowers other people. This focus on the building up of other people is an important characteristic in Church leadership because of the way in which it draws on the life of the Trinity and teaches us how to live out the fact that we are the ‘Body of Christ’ as faithful disciples.

²²⁵ Walker, *The Undefended Leader*.

In my analysis I have noticed the tension that exists around people's association between vulnerability and weakness. There was the recognition that VL could result in weakness of leadership ability, or the leader being open to abuse by others. However many participants identified a positive association between vulnerability and weakness because of the way in which VL created an open and honest environment where the leader could be open about their weaknesses. When a leader can admit they do not have all the answers and cannot do everything, it enables other people's contribution and input. It is through VL that we can embody what St Paul talks about, when he writes that we are strong when we are weak (2 Corinthians 12:10 NRSVA). However we are also confronted with the paradox that the leader needs to have a degree of confidence (inner strength) to be able to reveal their vulnerability and explore new and collaborative ways of working with others.

This research has enabled me to begin to reflect on my own praxis of VL in light of other people's perception and helped me to become more aware of my own personal bias and assumptions towards this model of leadership. Research findings also reaffirm the importance of VL and the positive contribution it can make to the life of the Church. For example it can contribute by opening up discussions with laity which could enable greater lay participation and responsibility and challenge traditional hierarchical autocratic structures which are not sufficient for our current context. We can begin by addressing some of the key findings from this research on VL at different levels within Diocese – for example: Deanery Synod, Clergy Chapter, Bishop's Staff, IME2 training for Curates, MDR learning and development sessions for clergy. In addition, a summary of findings can be provided for wider circulation, for example I have been invited to submit a summary of my findings to the CPAS²²⁶ leadership newsletter which will contribute to the work that they do in supporting and resourcing church leaders.

²²⁶ 'CPAS - Making Mission Possible', CPAS - Making Mission Possible, accessed 15 August 2022, <https://www.cpas.org.uk/>.

There are also a number of opportunities to develop this research further. Future studies could compare the attitudes and experiences between clergy and laity to explore similarities and differences between the lived experience of what it is like to practice VL compared to being led by someone demonstrating VL. There is also the potential for a larger research study to examine the relationship between VL and gender because in light of Ward's²²⁷ research, women may find it more challenging to model VL than men, particularly as the characteristics of VL mirror some of the stereotypical characteristics of women in leadership – for example collaboration²²⁸. Furthermore, this research offers an opportunity for clergy and laity to critically reflect on the roles of a priest as set out in the Ordinal, and whether these functions enable or restrict VL, for example, when thinking of shepherding how can we undertake this role through the lens of VL).

Church leaders undeniably face a challenge in needing to embrace the paradox that exists in leadership, especially in the Church where there is a balance to be had between fulfilling the more traditional functions of leadership (because of the institutional nature of the Church of England) whilst living out the call of being a disciple and following the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40) to 'love God and love others as yourself'. Leadership is more than theory: it is a practice - a "lived process"²²⁹.

²²⁷ Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders: Nurturing Women's Leadership in the Church* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008).

²²⁸ Ward.

²²⁹ Jones, Murray, and Warren, 'Christian Leadership in a Secular World', 103.

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Appendix One - Focus Group Reflection

As a precursor to the main body of research, I employed the use of an online focus group to begin to explore attitudes towards the concept of vulnerable leadership and highlight any issues, by discussing the proposed questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions with the group. I chose to use a focus group to commence the research because they provide an opportunity to “discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants”²³⁰ and a significant benefit to holding a group discussion rather than an individual interview, is the way in which the interaction between the participants contributes to creating a “joint construction of meaning”²³¹.

Bryman²³² notes how online focus groups are becoming more widely used in qualitative research, not least because they can save time and cost in travelling²³³ for both researcher and participant. However, the decision to meet online was also heavily influenced by the consequences of the current Covid pandemic – meeting online was a ‘safe’ option to prevent the participants and researcher from being exposed to the virus and/or the focus group being unable to take place due to people isolating.

Thomas²³⁴ identifies two kinds of focus groups – one where the researcher acts as facilitator and keeps their participation and interaction with the participants to a minimum, the second is where the researcher takes a lead role and where there is significant interaction with the participants. I chose the latter option which I felt was better suited to explore potential issues with the topic of research and helping to improve the questionnaire and interview design. It also created an environment where my own bias, assumptions and beliefs would be probed.

I met once with the focus group, consisting of three people, for an open ended discussion which lasted for 60minutes, online using Zoom. Participants were selected by a number of sampling methods. Purposive sampling (more specifically a ‘homogeneous sample’) was used on

²³⁰ Tobias O.Nyumba et al., ‘The Use of Focus Group Discussion Methodology: Insights from Two Decades of Application in Conservation’, *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 9, no. 1 (2018): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>. Accessed 12/01/22.

²³¹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 502.

²³² Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.

²³³ Bryman, 502.

