

LEAD ON

CO-LEADERSHIP: SHARING VISION AND DECISION

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A Partnership of Two

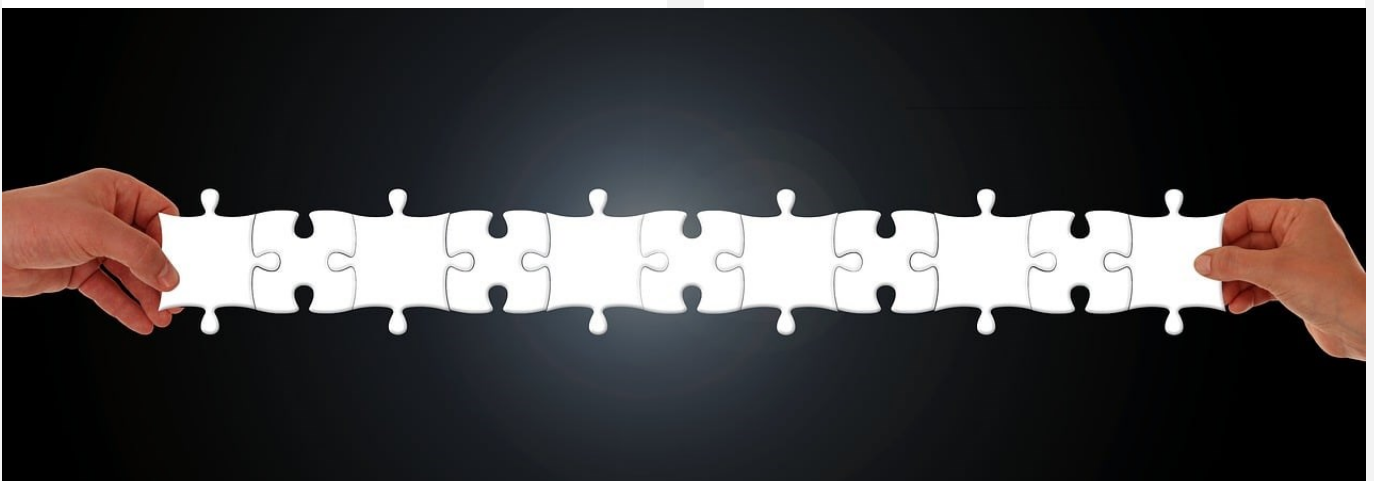
We, Tim and Lee, both lead the Ministries Team at the Baptist Union. Together, we oversee the vision for the Union's accreditation of ministers and the processes that aim to form and develop them. It's not a job-share as we each work full-time. Rather, it is co-leadership.

We are defining co-leadership here as that exercised by just two people working in partnership. In Baptist circles it is an increasingly common arrangement, not so much in our churches, but in trans-local roles where co-leaders oversee staff teams. Two of the five colleges that train our ministers have co-principals. Four of our thirteen regional associations have team co-leaders.

Perhaps this reflects the Baptist way of doing church, which encourages collaborative working and consensus building – Baptists understand that discerning the mind of Christ is best done together and not alone. Or perhaps it is just a pragmatic approach to a job with lots to do and decide.

Speaking for ourselves, it is both. It started pragmatically: There was a job no-one wanted to do. Someone had to do it. Both of us thought the other one of us should. But neither would. So we concluded we had better share it. (We in fact amalgamated two roles, those of Team Leader and Development Advisor, to create two equal positions.) But beyond pragmatism, we have found co-leadership to be an expression of the Baptist principle of 'walking with and watching over one another.'

We admit that a partnership of two is not a common feature of New Testament leadership. Leadership is often shared, but usually among a group, such as the deacons appointed in Acts 6, or the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Working as a pair seems to be reserved for itinerant mission, a pattern established when Jesus sent out the disciples two-by-two (who got Judas?) and continuing with Peter and John and with Paul and his sequence of co-missionaries. What is harder to find is a pair of co-leaders exercising oversight of a team or a community. Maybe only Paul and Barnabas in their formative year in Antioch, or Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus fulfil this brief.





Benefits and Challenges

So, what benefits and challenges does co-leadership bring? We have distilled our thoughts, along with those of our co-leading Baptist colleagues into six areas:

1. CO-LEADERSHIP INTRODUCES DIVERSITY

The aforementioned Priscilla and Aquila stand as an example. The presence of difference among co-leaders always means more angles are considered when plans or decisions are made. And when people of different gender, race or background co-lead, it makes a powerful statement to those looking for role models.

