

LEADING WITH AGILITY, LEARNING TO DANCE – STRENGTHEN YOUR CORE (PART 1)

BY ADRIAN LOCK

THE NEED FOR AGILITY – IT'S A VUCA-G WORLD

If the church needed a wake-up call, the pandemic gave us a heavy shot of caffeine. It forced us to rethink church and our emphasis on when, where and how we meet. It has shaken many churches and church leaders to the core and confronted us with both the opportunities and challenges of doing church in a digital world.

Our current age has been described as a VUCA world (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous). Of course, those that live hand-to-mouth, the marginalised and oppressed, would say it has always been so. Yet the digital age has added layers of complexity and brings greater volatility and uncertainty, than in any generation in human history. Its ability to connect us not just to news, but to individuals on the other side of the world, truly makes us a 'global village'. It's why I add a G for Globally-connected to the acronym. Add the environmental crisis and Ukraine, and the world is becoming more VUCA-G every day.

We are in uncharted territory. As Todd Bolsinger points out in his excellent book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, the world in front of us is nothing like the world behind us. Unfortunately, many of us were trained as church leaders to lead in a world that is fast disappearing.

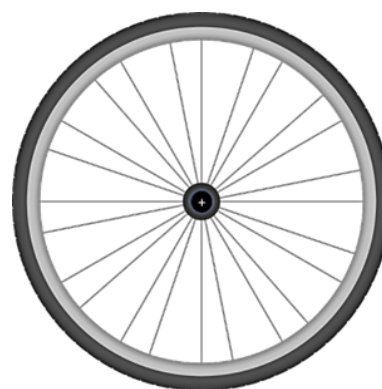
One thing is certain – we can't stand still or simply return to what we were doing before. Bolsinger asserts there will be a need to 'let go, learn as you go and keep going' as we navigate turbulent waters.

We need to learn to lead with agility, and be appropriately responsive to a rapidly changing world. Just as a dancer's agility and ability to move gracefully across a dance floor is rooted in his or her 'core strength', so a church leader's ability to adapt is reliant on a strong core

– both in their church, but in themselves too. In a VUCA-G world, it helps to strengthen our churches' and our own personal core – to re-affirm and re-state what is central and unchanging. This will be our focus in Part 1. In Part 2 we will look at a few dance moves that will be useful for church leaders to learn if they are to facilitate the necessary adaptive shifts in their churches and in themselves.

STRENGTHEN YOUR CHURCH'S CORE

I find the metaphor of a wheel helpful here. Every wheel needs a central hub that stays relatively still and an axle that doesn't revolve at all, if it is to let the rest of the wheel move quickly and take us somewhere useful.



In a similar way, every human being and every human system, including a church, needs a degree of stability at its core if it is to move appropriately with the times – a central hub and axle.

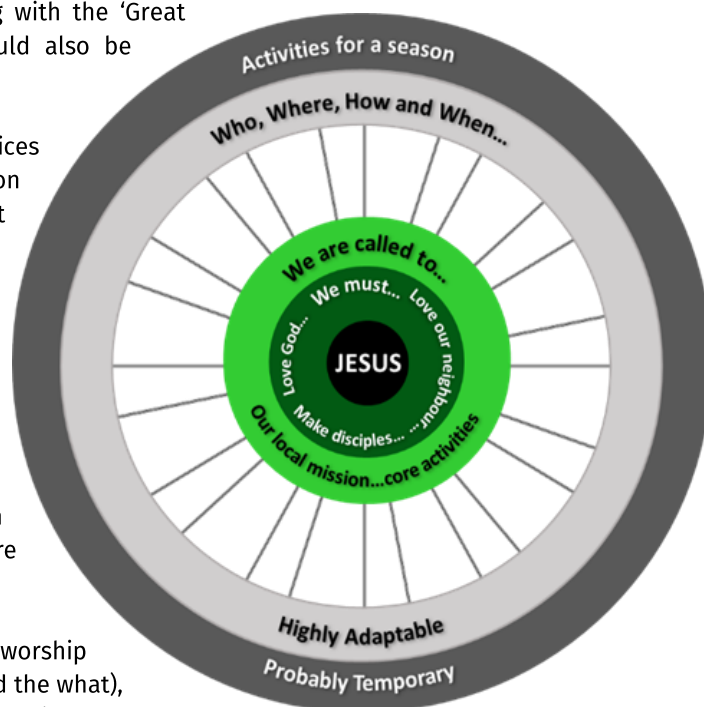
We might represent the church's wheel in this way:

The Church's Axle As Christ-centred churches, our axle, our still, unchanging centre, is Jesus (Hebrews 13:8). He is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2), the

way, the truth, the life (John 14:6). Jesus, and his core instructions to us, must be the immovable objects at the heart of what we believe and the axle around which all our activities as a church must revolve. Hence, the 'Great Commands' – to love God and others (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18) along with the 'Great Commission' – to make disciples (Matthew 28:19), should also be affirmed as unchanging.

