

LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH PLANTING

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WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT LEADING IN CHURCH PLANTING?

BY JOHN VALENTINE

If we were to play a word association game (you know, 'eggs – bacon', 'Arsenal – champions'), I wonder how you would reply to 'church planting leadership'?

I suspect, for many of us, there would be some variation on 'superwoman or superman'. The default image of the church plant leader is usually an exceptionally gifted, charismatic, A-type personality and energetic young man – and it usually is a man. Whilst there certainly are some church planters who fit that mould, our work at the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication shows that there are actually as many different types of women and men planting churches as there are church plants. It is the sheer variety and creativity of church plants that are coming through now that is one of the reasons that there is so much to encourage us.

On the current church planting course we are running, there are major city centre resource churches, missional communities, rural resource churches, plants into areas of major deprivation and into wealthy county towns, even one into

a farm, two Catholic teams from France (one planting into Portugal), Baptists, New Frontiers and Anglican. And these very different expressions of new Christian communities each require very different personalities and approaches, when it comes to leadership.

I have been asked to contribute three articles on leadership and church planting. This first is a reflection on how the church planting task may shape the kind of leadership involved. The second will start with the leaders themselves and their gifts. And the third will conclude the series with some more practical reflections.

All leadership, to some extent, is determined by the nature of the enterprise being led. So, to think about leading in church planting requires us to think about the nature of church planting itself. In many ways, there are substantial areas of overlap with other types of leadership in church and mission, but church planting has some unique features. Here are three.

1. THE TENSION BETWEEN 'CHURCH' AND 'MISSION'

The point of church planting is that it is fundamentally missionary. It is the establishing of new communities of faith to reach new people in new places in new ways. If the gospel does not drive church



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LESSLIE NEWBIGIN, P.148

planting, it will likely end up as a repackaging of existing church, with little or no impact amongst those who do not already come to church. But, equally, what is being planted is church. Church planting is distinct from an evangelistic event or a series of social action projects. It aims at the establishing of churches as distinct theological entities. Church planting, then, stands at the intersection of 'church' and 'mission'. It needs to be and do both. Lesslie Newbigin wrote, 'An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church' (The Household of God, p148).

There can be a tension between these two, and this tension is reflected in the leadership that church plants and church planting movements require. Stephen Croft, reflecting on his years heading up Fresh Expressions of Church for the Church of England, concluded that special work needs to be done specifically around the intersection of ecclesiology and missiology (Mission-shaped Questions, p14).

Those leading church plants need to carry both church and mission in their hearts, and ensure that both are featured in the cultures,

priorities, budgets and calendars of the church plants that they lead. I think it is fair to say that the predominant models of church leadership still remain weighted towards the 'church' side of this equation, especially the pastoral and the teaching. And I also think it is fair to say that the demands of establishing and running a church community are likely to pull the majority of the pioneer church planter's time and energy more towards the 'church' side of things.

One could argue, too, from the methodological point of view that church plants are new, and so need to prioritise 'mission'. For all these reasons, effective church planter leadership leans towards 'mission'. That said, 'church' is at the core of the church planting vision, so the church planter will need to balance the pioneering aspects of leadership with the pastoral. It can be a tricky tight rope to walk!

2. THE TENSION BETWEEN CONTEXT AND THE LEADER'S GIFTS

Church planting is ideally on the edge of existing church cultures and initiatives. It is, after all, aiming for the vast majority of people (over 90%) who are not currently in a

church on any given Sunday. In all likelihood, then, church plants will be thinking hard about the how of what they are doing, as well as the what. Questions of culture and context are central to all missionary work, and church planting is no exception.

Paul's is the classic statement of the posture of the missionary: 'I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22). Ed Stetzer has written, 'The gospel doesn't spread in a cultural vacuum, but it's always incarnated in a specific cultural context' (Planting Missional Churches, p14). It is striking that in Tim Keller's magnum opus on church planting, *Center Church*, the central third of the book is all about contextualisation.

Here again there is a tension. Most ordained church planters will have been trained within a certain ecclesial culture, and most lay church planters will have cut their teeth within churches that have their own expectations of how things are done, what beliefs are core, which behaviours are and are not acceptable. And church planting may ask some deeply searching questions of all these things. Church plants and fresh expressions of church, perhaps more so than other churches, have to reckon with how their own cultures can best engage with the cultures of those communities they are trying to reach for Christ.

Church planting, like all missionary work, requires a combination of flexibility and rootedness. Whilst Paul could write about 'becoming all things to all people', he placed that approach clearly within the context and parameters of doing it 'all for the sake of the gospel' (1 Corinthians 9: 22-23). Lesslie Newbigin wrote, 'True contextualisation accords to the gospel its rightful primacy' (The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p152). Church planters need to be secure in those things that are fundamental and non-negotiable for them, whilst



having the ability to adjust and alter the non-negotiables, perhaps 'on the fly'. This can be challenging. It requires great wisdom, as well as security and courage.

3. THE TENSION BETWEEN THE SHORT AND THE LONG TERM

In some ways, church plants are like start up businesses. Or maybe like gardens, or like building on a plot of land or putting on a play. All require long term vision, and all demand decisions rooted in the short term. There are trade-offs to be made; plans have to be followed, but flexibly, and core relationships must be nurtured without losing sight of what this is all about.

A classic church revitalisation plant, where a church planting team is sent to merge with an existing (likely small) congregation, will require a combination of bold vision casting for the future direction of the new church plant, with a negotiation with the existing congregation about how things have been done previously around here.

A resource church will want to be clear about its vision to reach a whole city or region for Christ, with hopes to plant multiple other churches, but it will also be acutely aware of wanting to get off on the right foot with local clergy and churches.

All church plants come with an element of challenge and disruption to existing cultures (both social and church), but do not want to rock the

boat for the sake of it. Oftentimes, there are short-term compromises to be made for the sake of longer-term gains.

This is symptomatic of a tension that many church planters inhabit. They may well be visionaries, led by the Holy Spirit towards the fulfilment of a particular dream. The resources necessary for this to happen may well not be there yet. They may have to start small. Some resource churches start with a few families and friends gathering in a front room to worship and pray. There may not be the budget to take on staff, the right people might not have come along yet, or the diocese have said no to relocating to a neighbouring parish. Perhaps one of the church wardens from the church into which the plant has gone refuses to step down until the annual meeting, or there are no break out rooms for the children's work. The list can go on...

Church plant leadership is not unique in this, but is likely to experience the challenges of growth more acutely than other churches. Such leaders will need bold and clear vision, good plans, secure core relationships, coupled with the ability to be patient, to defer, to wait for the right moment, to know what to sacrifice in the short term for the longer term game.

CONCLUSION

A friend put it well, in reflecting on our theme, that leadership in church planting is, to a large degree, a negotiated

space. If church planter leadership is predicated on the nature of church planting itself, then tensions emerge.

Church planting sits in the middle of both missionary and church work; it aims at seeing the gospel reach into new areas of our society which are as yet not engaging with the gospel; and it is a process of starting something new, with a likely view to its growing in significance and impact way beyond its initial size and form.

All these require a particular posture when it comes to leadership – a clear sense of what is being aimed at, and a flexibility as to how it may be arrived at. It is not that these tensions are not present in other aspects of church leadership, but they seem particularly present for church planters.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. What would you say are the relative weights of 'church' and 'mission' in church planting?
2. How significant do you think it is that a church planter be able to both engage and inhabit the culture of the neighbourhood or network she or he is trying to reach?
3. Do you think a church planter should plan ahead of growth, or should she or he wait until the church has the resources to make this possible before starting a new phase?

