LEADING TEMPORARY TEAMS
Additional Handout for Leading Well with Others

Football teams become champions when they train and play together, under good management, over a sustained time period. Orchestras play best when they rehearse and perform frequently together with a great conductor. Musicals win awards when cast and crew have practised, polished and created together under an inspired director. Even actors who specialise in improvisation perform to their best when they have a high level of trust gained from working together frequently. Teams that excel have two things in common: great leadership and great, well-established relationships.

None of this seems to bode well for temporary teams.

I am using 'temporary' in a specific way: A temporary team is one that gathers for a targeted, short-term project and then disperses, never to be re-assembled even if the project happens again.

Temporary teams (TTs) tend to form for mission. So, for example, a children's holiday club, a beach mission, any kind of mission, a youth camp or Venture – all of these would be run by TTs. Leading a TT can feel like gunning for an Olivier Award after scant rehearsals or trying to win the World Cup with a team who rarely play together (maybe the latter sounds a bit too familiar?!).

JOYS OF TEMPORARY TEAMS

So why do it? This is an article on leadership, not missiology, but I think there is a question around why we so often do mission (especially with children) under these kind of circumstances. I look forward to reading that article some time! But for those who do lead or participate in TTs, there are lots of positives:

- **Unity** around a single vision and purpose.
- Great **energy** over a short time-span.
- Prayer and a **'high spiritual temperature'**.
- Involvement and **creativity** as each person uses their gifts and plays their part.
- Opportunity for **building relationships** across more established networks or cliques.
- Great **equality** as each person makes an essential contribution, giving a high level of 'buy-in'.
- Rapid **growth** of new skills.
- **Fun** – and it's all over in a week!

At best, TTs are workshops where new skills are sharpened, new relationships forged and the kingdom of God grows. People lay aside differences and work all-out for Christ's glory. Good stuff. But, of course, there are challenges too.

CHALLENGES OF TEMPORARY TEAMS

- **Time pressure** – which leaves people feeling under-prepared, over-stretched and downright grumpy.
- **Lurking tensions** – the kind of differences that normally separate us, (theological, stylistic or personality clashes), can emerge in the pressured time -frame.
- **Lack of support** for team members due to – oh yes – lack of time.
- **Competitive spirit** amongst those who see the project as a platform for their gifts.
- **Sense of inadequacy** amongst those who don't know what their contribution is.
- **Superficial** sense of community as the context for spiritual formation, which can be detrimental both for team and punters.
- **Getting stuck** – being in the same role year on year has its particular challenges.

At worst, TTs are riddled with stress, insecurity, fatigue and division. Not an ideal basis for any kind of gospel work.

If you've ever led a TT, you will have heard people cry 'if only church could be like this.' The positives listed above reinforce this. But church, by definition, is a long-term commitment. In churches, we can't hide behind the pressure of time constraints, we have to grow in grace with others, often confronted by our own sinfulness. Jesus was pretty challenging about our attitude to serving (e.g. Luke 17:7-10), but it is where he grows our character. The truth is, that some of the reasons people love being on TTs are exactly why they also need to be on longer-term teams back in their local churches.

However, most TTs have a more long-term element. People return to beach mission year after year. Holiday club helpers get hooked. Ventures become a way of life (after 26 years, some might call me institutionalised!).

A team with an established core and a constantly changing fringe can offer deeper relationships and a better context for training and mentoring those who come in, full of new ideas and energetic enthusiasm. Training days, planning sessions and team-building exercises all help ground the team in godly relationships.

So, what are the key lessons for those of us who lead such teams? Normally I would look for biblical resources, but I struggled to find a true TT in the pages of Scripture. Paul's missionary journeys were far longer than a week, Jesus gathered a team that walked with him for three years, the builders of the temple took decades.

But reflecting on my own experience (and picking the brains of others who do this stuff), here are a few imperatives for TT leaders:

1. **Hold the vision.** All teams need vision. TTs face fewer diversions than settled ones, but cannot depend upon new members to grasp the vision straightaway. In any team, refocusing on the vision is important – in a TT, it's crucial.
2. **Make time.** If you, as team leader, spend the project saying 'I'm so busy,' guess what your team will be saying? You need to model making time for prayer, for devotion, for relationships. Team meetings that focus on business never leave time for prayer, whereas when prayer comes first, business still gets done.
3. **Make time** (unashamed repetition here). Invest in relationships and give permission for the team to do the same. Obviously, this is not at the cost of the project (which is why you need to hold the vision), but it will help the vision to be realised.
4. **You are not their pastor.** You have a mentoring role, but TTs are not churches. Team members with pastoral issues need to be encouraged, gently, but firmly, to work them out in the context of their home church. At our Venture holiday, we sometimes take too many risks, including team members who are not properly rooted in a local church. Result – we lose time and energy pastoring them. Of course, we should look after people, but they need Christian community beyond the TT.
5. **Grow the core.** It is up to you to identify key players and invest in them. This takes the TT on to a more established foundation. Be strategic about who you work with in this way – they will share the load with you, energise you and hold you accountable for the vision.
6. **Celebrate success and accompany the weak.** I love the model of Deborah – she goes with Barak to the battle when he is fearful (see Judges 4-5) and praises Jael when she is triumphant. All teams need encouragement from their leaders, a TT is no exception.
7. **Lead yourself.** TTs operate, by their very nature, in intense circumstances. For example on a residential TT, lack of sleep, eating junk, skipping time with God are all easy temptations. But they lead, at the very least, to bad-temper and ill-health, and at worst to a hollow, superficial leadership which gives the devil a foothold and undermines everything the TT is for.

AND FINALLY

People often assume those good at working with children/youth should lead such temporary teams. However, whilst there is some overlap in skill set, there are a number of different skills required to lead a TT. Those who lead temporary teams are generally leading adults rather than delivering hands-on youth work. The temptation in a temporary team is to try and do both which can often be a fatal error. Regardless of age focus, the principle is that the leader of the TT is not usually best placed to also 'deliver/present' the work but to facilitate the team to do so.

As long as we commit to, and recognise value in, short-term mission projects, we will always have temporary teams. If we have the privilege and responsibility of leading such teams, we need to recognise that our leadership skills are stretched in different ways than in 'regular' service, and adapt accordingly.

We must also beware of a TT culture which distances itself from long-term relationships and the call on every Christian to serve in their local context, at work, at church and in their network or neighbourhood. If we can hold the temporary in tension with the long-term, then we can point people onwards to the eternal.

BY SAMI WATTS (LEAD ON, APRIL 2015)

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FOR REFLECTION

- What experience do you have of being on or leading a temporary team? Can you think of more joys and challenges from this experience?
- If you are a church leader, how might you support those in your church who lead TTs? If you are a TT leader, how can you feed your experience back into the local church? If you lead in both contexts, what transitions do you need to make between the two roles?