

Leading in a Time of Crisis

Last year was **the most demanding leadership year** that I've had in 6 or 7 years. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. September 07 began very well but then from October until December we entered what I called '**the perplexed season**'.

Firstly our church administrator – an excellent guy – confirmed that he wanted to move on due to the special circumstances following the birth of their first child. Then, a friend and co-pastor here was diagnosed with severe burnout in October. In a church of this size pastoral care is a huge load and now we had **an Acts 6 moment**. Our growth over the years finally caught up with us in that **our infrastructure hadn't adjusted enough to cope** with the numbers of people. We were overrun pastorally and administratively.

It was manic. October and November are my busiest times for Newfrontiers and also the time when I speak most at Kings. At the same time we were in discussions about relocating to a new site (which we were told would cost us £12 million). In mid-November I was informed that we were £90K short in the budget. And then, for the first time in ten years our Sunday attendance was lower than it was the previous year. It's probably fair to say that the team were under more stress than I had ever seen.

For the first time since I began to lead King's (the only church I've ever led) I didn't know where we were going – an uncomfortable place to be in and very difficult to lead from such a place. **I was so overrun that I lost my bearings.** There were still great things going on! We were still seeing people saved every week. We had 1700 attend our Christmas Carol Services.

1 Corinthians 4:16 says, '*therefore we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away... For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that outweighs them all.*'

First lesson learnt: **Eternal truths do not change, circumstances do** – this is foundational. I found an ability through this period to lean into God and His love for me as an individual rather than finding value in the indicators of progress and growth in the church. It pressed me into prayer more. (This is so basic that I am almost embarrassed to mention it!) Grace under pressure! I was going to meetings in the hope that I would be able to coast and just catch my breath – it didn't happen!

Then I learned '**It's important that the team members know exactly where the team stands.**' (John Maxwell). On Boxing Day I got up and wrote down the things people were saying to me about church (I know, how sad is that, working on Boxing Day!) – I had enough space to reflect on what was going on and analyse our situation. As a result, I came up with five major reasons why we were where we were.

1. We were facing a **growth challenge** – could we cope with more people? Could we recover from sending out a church plant and supporting another smaller one? Could we adjust to new roles as a team? Could we go through the pain of counting the cost of all these changes?

Mark Driscoll says that **you need to re-engineer or replant the church every year and the main reasons churches don't grow is because the elders don't want to change.**

2. We faced the **facilities challenge** – we were running out of office space and we don't have enough space for weekday activities or Sunday ministries outside of the main meeting, so we investigated relocating.

3. We faced a **financial challenge** - £90K short and needing to do something with our buildings.

4. We faced the **diversity challenge** – the race issue.

5. And we faced an **apostolic challenge**. Could we recover from planting South Central? Could we help with Greenwich? Could we release Mick Taylor further with training for Newfrontiers?

This was my analysis. **Any one of these challenges is big enough for a church.** Put all five in the mix and we could get stuck, by which I mean **stop growing.**

Then another question came. **Is this – where I am now - the full measure of my ability, of me as a leader?** Have you ever asked that question? If this was it, could I cope with that? Will I be at peace in my soul with the measure that I am? And the answer came – 'I don't know!' When you are younger there always seems to be years ahead in which to achieve all you hope for. 'Bring it on!' is the attitude! But actually it's not about me – or you – it's about **grace apportioned.** And I thought – well, we shall find out... and we're still finding out, by the way!

In the middle of all this I found another Leadership Lesson. I was doing a coaching session for leaders of larger churches within Newfrontiers, trying to explain some of the challenges of growth. I drew a triangle on the board with one side representing 'Team', the second 'Buildings' and the third 'Finance'. I'd always thought that to grow a church from 200 to 500 you need to have a team in place, you need facilities that can cope and you need to be able to fund both. If one of them is not there – you're stuck. **I realised as I spoke that this was what we were still dealing with at King's.**

Next Leadership Lesson: '**You can only run at full stretch for a short time.**' Upping your game requires **emotional, spiritual and physical capacity** – after a 3 or 4 month period **you need to dial down so that level of demand doesn't become a lifestyle.**

And you need to **teach into what's going on.** So, on the first Sunday in January (our Vision Sunday) and conveniently just after my Boxing Day morning revelation, I stood in front of the church and went through all these things.

I had to **help my team adjust expectations** on what we were looking to achieve in the year to come. Once I was clear on that **I needed to communicate it well at all levels. We called the church to pray** – being open with them brought a great response in prayer.

So – that was January to February and then something else happened to me – an instinctive thing. **I felt it was time to lead and make some decisions!** I had a

phone conversation with Steve Nicholson (who oversees church planting in the Vineyard Movement in the USA and who is an old friend of our church) and said to him, 'Our numbers are down – do you have any advice?' to which his response was, 'If you sent 40 people out a year ago and you are now almost back to where you were numerically – you have done well!' He also reminded me that the 40 who went will be more committed than the new folk who are just coming into the church to 'replace' them. This changed my perspective – **a useful piece of information that reduced some pressure!**

Well, we recovered. We got back to an underlying growth curve of 5% that August. We've been up to 10% and made massive adjustments to our team. We looked at the budget carefully. We cut everything we could ... and then decided **to invest in 5 or 6 new staff members**. A pastoral care worker, a new church administrator, a new facilities manager, two more part-time admin staff and a full-time social action worker came in. We made the decision on our facilities not to relocate but to extend the crèche rooms. **And we decided to launch a third Sunday meeting**. Hearing Mark Driscoll at Brighton made me glad we had made that decision before the conference.

As to the **financial challenge** – in the end we made a £2K loss rather than the £90K predicted and we did that by cuts and by going to the church – we had two Sundays where I did a 10-15 minute exhortation on giving. We had standing order forms available around the auditorium and encouraged people to sign up then and there. This was the first time we had done such an approach and we found that people responded to the situation generously. **We realised that we needed to make giving an easy access thing.**

On the **diversity challenge** we taught through David Anderson's book called Gracism. We invited Robert Kwami – a Ghanaian pastor now in our church – to join the team for a year.

On the **apostolic challenge** we sent some of our members to join the Greenwich church plant which continues to prosper. And we stretched even further by going for the third meeting – impelled by the desire to see more people saved. We made the decision on that before we knew the full implications of implementing it. I'm glad that I didn't know that a third meeting would require another 100 volunteers a month to run!

We have also moved into another new area – **an advertising campaign** in our locality with one large (huge!) billboard next to Catford station and also posters in bus shelters. We will review this in due course.

So, to summarise the **Leadership Lessons**:

- 1. Remember eternal truths**
- 2. A good team knows exactly where it stands at any given point**
- 3. You need to lead in crisis - and out of it.**
- 4. You can't keep running at full pace**
- 5. Know when it's time to reach again**