The Church's Hub This consists of core values and practices that Jesus taught and told us to live by. Their expression may need to vary over time and in different contexts, but churches would be disobedient to their call if they weren't doing them in some shape or form. These would include activities such as meeting, praying, breaking bread, worshipping, serving, growing disciples, caring and standing up for the needs of the vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed. A church's hub also consists of the local mission that it is called to: its unique contribution to the community it serves, within the global mission of Jesus. If you haven't given much thought to this as a church, I recommend doing so. More about this next time.

The Church's Rim Outside the stillness of the Christ we worship and the purpose and practices he called us to (the why and the what), we need to be agile in how, where and when they happen - if we are to continue to serve his kingdom purposes in a way that is relevant and responsive to a rapidly changing world. And some activities may only ever have been appropriate for a season.



WHEN A CHURCH'S HUB IS OFF-CENTRE... IT'S IN FOR A BUMPY RIDE IN A VUCA-G WORLD!

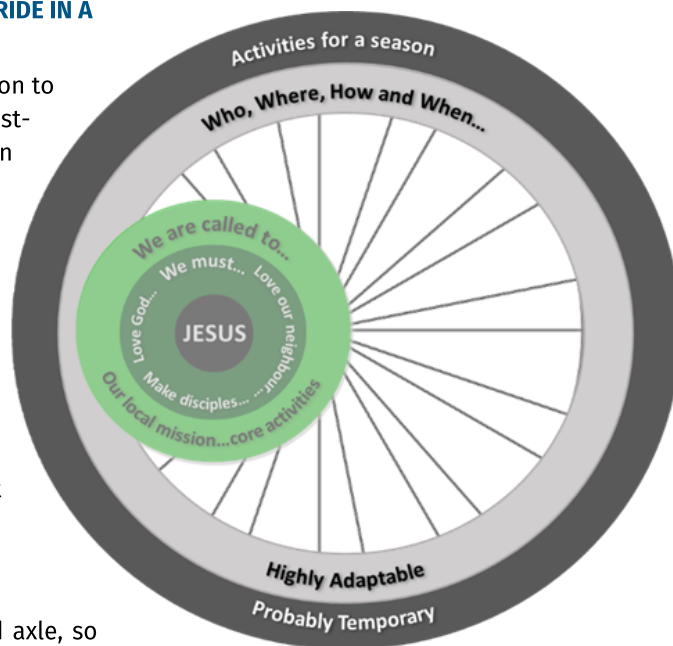
It is all too easy for us to lose focus on what is core. We hold on to expressions of ministry and church that have passed their 'best-before' dates. We no longer 'fix our eyes on Jesus' but on aspects of church that need to be highly adaptable over time, things that are cultural rather than core, or were only ever useful for a season anyway. Old and new wineskins come to mind (Matthew 9:17). It can also be easy to over-react to a fast-moving and needy world and lose sight of Jesus and his central call.

That is why the agile church leader needs first to reaffirm what is truly core and help loosen their congregation's attachment to what is not core, before helping them adapt appropriately to a VUCA-G world.

STRENGTHEN YOUR PERSONAL CORE

Just as a church needs a central and relatively still hub and axle, so does a church leader. A church leader's core centres around answers to 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I?' questions.

Your Personal Axle Our relationship with God needs to be the still centre, not just of our ministry, but of our life. The need to maintain a still centre has never been greater than in this VUCA-G age. What time do we give to keeping Jesus central? Six years ago, I booked into my first one-day silent retreat, when I couldn't really afford the time. At the end of that day, I decided I couldn't afford not to retreat, and committed to a monthly retreat day to help keep me centred on what



matters most. I recommend this to every Christian leader I coach and train.

Your Personal Hub Closely aligned to your relationship with God is your identity in God (something Rick Warren explores through the acronym SHAPE – your Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality and Experience – in his best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*). This must be more central and core than your current role as a minister, priest or lay leader, and is about who you fundamentally are as a person. If you identify too closely with your current role, it can become a hub which is off-centre, making you more vulnerable to threats to your current position than need be.

A growing sense of your identity also gives you a clearer view of ‘the work God has prepared in advance for you to do’ (Ephesians 2:10) – your personal mission in life, which may be possible for you to fulfil in a variety of contexts. A growing sense of your identity and purpose will go a long way to strengthening your personal core and building your resilience so you can lead others in turbulent times.