²³⁴ Gary Thomas, *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017), 213–14.

the basis that they are congregation members of churches within the Church of England. Convenience sampling was used to maximise the efficiency of our time together and assist with the participants feeling of comfort in a group setting. I selected people I knew work well together and with whom I already had a good and trusted relationship, to enable an open and honest conversation. Furthermore I knew that they are able to work together on an online platform. Whilst the sample is not representative of the total number of lay people and clergy in the Church of England, this is not necessarily a weakness for the purposes of this study.

From the group discussion a number of insights emerged:

- The participants noted the use of the word 'leadership' rather than 'leader' which developed into a discussion around the choice of word and how it might influence the responses that people give. This was an important point as it confirmed my belief that I will need to include a brief note in my dissertation explaining why I specifically chose to use this term. When generating the research title I reflected on which term to use - this is important in terms of reflecting on reflexivity because it highlights my influence on the research design but also that language / the use of language is important and can affect understanding and meaning.
- The participants struggled a little when answering the question around vulnerable leadership as they were not familiar with the concept. After providing some thoughts they asked for a definition. Initially I was reluctant to provide a definition as the research is iterative and inductive and I wanted to minimise my influence at this point – my aim is to seek to understand what people believe it to mean for themselves. I provided Sykes²³⁵ explanation, that we can be vulnerable in two ways, firstly through circumstances (which was the understanding of the participants) and secondly through choice – which I confirmed was my understanding and which is being presented as a preferential leadership model. This discussion confirmed a number of things.

First, that whilst there is a growing awareness of vulnerable leadership as a helpful model for leaders with books emerging and courses being developed (e.g. CPAS Vulnerable Leadership), there appears to be a tension and even dissonance between what people in general might understand it to mean, and what those who are seeking to

²³⁵ Emma Sykes, *Vulnerability in Leadership* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2016), 4.

model it (and train on it) understand it to mean. This might therefore be one factor which will influence people's attitudes towards it being modelled within the Church – something that could be explored in a much larger study.

Secondly, it highlighted a possible risk (inherent with inductive research) to the data collected through the questionnaire. Because I have chosen not to provide information which might encourage those completing the questionnaire to give their thoughts even if they do not know anything about vulnerable leadership as a concept (i.e. context or definition) this may result in people not completing sections of the questionnaire. I decided to accept the risk and, being mindful of reflexivity, resisted including extra information because I want to limit my influence on the participant's response. This is a limited research project which is using mixed methods and data will also be collected from the semi-structured interviews and secondary sources (e.g. the literature on vulnerable leadership).

- A critique of the questionnaire led to a reflection of the design. One participant felt that moving from the initial questions 'have you heard the term vulnerable leadership?' to 'what do you think it means?' might be problematic if people are not familiar with the concept and that people would struggle to write anything (i.e. it was too abstract). I changed the wording to try and locate the question within a context and it now reads 'If you heard church leaders talking about 'Vulnerable Leadership', what do you think it might mean?' They also suggested that rearranging the order of questions might help people to engage with the questions and so the questionnaire begins with generic questions on leadership before moving on to consider a more specific model.

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Appendix Two - Questionnaire Form and Semi Structured Interview Questions

Questionnaire

1. List 3 characteristics / values required for anyone in leadership outside the church

2. List 3 characteristics / values required for anyone in leadership in the church

3a. Have you heard the term 'Vulnerable Leadership'

Yes (go to question 3b)

No (go to question 3c)

Not sure (go to question 3c)

3b. Please describe where you heard it and what do you understand it to mean

3c. If you heard church leaders talking about 'Vulnerable Leadership', what do you think it might mean?

4. List 3 key characteristics that you think would demonstrate 'Vulnerable Leadership'

5. How do you feel about the idea of 'Vulnerable Leadership'

6. What would your attitude be to someone in the church demonstrating 'Vulnerable Leadership' (where 1 is strongly disapprove and 5 is strongly approve)

Vicar	1	2	3	4	5
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Reader (LLM)	1	2	3	4	5
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Churchwarden	1	2	3	4	5
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7. Please list the advantages of 'Vulnerable Leadership'

8. Please list the disadvantages of 'Vulnerable Leadership'

9. Are you ordained? Yes No

10. Are you currently in a leadership position (inside or outside the church)? Yes No Not sure

When the questionnaire has been completed please put it in the box provided at the back of church or email it to revdayvik@gmail.com

Thankyou for your time and support.

Semi-structured interview Questions

1. Have you heard the term 'Vulnerable Leadership?'

Yes (ask supplementary question 1a)

1a. Please describe where you heard it and what do you understand it to mean

No / Not sure (ask supplementary question 1b)

1b. If you heard church leaders talking about 'Vulnerable Leadership', what do you think it might mean?

