

FOUR THINGS I WISH I KNEW STARTING OUT AS A CHURCH LEADER

BY MATT HOGG

INTRODUCTION

I had the privilege of planting and leading a church in West London for 11 years. In many ways it was where, for me, leadership theory became leadership practise. I made mistakes, I faced my fears, I had to get on my knees. Oh, and my wife and I had to work out how to recover from planting a church and giving birth to our new-born son, both on the same day. I wouldn't have had it any other way though. What an adventure. What a faithful God we serve.

Last summer, however, I moved out of the parish and began to work at CPAS as a Leadership Enabler. I've been reflecting on some of those helpful leadership principles that served me well during 11 years of church leadership;

learnings that I would tell myself if I were starting again. I thought some of them, outlined below, could be of interest to you too.

CONTEXT

First, though, some context. Our church building was on a housing estate in Fulham, West London, built in the Victorian era, a plant from a neighbouring parish. Zone 2 on the tube map, we experienced up to 40% turn-over of people each year. On average people would stay with us for two years, so it was a good opportunity to invest in them, give them space to develop their gifts, relationship with God, and then commission them out to new pastures. There were the typical social challenges that come with an inner-city parish, but one that particularly grabbed our heart strings was the fact that 32% of under 16 year-olds lived in poverty, so we did a lot of work with young people in the community.

When we planted, the building had been closed for six years. The previous vicar had re-ordered the church and done phenomenal work putting in glass doors, opening it up to the community and making it fit for purpose. It was into this context that we re-established a worshipping community, and had a vision to see a great awakening of faith in Jesus, transforming Fulham and beyond.

I arranged to go and see the previous vicar who did all that amazing re-ordering work and associated fundraising and faculty applications. I told him how grateful we were for all the work he had done, for getting the building fit for purpose so we could use it for services, courses, play groups and events. I wanted to thank him for the sacrifices he had made. I believe he was encouraged by that conversation.

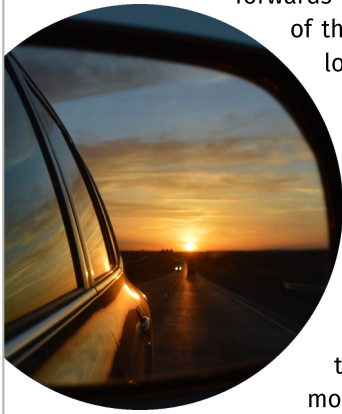


1. LOOK BACKWARDS TO MOVE FOWARDS

Looking backwards to move forwards was a principle that applied time and time again during my time as incumbent. Bishop Ric Thorpe encouraged me to think about the stories of the past to inspire mission and vision in the present.

I spent time researching 'Saint Alban', after whom the church had been named, and retold his story in sermons and leadership development sessions and vision Sundays. I recounted the sad stories of a couple of young men who had died from drug overdoses in our community before we arrived, to help us capture something of the grieving heart of God. We sensed his compassion for a lost and broken world which propelled our desire to love, serve and pray for our community.

Time and again we found this such a helpful tool as we looked back to God's story in our community over the decades. Isn't this pattern of looking backwards to move forwards what we see in the Bible? Many



of the Jewish festivals are based on looking backwards to inspire faith for the present and future. So to is the institution of the Eucharist, a sacrament based on remembering the incredible work of God in Christ, and also a reminder of God's faithful promise to come in finality at the end of the age. Look backwards to move forwards.

2. THE 'MINISTRY OF PRESENCE'

When we planted the church, we were energised by Peterson's version of John 1:14, that the 'word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood'. The incarnational ministry of Jesus reflected in the people of God becoming downwardly mobile and committed to a particular area of a transient city for the sake of the gospel. We encouraged those who, up to that point, weren't living in the community, to move to the neighbourhood. Many did. It was a prophetic act and a small sign pointing to the way that Jesus moved towards us.

It was a conversation with my Archdeacon that brought this vision into even greater clarity. He talked about the ministry of the local church as the 'ministry of presence'. Being present at the school gate, present on local action groups, present on the school governing body, present in the shops, present in the neighbourhood, present with the poor, present with the lost, present because Jesus moved into the neighbourhood that we might not be absent from him in eternity.



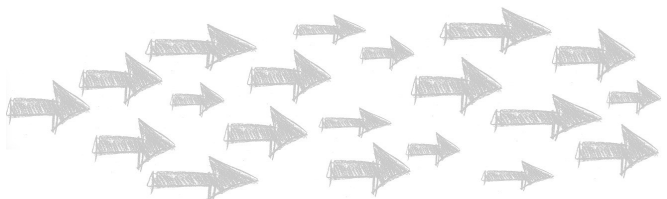
After committing to building relationships with people, we often found evidence of the kingdom of God in the lives of those around us. Being present as salt and light always results in kingdom fruit, whether we see it or not.

3. MAKE SPACE TO EXPERIMENT

Perhaps because of the context into which we planted, we felt like we almost had a blank canvas (in an accountable relationship with the Bishop, of course!). As a result, everything seemed quite fluid and we began to see new ideas emerge that led to some creative ways of connecting evangelistically with our community. One of those was a football project that was the seedbed of mission amongst young people. Someone had a vision, the drive, and some time to connect with local young people, and as a result youth ministry began to develop.

Another project began that helped people to explore faith through film. Someone had an idea, some time and a team, so we gave them space to get going with a monthly curated space that enabled people to watch a film and host discussion around the themes that emerged from the film, trying to help people bridge the gap between media, culture and the gospel.

We tried various things, and found that piloting initiatives gave us some quick feedback and analysis on the need and opportunity, and we weighed it up against the resources available. Some things continued and became permanent features, while others were seasonal, but it created a sense of permission to try things out. The important thing was to give people the space, in an accountable relationship, to plan, prepare, execute, and review together. By creating a little reflection cycle it enabled things to grow and develop.



4. FIRM BUT FLEXIBLE BOUNDARIES

As mentioned, the day that we had arranged for our bishop to come, and we had invited local dignitaries to help celebrate the re-opening of the church, was the same day that my wife gave birth to our first child. Someone later on said how beautiful prophetic it was, having a new baby and starting a church on the same day; just not very practical.

As everything coincided together it took us a while to find a good pace of life. At the end of the first year it would be safe to say we felt rather exhausted. Taking some time to reflect showed us that while we might be seeing lives transformed all around us, if at the end of it life wasn't working at home, our plans and pace needed to change.

As a result we made sure that we had some boundaries in place that protected our family unit. We made sure that we were talking regularly, looking ahead to the week, the month and year to see where potential pinch points might come. It was James Lawrence who said to me in a conversation recently that we need firm but flexible boundaries rather than fixed or fluid boundaries. I think that articulated something of what we tried to aim for during those 11 years.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. Making space to reflect is essential. Looking back, It's something I wish I did more of. Do you have space for reflection booked into your diary in 2022? There are invaluable nuggets waiting for you there, not least, the affirmation of God over your life and leadership.
2. Which of these four learnings most resonates with you as you read them? Are there any practical next steps that you feel you could apply today?
3. Are there any areas where you feel the grass is greener in another parish? 'if only we had... then I would... '? We all do it. What does it look like to embrace an apparent weakness today and find Jesus there?