TOWARDS PART 2

Leading with agility starts with strengthening your core – both your church’s and your own. It will give you a good foundation for setting out on the turbulent waters of change. Next time we will cover some key ‘dance moves’ as we explore how we can lead our churches to adapt to a fast-moving world to fulfil the mission Jesus has called us to in this generation.

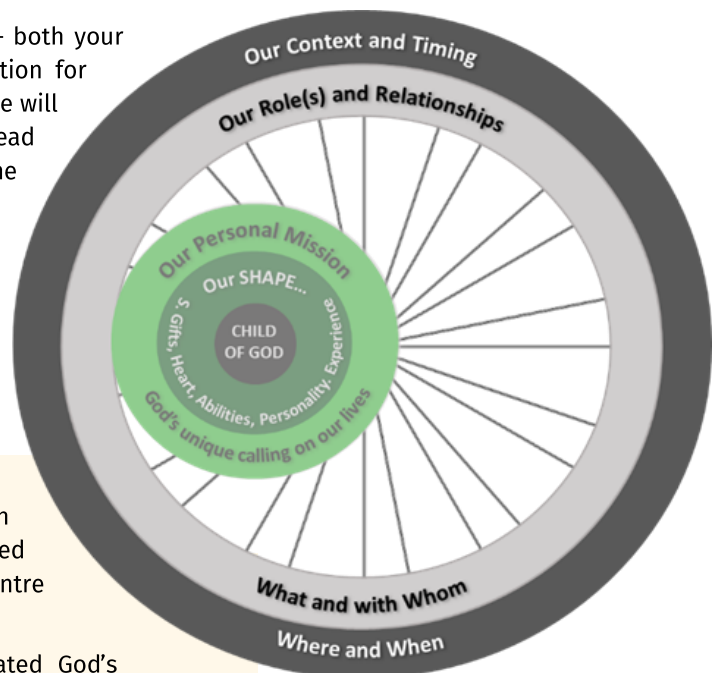
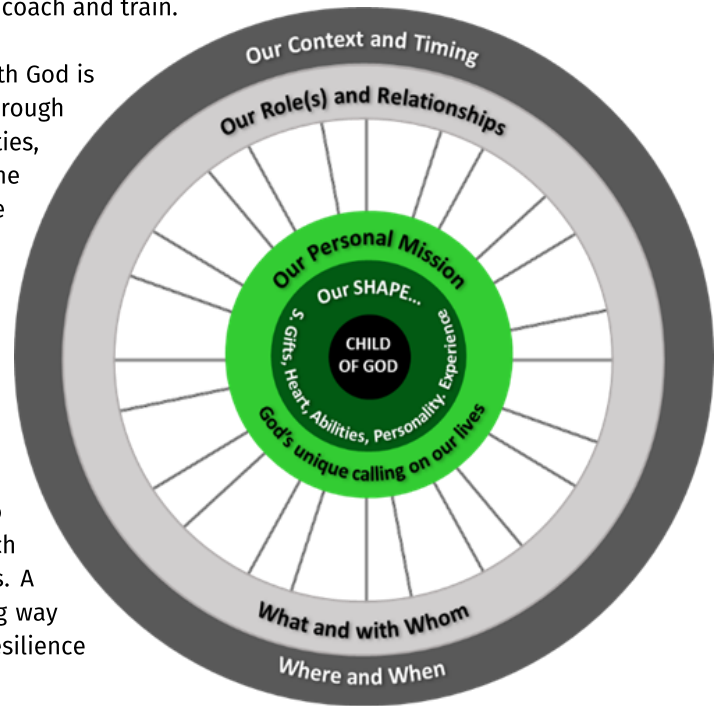
ADRIAN LOCK IS THE CO-FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF ENABLED LEADERS (WWW.ENABLEDLEADERS.COM).



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. To what extent is the axle and hub of your church truly centred on Jesus and the mission he has called us to? What do you need to do to reinforce and recentre your church’s axle and hub?
2. To what extent have you discerned and articulated God’s unique local mission for your church? What could you do to create a sharper focus on this?
3. How central is the hub of your personal wheel? What do you need to do to strengthen your personal core?



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- How to Lead When you Don’t Know Where you’re Going – Leading in a Liminal Season, Susan Beaumont (Rowman and Littlefield).
- Canoeing the Mountains – Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory, Tod Bolsinger (IVP).
- The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (HBR Press).
- Finding and Fulfilling Your Unique Purpose for Life, SHAPE, E. Rees (Zondervan).
- Purpose-Driven Life – What on Earth am I Here For? Rick Warren (Zondervan).