2. What do you think are the key characteristics of someone demonstrating 'Vulnerable Leadership?'

3. How do you feel about the idea of 'Vulnerable Leadership?'

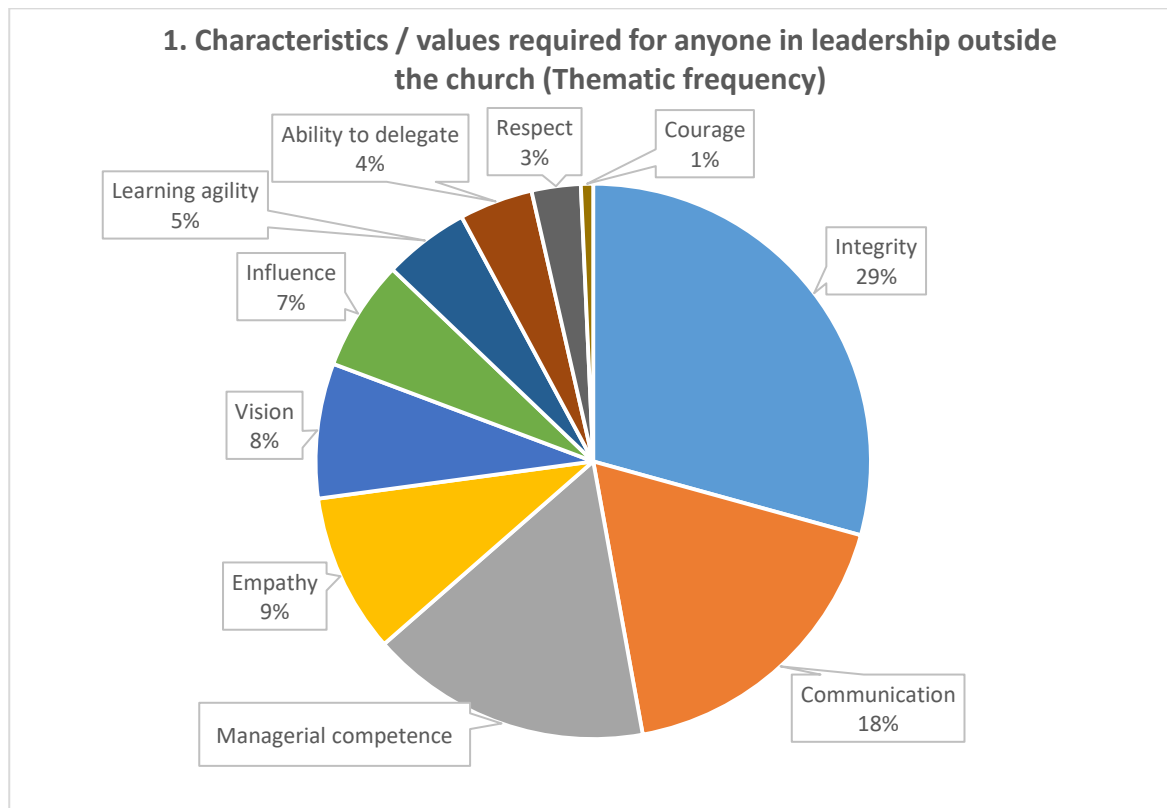
4. Do you try and model this yourself – how?

5. What do you think are the advantages of 'Vulnerable Leadership?'

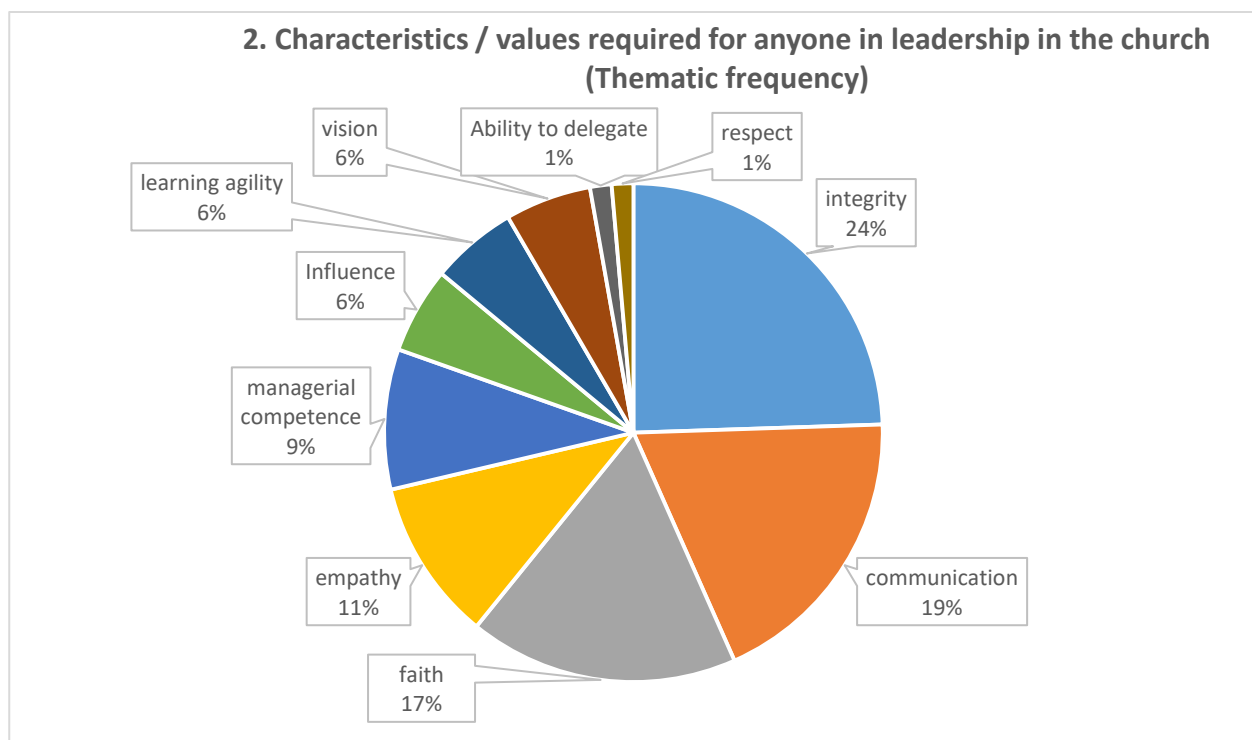
6. What do you think are disadvantages of 'Vulnerable Leadership?'

