

FOUR MORE THINGS I WISH I'D KNOWN WHEN I STARTED LEADING A CHURCH

BY MATT HOGG

INTRODUCTION

After leading a church for the last 11 years, I had a major shift in ministry last summer when I moved to work for CPAS as a Leadership Enabler. The experience has been entirely positive although at times disorientating. Parish ministry is more than just 'ministry'. It's community, workplace, mission field, neighbourhood, and in many ways, your family. As a result, I have found myself doing a lot of reflecting which has given rise to two Lead On articles (January 2022 and this present article).

In part one I shared four leadership reflections:

1. Look backwards to move forward.
2. The ministry of presence.
3. Make space to experiment.
4. Firm but flexible boundaries.

In this article I want to offer four more tools and learnings that have continued to help me lead, year in and year out.

1. STICK TO THE JOB DESCRIPTION

When we first landed in the parish, my expectation was to grow a congregation on one of those 'up and to the right' type growth curves, to build a big church and grow a large staff team. As the church was empty to begin with, the bar was low, so even with my wife and new child turning up, it felt like revival was breaking out.

In fact, with a planting team and others who were moving into the area from week one, things were looking great. But then when people started moving abroad, and changing jobs, or graduating and leaving the capital, or growing a family and seeking more space, we found that we were beginning to say 'goodbye' as well as 'hello' to people on a regular basis.



To begin with this really tapped into all my insecurities. We were meant to smash through the 200 barrier and keep pressing forward. But when we stopped to reflect, we realised that God was doing something through this. Perhaps the shape of our ministry wasn't primarily to be about building a big church, but to build up missionary disciples.

It was an epiphany moment, and what was rather shocking was that I had so quickly forgotten to keep focused on my primary job description: to make disciples.

I think back to the Corinthian church when Paul was writing to them. It was not a large church. I understand it had around 30 people in it. But how did it begin? Missionary disciples were sent from one part of the world to share the gospel in another. Someone said that 'I'm not interested in your seating capacity, but in your sending capacity'. Somewhere else I remember hearing the analogy of a lake versus a river, and the importance of 'sending them' out rather than focusing simply on 'seating them in'.

On that basis our church was sending people out every year to different parts of the country, and even the world. We realised that we needed to invest in them during the time they were with us; to help them discover their unique shape, and to grow in faith and confidence in the Lord so that wherever they ended up, they would be ready to serve, lead and pray for their community and come under the vision of their new church.

2. EMBRACE YOUR WEAKNESS

To begin with it was hard to swallow all the people we were sending out every year, but God showed us how each person carried a story of God's work in their lives. They each had a testimony of the way they had encountered God while they were with us, and as we shared those stories we found that it released faith and raised courage.

We decided to ask those who were commissioned each year to give us a few things:

- To pray for us.
- To tell their friends who were moving to the area about us.
- To write down a paragraph or two on what God had done in the lives during their time with us.

I tell you what, that last one kept me going on rainy days. Not only that, they also gave me permission to share their stories in sermons and our leadership development training so that their experience continued to bless our people long after they had left.

When we shared their stories you could sense faith rising in the room. You could almost see people being filled with courage, as they heard how people who had been part of our community had encountered God.

The principle was to embrace our apparent weakness. Maybe you have a particular feature in your own context that feels like a weakness, perhaps something that causes you to compare and say to yourself, 'if only we were like that parish over there', or 'if only we could have what that church has, then we could really motor'.

It could be your context, your demographic, or the buildings you have or don't have, or even internal and personal weaknesses that you carry (for example you find yourself saying 'I'm not very good at public speaking', or 'I'm not a Billy Graham' and so on).

There's something about embracing our weakness for the sake of Jesus that leads to blessing.

3. FIND AND BUILD A TEAM

I'm aware that having a paid staff team is not to be taken for granted, but whether you have a paid team or not, the principle still stands: gathering trusted people around you as you seek to follow Jesus in his plans and purposes for your church and community.

We see the principle at work in Jesus' life (gathering disciples and friends around him was obviously a core part



of the redemptive plans of God). We see it in the early Church, where churches were planted and overseers and deacons were invited to lead as part of a collective or group of leaders that brought different gifts to the table.

So one of the things I sought to do over the years was build a little ministry team around me as we responded to the opportunities in front of us. Not only did these people become colleagues, they also became friends. Not only was ministry much more enjoyable as a team, but it was such a relief to be able to share responsibility with those more gifted than me.

Part of the process is to identify the people who are around during the week and might be able to get stuck in. I began internally and then thought externally.

1. Internally

I went through the list of church members and assessed who might have some time to offer. I then scheduled a conversation with them to find out about their story and their passions and to see if there was any synergy with the opportunities around us (for example, anything from starting an older people's ministry, to a parenting course, to helping administratively in the office).

2. Externally

I explored who was out there beyond the church community and in the local area. The people of peace who were friends and loved our church. This led to people giving their time to re-laying patios, putting up fences, helping us deliver food parcels and handing out drinks at the carol service. Beyond the local community I approached an American Christian university to see if any of their students would like to get involved in a local church to help enhance their experience of living in a

different country for a year. This led to a raft of students getting stuck in to office work, youth work, home groups and administration.

Building a team is not only fun, but it's essential as we respond to the opportunities before us.

4. KEEP CONNECTED TO THE BIGGER PICTURE

Life in a parish consumes a lot of attention and focus. Rightly so, and what a privilege. However, I have found that combining this focus with a broader perspective makes an enormous difference to the way you lead in the day to day.

Seeing the bigger picture of how your ministry fits into the larger story of God at work in the city and nation won't happen naturally of course, unless you build in some practical features to help you.

For those in the Church of England, each parish is part of a deanery and each deanery is part of a diocese. Within this structure (ideally) we hear about the things God has been doing across many churches, which serves to encourage us in our own leadership.

We sought to apply this principle elsewhere too. So committing to a summer festival each year was essential for our community. Not only did we hear stories of what God was doing across the country, and hear of new churches being planted, we found that it paid dividends throughout the rest of the year, not just in my own leadership, but also in the way that those festival 'attendees' were more committed to the vision of our church shown through their serving, praying and giving.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. Consider for a moment those things that are taking up a lot of thought space, or dare I say, 'worry time'. Stop for a moment and hand them over to the Lord. Remind yourself of your job description, and who it is that has invited you to play a part in his story.
2. Where are there some practical needs at your church right now? Who in your church might have a bit of time to serve if they knew about the opportunity? What about those outside of your church community?
3. What is the apparent 'weakness' in your own context (easily identified because you find yourself musing 'if only we had...')? Talk to God about that weakness and be ready to see how he might show you his strength through it.