Mind you, this is a little theoretical for us! We are both balding, six-foot, middle-aged white men and often one of us gets called by the other's name. This phenomenon may simply be a consequence of looking alike (if viewed from a distance with no glasses on), but we choose to regard it positively. We rather hope our working as one makes us hard to distinguish. Likewise, the way our immediate team has ascribed to us a collective name. Not knowing whether they should refer to us as Lee'n'Tim or Tim'n'Lee, they call us Lemon Tea.

2. CO-LEADERSHIP SHARES RESPONSIBILITY

This might be the most obvious benefit of all. But it is not just that the burden of decision-making is shared. It is that decisions are just, well, better. We have lost count of the times we have refined or even reversed our trajectory on the basis of joint reflection.

This is a comforting safeguard when decisions have to be made quickly. We feel less exposed. And even when we maintain an intended course of action, it is

often with greater confidence or more nuance, because two minds have considered the matter.

This is not to say we always get it right. The risk remains that wrong thinking by one is lazily confirmed by the other, especially if we are defending ourselves against criticism. Yet we find it more likely that one of us will name this temptation to collusion and so avoid it.

3. CO-LEADERSHIP ENABLES WONDERING

Each of us has an immediate place to go with any tentative vision, left-field solutions, or musings about the reality of a situation or the motives of other players. In leadership, it can be hard to know with whom it is wise to share these thoughts. But a trusted co-leader can be a safe person in which to confide openly and honestly.

We have formal spaces for speaking truthfully, of course. We both have a (different) pastoral supervisor who helps us to examine how we work and how work affects us. But at any one moment supervision may be weeks away, so having a more available sounding board is tremendously useful.

4. CO-LEADERSHIP INCREASES CAPACITY

The maths are simple. We have two skillsets to choose from, two leadership styles to offer, and two diaries to play with. The key is to use this wide range of options wisely and to avoid duplication. So, though we share responsibility for the whole, we divide up our work quite strictly. Some strategic work is of such significance we agree to share it. But we more usually ask ourselves which of us has the most suitable gifts and leadership style for any situation.

Even within our own areas, we delay in order to consult if we are unsure. We also divide up the line management of the team we oversee, and we tell those we regularly engage with which one of us they should speak to about what. Having said this, not all co-leaders we spoke to work in this delineated fashion. Some share all tasks and allocate work simply on the basis of who has the greatest capacity at any point. Either way, it is essential to review frequently the division of work.

5. CO-LEADERSHIP REQUIRES GRACE

Co-leaders bring two personalities and there are bound to be tensions. When we asked one co-leader for a top tip, they replied without hesitation, 'Learn to forgive each other.' Collaborative leadership involves honest feedback and frequent challenge – some co-leaders meet with a facilitator every couple of months to help them do this. Frank exchanges require resilience and humility and lots of grace. Yet there is something beautiful in this. Neither of us stands atop the pile, nor has the right to act alone, nor can afford the conceit of imagining ourselves in charge. Being a co-leader is a good antidote to pride.

6. CO-LEADERSHIP MEANS COVENANT

Done well, co-leadership models what Baptists would name as a covenantal relationship. It is a commitment between two people to work in partnership, despite personality difference, individual preference, theological disparity and so on. We hope this covenant language does not sound trite. We think it is imperative that each co-leader dives deeply into an understanding of the other. This demands dedicated and consistent communication.

We use messaging and Teams calls for quick-fire communication and weekly meetings for talking through current work. When we have something more significant to discuss, we set time aside to talk it through together. And from time-to-time we disappear off for a day to make space for thinking about the big picture and for reviewing our relationship.

A superficial relationship will simply not suffice for co-leaders wishing to present with confidence a united sense of purpose and direction. Please note that the covenant should include an agreement to refuse to disparage the other in any way whatsoever. As a colleague of ours says, 'Meet regularly, communicate clearly, trust implicitly, support in public, critique in private, honour always.'

More to Consider

We are only one year into co-leadership and there is more to ponder on. Does our partnership of two make others feel excluded? How will we end this season well if one decides it is time to move on and the other wishes to remain? There is room here for further reflection, but on balance we both know the value of this way of working. Put simply, neither of us wants to carry alone what we currently carry together. God in his mercy has given us each other.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What are you carrying alone that you could share with another?
- What control would you have to give up in order to co-lead?
- How might co-leadership work in a parish or congregational setting?