Appendix Three – Results Graphs and Tables

Question 1. List 3 characteristics / values required for anyone in leadership outside the church



Question 2. List 3 characteristics / values required for anyone in leadership in the church



Question 3a – Have you heard the term vulnerable leadership?

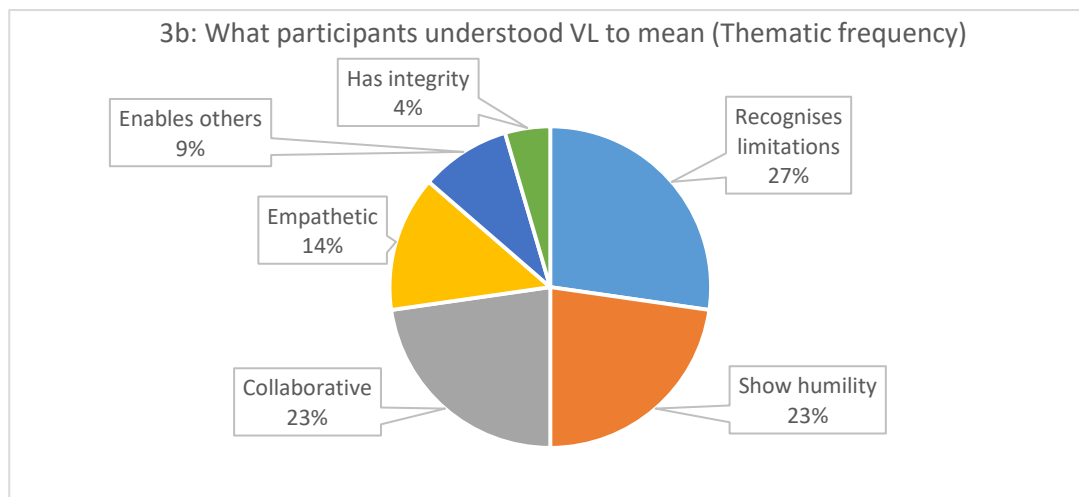
	Yes	No	Not sure	N/R
Total	12	31	4	5
%	26	56	7	11

Question 3b: Please describe where you heard it and what do you understand it to mean

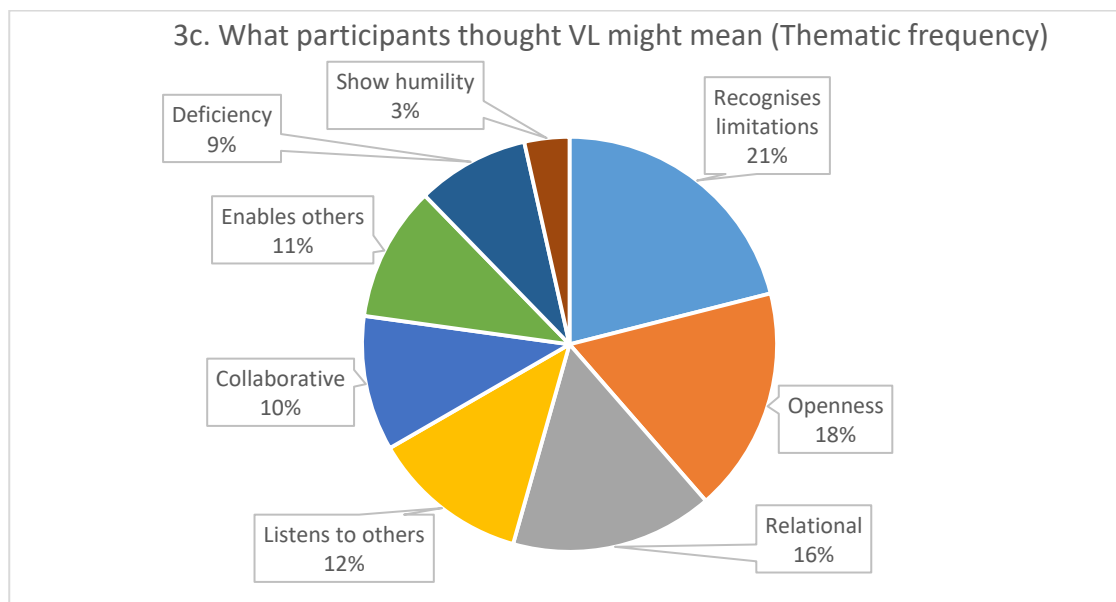
Where participants heard it:

