

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FOR YOUNGER LEADERS

BY BEN DYER

As I step into a meeting with a group of 20 local church leaders I am acutely aware that I am different. I grew up listening to Eminem and Gorillaz, everyone else in the room thinks Eminem are a type of chocolate and Gorillaz are large primates that live in jungles.

For most of my life I have been the youngest leader in any room, at 19 I was part of a team that started a new congregation out of St Michael-le-Belfrey, York and at 24 I moved to Ormskirk to plant an Anglican church for young adults (18-30s). I have often found being a young leader difficult, so what follows are four lessons I have learnt along the way and also what others (line managers, friends, other leaders, church members) have done that have helped or hindered me as I have tried to lead.

1. CONFIDENCE

Most people who know me would describe me as confident. In most cases this is right, but in truth I have been (and can be) insecure about being a young leader. I often have a nagging feeling that people think what I'm saying isn't quite as important or valid, because I'm young. When I stepped into my first church leadership meeting at 19 everyone else seemed like they knew what they were doing, whilst I just felt small and insignificant. When I feel this way now I try and remember 1 Timothy 4:12 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.'

What others have done that has helped

The greatest thing you can ever do to help a young leader is to believe in them. Not just in the task they are doing, but believe in them as a person and as a leader. In my life, I have had a few significant people who have believed in me.

In York, the leader of the new congregation was a guy called Dave Magill and quite simply I would not be

leading a church unless he had believed in me. And it's through people like Dave and others believing in me that I learnt to believe in myself, despite my age.

We may know young leaders who seem very confident, but in reality, most of us are still trying to work everything out and we need people who are going to believe in us, both when things are going well and also when things don't go to plan.



2. EXPECTATIONS

I want to see the world changed and I'm young enough to believe that this can happen. Typically, young leaders dream big and with the rise of social media we often hear stories of people that do amazing things. Rob Bell planted a church at 28 and in two years the attendance was 10,000. Tim Hughes recently planted St Luke's Gas Street, which had 300 members before the first Sunday. And I'm sitting here six months into Red Church, with no team and two people who are sort of interested in church. And to tell you the truth I feel like a failure.

Expectations are really, really important both for you and for others. The reality is that church planting, fresh expressions or starting something new is not glamorous, but hard work and slow. The biggest thing I have had to learn is to keep my eyes on Jesus, watch my own lane and not compare what we are doing to anything else, especially an anomaly I read about on social media.

What others have done that has helped

Nine months into Red Church I had a meeting with someone who had oversight of my work and the words he said are the kind of words that can stick with you for a life time. He said, 'I'm disappointed in how far you have come.' We had grown from two to 12 in three months, but we were not meeting his expectations. After that meeting, I nearly quit and walked away.

The reality is that most church plants are effectively reaching the dechurched. If your Fresh Expression is reaching the non-churched it takes time, lots of time. It helps if everyone's expectations reflect that.

3. MAKING MISTAKES

Nine months into Red Church we had 12-15 people who were coming to our house every week for a small group. Now these people were a mix of life-long Christians and life-long church allergy sufferers. Our lounge only held eight people, so we decided that we would move this small group from our lounge into a bar and at the same time start an Alpha course with them. What a great way for them to invite friends and find out more about Jesus!

In two weeks, we went from 12-15 to five. In hindsight, it was a mistake. Our group liked meeting in our home, having a meal and a chat – not meeting in a bar.

If you are going to do something new you are going to make mistakes. Good leaders are not people who make no mistakes, that would mean they take no risks. Good leaders are those that recognise mistakes early and do something about them. It's important for young leaders that we don't become discouraged when something doesn't go to plan, because in my experience church doesn't often follow my plan (which is probably a good thing).

What others have done that has helped

Mistakes are a learning experience and not an opportunity to criticise or strip authority. If you believe in the young leader, in humility, then use every mistake as an opportunity to learn together from it. 'The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.' – Henry Ford.

4. DON'T LOSE JESUS

Before I had ever led a church, I would have found it amazing for someone to say that you could lose Jesus while 'working' for Jesus. All day you prepare sermons, you meet people pastorally, you are in meetings about church vision – how do you lose Jesus? Oh, how naïve I was!

One of the most difficult things for me was trying to untangle my relationship with God from my ministry for God. In the beginning when ministry was going well, my personal relationship would be going well. But when ministry was difficult, frustrating or hard my relationship with God was difficult, frustrating and hard. I had to learn (and am still learning) that above all else I am a follower of Jesus, loved and accepted by him, no matter what happens with church. Bill Hybels says, 'Who is your toughest leadership challenge? You.'

What others have done that has helped

The danger for young leaders is they sprint at a million miles an hour because of their passion, get burned out and lose Jesus. A healthy and growing relationship with Jesus is the hallmark of a long lasting, effective and transformational leader, but it is so easy to lose sight of him in the busyness, stress and pressure of leadership, particularly for young leaders. For those of us surrounding young leaders we have to do everything in our power to help, support, encourage and remind them that Jesus is the most important person in their life, not their ministry.



FOR REFLECTION

1. If you are a young leader, which of the four areas do you find the most difficult? Who could you talk to about this area?
2. If you are not a young leader, think about the young leaders around you. How can you best help, encourage and support them?
3. Who are the potential young leaders around you can you begin 'believing in'?