

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT LEADING IN CHURCH PLANTING?

BY JOHN VALENTINE

This is the last in three articles on the intersection of leadership and church planting. The first looked at how the church planting task necessitates a capacity to negotiate a clear vision and a flexible context. The second was an exploration of what qualities of leadership church planting requires within those different contexts. This last is a collation of wisdom from the front line: a 'top ten' reflections from church planting leaders on their own experiences.

1. VISION IS PRIMARY

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, who could say 'This is what I came out to do' (Mark 1:38), and of Paul who 'was not disobedient to the heavenly vision' (Acts 26:19), church planters have a clear sense of what they are up to, with whom and for what reason. This is frequently linked to an intimate and in-depth

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knowledge of the area, people and context into which the church is planted. One church planter spoke of the need to love the people and context. For others the emphasis was more on what God was saying, and then being obedient in responding to that and sticking with it. The place of communicating a vision and the leaders' ability to bring people with them was also emphasised.

2. SELF-AWARENESS WAS THOUGHTFULLY MENTIONED SEVERAL TIMES

The leader needs to be intentional in learning and reflecting honestly on their own strengths and weaknesses. This will affect leadership styles, team building and the values of the church plant.

3. LEADERSHIP, AS A CATEGORY BY ITSELF, WAS ALSO REFERRED TO

Church planters should not be afraid or embarrassed to think of themselves as leaders, including those church traditions that are more hesitant than others to think in such terms. A biblical example of this would be Paul's encouragement to the timid Timothy, through his prayers (2 Timothy 1:7) and the mighty charge in the presence of

God (2 Timothy 4:1-5), to lean into fulfilling his ministry as an evangelist (4:5). Leadership operates at every level of any organisation, and the church is no different. Church planting leadership, perhaps more than other aspects of church leadership, requires a sense of timing – what needs to be done, and when it needs to be done. And church planting leadership, like all Christian leadership, is rooted in being self-sacrificial, as we follow Jesus, who gave his life for us (Mark 8: 31-38).

4. THERE WAS AN EMPHASIS ON PRIORITISING EVANGELISM, MISSION AND OUTREACH

Church plants can all too quickly revert to being churches 'for us' (those already in them), and by launching clearly with a priority for those who are 'outside', the value of evangelism is clearly set. Bob Hopkins has provocatively and prophetically said that 'We must stop starting with the church' (quoted by Stuart Murray in *Planting Churches in the Twenty-first Century*, p18). It is rather like those from Cyprus and Cyrene in Acts 11, who start to speak to Hellenists as well as Jews (11:20).

5. ENGAGING CULTURE MATTERS

Culture is clearly related to this list, and also features in church planting leadership from the front line, particularly from those who head up church planting movements. Someone specified the PCC and elders – the need to foster a church planting culture with them. Someone else suggested that we not allow ‘failure’ to be part of our vocabulary. Another aspect of this, from a different angle, was having a culture that had a way of coping with the inevitable disappointments and discouragements along the way.

Another aspect of culture was the urgency, energy and inspiration that church planting requires, and reckoning with the entrepreneurial and disruptive aspects that so often go with it. Especially in the early days of the church plant, it may be that a clear and vigorous lead will be required. In a memorable phrase; a church planter in central Asia said that what church planting leadership requires above all else is ‘extreme courage’. Fostering a culture of risk-taking, boldness, a readiness to try new things, and faith is a key aspect of leadership.

More and more, at the Gregory Centre, we hear talk of ‘movement’. There seems to be something of a shift happening from the planting of churches to the planting of churches that will in turn plant further churches. It is still early days, but local networks of church plants are appearing, with leaders who exercise a kind of oversight of the new churches planted from their churches. The language of ‘multiplication’ rather than ‘addition’ is coming to the fore.