Internet search	In church when research announced	Resources (research / books)	Course / training	No response	Not sure
4	3	2	2	3	1

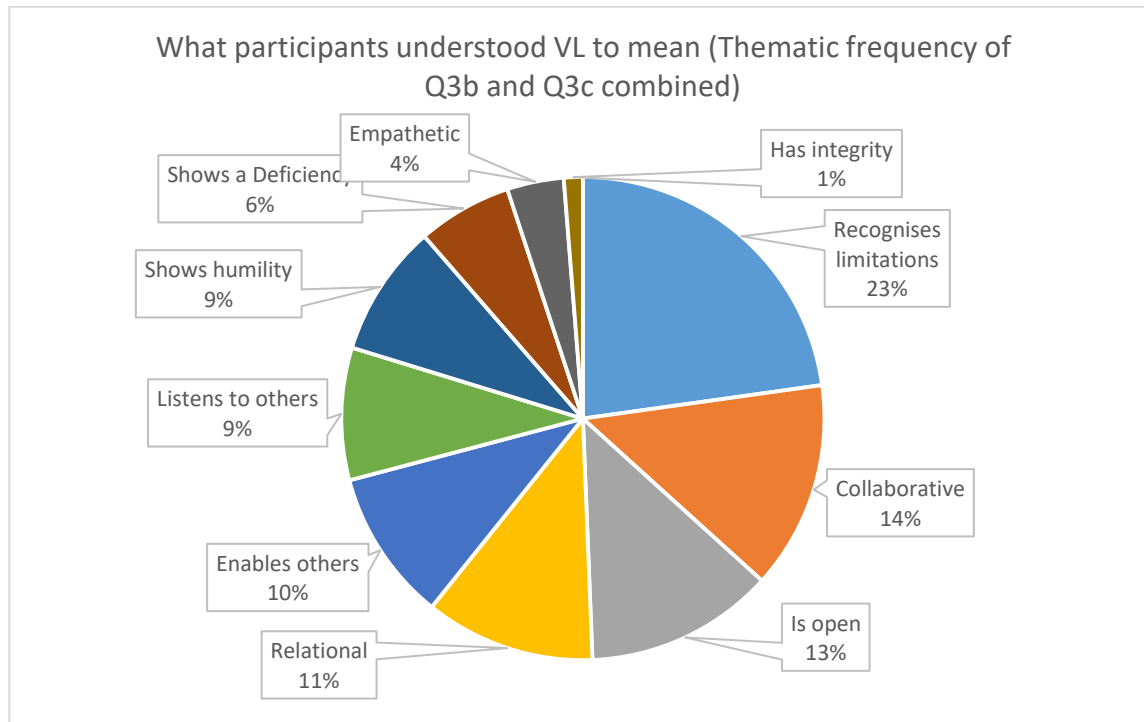
What participants understand it to mean:



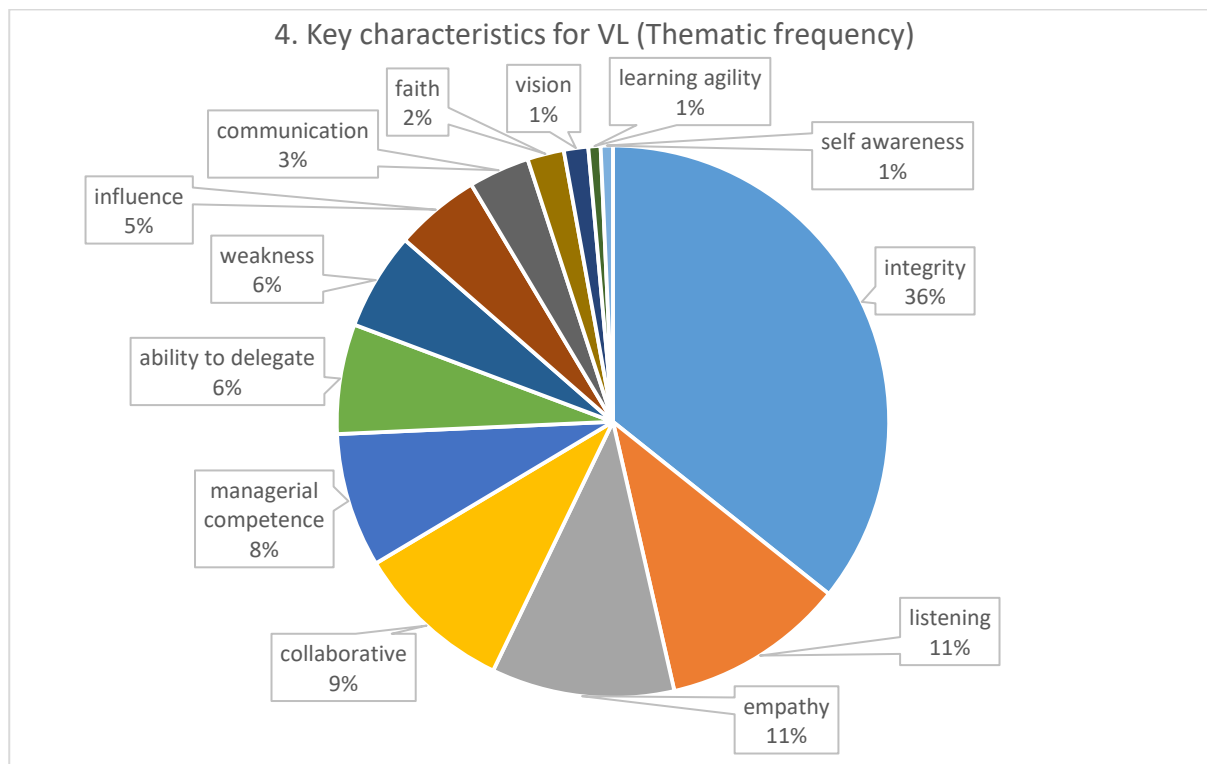
Question 3c. If you heard church leaders talking about 'Vulnerable Leadership', what do you think it might mean?



Thematic frequency when results of Q3b and Q3c combined:



Question 4. List 3 key characteristics that you think would demonstrate 'Vulnerable Leadership'



Ranking of characteristics when compared to results of Q2:

Q4 characteristics	Comment
integrity	still top but much stronger position
listening	New category
empathy	+1 place - same level of coverage but now rank 3rd
collaborative	new category
managerial competence	stay same in 5th place
ability to delegate	+1 place - slight increase in popularity
influence	-1 place
faith	-5 places and significant change in popularity of characteristic. because didn't specify 'church' in the question
vision	-3 places - slight decrease in popularity
learning agility	-4 places - decrease - minimal impact
self-awareness	was mentioned but only once
communication	Lower position because listening now its own category – not as frequency as Q1 or Q2

Question 5. How do you feel about the idea of 'Vulnerable Leadership'

(See discussion in Chapter Three: Results and Analysis section)

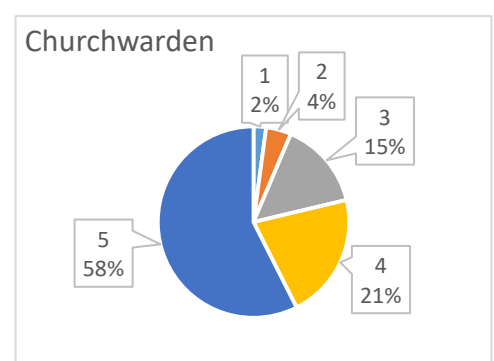
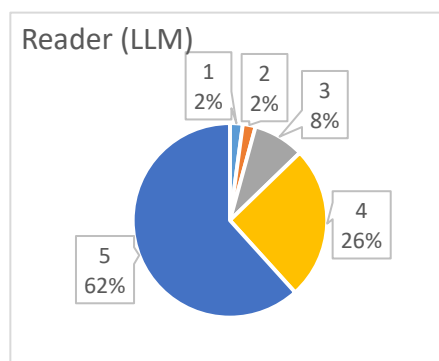
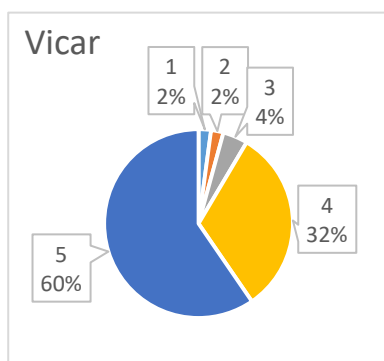
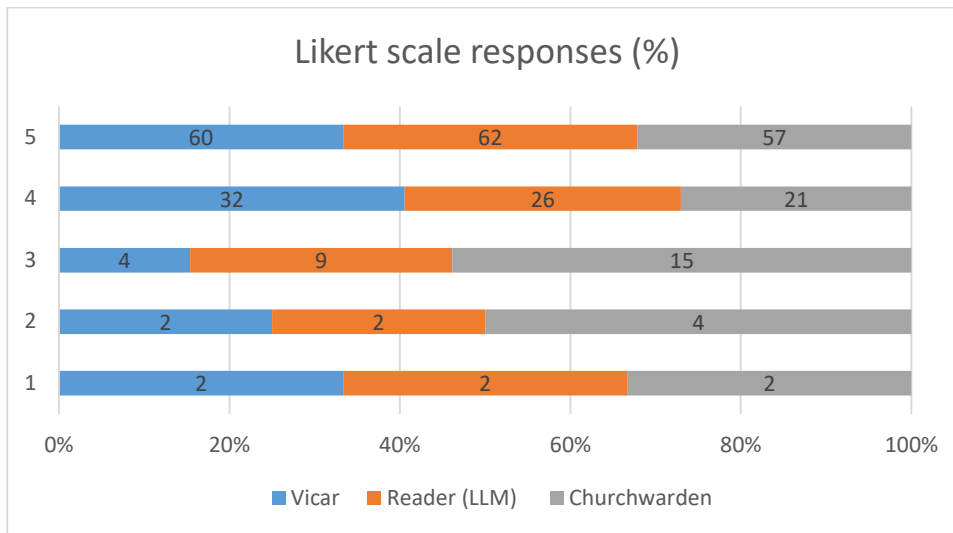
Question 6: What would your attitude be to someone in the church demonstrating 'Vulnerable Leadership' (where 1 is strongly disapprove and 5 is strongly approve)