6. A SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES WERE AROUND TEAM

Partly, this was to do with playing to strengths and ensuring that the church plant had a fuller range of gifts than just the leader’s, and the ability to ensure that a team thrives. But also, there was a strong



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emphasis on how leadership development is the engine for growth. Church plants, especially in phases of rapid growth, always have more jobs that need doing than people to do them. Here is an opportunity for spotting, training and releasing potential new leaders.

This is part of the reason that church plants often churn out disproportionate numbers of ordinands – people in church plants are used to stepping up and taking on leadership responsibilities more quickly than in other churches. The flip side of this is that the greatest brake on church plant growth is when new leaders are not being spotted, invested in, mentored and given opportunities to serve and lead. A key aspect of church planting leadership is attracting growing potential leaders, people of real calibre, who can share in the leadership.

7. FOSTERING GOOD RELATIONS

There was some discussion around fostering good relations with neighbouring churches, about getting to know neighbours, and doing everything possible not to attract Christians from other churches and not draining talent from them. I suppose we could link this with a sense of being collaborative, having a kingdom vision, being generous in spirit to those around us.

8. ADOPT DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP STYLES

Others drew out the need to adopt different leadership styles for

different phases of life and growth in the church plant. The initial drive to establish the church, to set the culture, to prioritise evangelism, may give way to a less hands on approach when the church grows. The leader will need to relate in a different way to others if the church grows to over 120 than if it stays at that sort of size. Growth and life are unpredictable, and church planter leadership may require an agility in responding to unforeseen factors.

9. MANAGING UP

Someone jokingly said that church planter leadership needed an ability to ‘fill out complex Church of England forms that don’t ask the right questions’. I am sure other denominations have their equivalents!

The serious point behind this is that often church plants don’t fit into existing patterns and structures within the wider church ecology. Church planters have to make allowances for this, to have patience in being misunderstood or misrepresented, and to translate what they are doing into terms others can understand. They may have to ‘manage up’, keeping good relationships with their bishops or other denominational heads and their senior teams. And they may have to work hard at smoothing ruffled feathers in neighbouring parishes and churches.

10. SELF-CARE

There were many responses about the self-care that church planters should show themselves. Isolation and exhaustion were identified as particular threats to emotional, spiritual and relational health.

Someone wrote about how a small plant will not have the breadth and depth of fellowship that the leader may have been used to in the sending church, and described how the demands of church planting will necessitate giving out more than in the past. The respondent encouraged church planters to have special thought for their families, to make sure that they are not sacrificed in planting the church. Single people were vulnerable to isolation and exhaustion, and there was encouragement to developing healthy patterns of life, routines of prayer, and attending to friendships that are life-giving and lend perspective.

There were some good suggestions in this area. Someone highlighted the need to maintain a close and vibrant walk with Christ. Someone else recommended having a mentor, someone to advise, pray and encourage; and having a prayer group of peers.

THREE BONUS POINTS FROM ME

- On the Plant course which we run at the Gregory Centre, it is striking to see the increasing imagination of the church plants on the course. And it is noticeable that there is a growing sense of being part of something bigger that God is doing in our time. We are living in exciting times! The more we

can link up with each other, cheer each other on, and support one another the better.

- A book recommendation, on which much of the Gregory Centre Plant course is based, is *Lead* by John Greenaway, Andy Blacknell and Andy Coombe (Capstone, 2018). It is designed for business and life, and is fully applicable to many of the practicalities of church plant leadership.
- Lastly, all this can come across as quite heavy – demanding of the individuals concerned, and with the slight sense that all this depends on us. How refreshing then to realise that it is Jesus who builds his church (Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 3:6), not us; and to ponder the words of one church planter, who has planted over one hundred churches, who's advice was, 'Don't count the numbers, and have fun.'



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. What do you think are the top three leadership lessons for church planters?
2. How could a church planter build a culture of 'extreme courage' in their church plant?
3. What advice on self-care would you give to a young and enthusiastic church planter before they plant their church, six months in, and after two years?