Table to illustrate frequency of responses

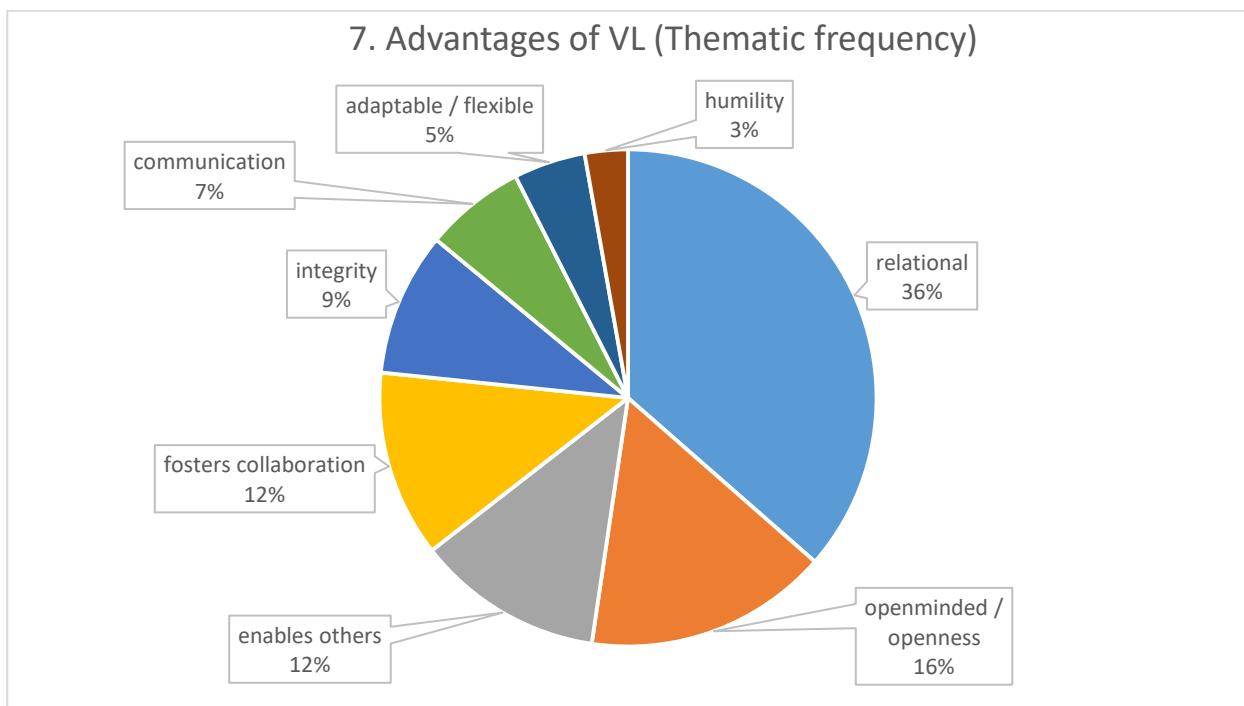
	Likert Scale					
	1	2	3	4	5	N/R
Vicar	1	1	2	15	28	4
Reader (LLM)	1	1	4	12	29	4
Churchwarden	1	2	7	10	27	4

Table to illustrate % of responses

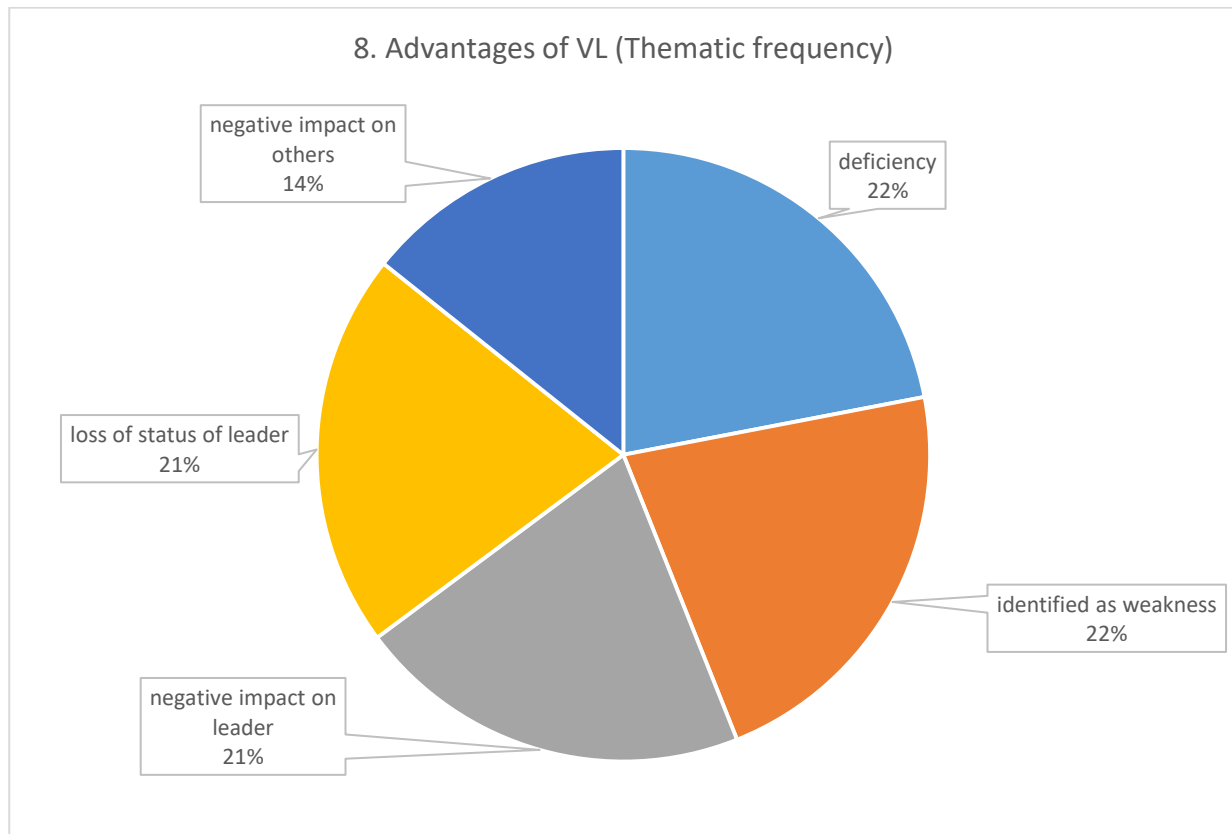
	1	2	3	4	5
Vicar	2	2	4	29	55
Reader (LLM)	2	2	8	24	57
Churchwarden	2	4	14	20	53



Question 7. Please list the advantages of 'Vulnerable Leadership'



Question 8. Please list the disadvantages of 'Vulnerable Leadership'

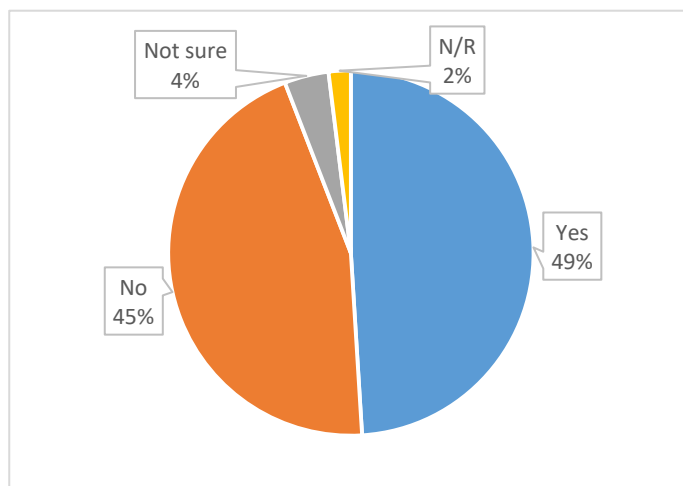


Question 9: Are you ordained?

(See discussion in Chapter Three: Results and Analysis section)

Question 10 - Are you currently in a leadership position?

	Yes	No	Not sure	N/R
Total	25	23	2	1



Appendix Four - “10 essential leadership qualities”

list of essential leadership qualities, created by the Centre for Creative Leadership, used for thematic analysis of Q1, Q2 and Q4

1. Integrity
2. Ability to delegate
3. Communication
4. Self-awareness
5. Gratitude
6. Learning agility
7. Influence
8. Empathy
9. Courage
10. Respect

<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/characteristics-good-leader>