

S P R I N G 2 0 1 5

Transformational Church

Relational Leadership

Why the Aussie Church is Struggling



Relational Leadership – The Critical Element for Church and Community Transformation

Introduction – Why Mindset Matters:

We are each formed and impacted by our own experiences within church/faith environments, which create models or mindsets for how we see church functionality. Here in Australia, there is predominantly a Western world-view where the church traditionally creates a structured community and we gather around some of the important elements to inspire and build our faith and spiritual growth. Sadly we mistake the 'forms' of church life with some of the more important 'functions'.

Australia is now a post-Christian country, and the stressors impacting the church have precipitated significant shifts in both attitudes and commitments to church life. No longer is it normal for a person or family to remain in church for a lifetime and many generations switch cross-denominationally depending on circumstances and preferences. These switches inevitably create seasons of conflict as different theological persuasions create tensions in the form and shape of a worshipping community.

The longer we experience a 'sameness' in church community, the more likely we normalize our frameworks that determine our personal preferences, likes and expectations; sadly more so as a consumer/critic as opposed to contributor. Our preferences and expectations contribute to or shape our mindset(s) which in turn determine our level (or lack thereof) of 'buy-in' and active participation in church.

As a consequence of church consumerism, we tend to downplay the impact of mindset by simply becoming a community set on pleasing as many people as possible. Inadvertently, 'pleasing' behaviours create anxiety for staff and leaders alike, since it becomes impossible to please everybody thereby using important emotional energy on holding the community together as opposed to releasing the community into mission. We confuse loving people with pleasing them.

Our mindset(s) become the filters by which we view church life with a degree of passion and ambivalence. Mindsets can be influenced by theology and doctrine, church polity, worship forms, facilities, family history and personal preference. The extent to which we understand or are aware of mindsets, impacts our capacity to lead well together in community.

Ideally our mindset(s) should reflect an accurate biblical worldview and allow us to synthesize important values that underpin our practice. Churches who fail to clarify their DNA and ethos call newcomers into relational environments that can be unclear and confusing. When we subscribe to an undefined community we create unhealthy relationships.

For conversation:

- *What mindsets are evident in your church community?*
- *Is there a predominant mindset which impacts culture and capacity for people to get involved?*
- *If you benchmark mindsets against a biblical world-view, which values do you think are non-negotiable that you would call newcomers to subscribe to?*

Relationships Before Structure

In the Gospels, the accounts of Jesus' early ministry days remind us that the disciples were commissioned as followers to journey with Jesus in relationship for three years across the length and breadth of the ancient world. They did not enlist to simply debate and collaborate within the confines of the structured Synagogue, as was the practice of the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

I understand Jesus came to redeem and restore the world, but to also break the mold of human habit. Perhaps it is way too easy to lose sight of the important and the urgent and become captivated by the safety of one's own faith community. At times I wonder if we prefer the comfort and familiarity of our church facilities somewhat impervious to the genuine needs of the community around us.

Somehow we all know that to play it safe is to lose the game. (McManus)

In my opinion, the Aussie church has safely conditioned itself to become facility centric. The grand Aussie dream of owning property (a post war legacy) has biased generations towards the building of sanctuaries that inadvertently define our purpose and mission.

What if our facilities were operational seven days per week and enabled people to explore their faith relationally rather than structurally? What if we prioritized the needs of community first, and compromised our worship space as a secondary need? What if we started relationally and minimized our structures to the absolute minimum? What if we prioritized our calendar around relational events instead of structured programs?

For discussion:

- *How does your church prioritize relationships?*
- *If you were to audit your church's relationship connection to the community how do you think you'd rate? If your church didn't exist would the community care?*
- *What is the biggest relationship challenge confronting the church?*

Relationships – Emotionality and Your Family System

We are each formed and shaped by our family environment. This environment shapes our early developmental years and can either positively or negatively impact our capacity to form secure and safe relationships. How we form relationships, is known in psychology as our 'attachment' ability or capacity. If we come from broken or highly dysfunctional families, our capacity to form secure relationships is somewhat hampered or diminished creating fearful, anxious, preoccupied or isolated behaviours.



In any relationship we all experience emotions, some helpful and others not so productive. I am reminded of the encounter in Scripture with James and John petitioning Jesus to sit either-side of him in heaven.

'When the ten other disciples heard what James and John had asked, they were indignant. So Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. (Mark 10 NLT)'

Being 'indignant' presents as a strong emotion. I can understand how the other disciples must have felt, seeing their colleagues attempt to manipulate Jesus into some special deal. Jesus aptly reminds his team – you must first be a servant. This encounter suggests we need to learn the important skill of regulating our emotions; learning how to validate them, but at the same time checking our responses.

Leaders who step into responsibility should take time to explore their family system and process any impacts of family into their own development and growth. A failure to do so may create patterns of behaviour that are unhelpful to church life.

For conversation:

- *Do you think your own family has created wounds in your own relational development? If so can you clarify the impact of your own family on your ability to form safe and secure relationships?*
- *How does a church leadership team learn to deal with strong emotions? Are emotions important when considering important decisions in the life of the church?*

Relationships and Control – Start with Yourself; Humility First

The brokenness of our human condition warrants careful consideration with respect to developing healthy relationships. It's too easy to bias our relationships through power and control rather than a mutuality of respect and understanding. Controlling, manipulating or abusing others was never God's intention for His creative order or church.

The church must become a 'safe-haven' for relationships if we are to model genuine community. God has ordained the church (read community of relationships) as his bride to model constructive, real and empowering relationships.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ. (Philippians 2: 1-5 NIV)

I believe that healthy spiritual leaders take the time to manage or control their own growth by humbly addressing their own shortcomings first. The biblical notion of dealing with the 'plank in one's eye' reminds us that the important work of relational leadership starts with self. I suspect we tend to avoid our own pain and wounds rather than allowing Christ to set us free and shape us as healthy disciples.

For conversation:

- *Have you experienced or seen controlling leadership in church life? If so, how was it deal with?*
- *What challenges exist when churches prioritize character development and spiritual maturity in leaders?*

Relationships – The Environment for Transformation (How Trust and Safety are Critical)

There are some churches who never seem to rise above seasons of conflict and mistrust, forever turning over pastors and unable to sustain growth from new comers. These churches display a chronic or systemic level of dysfunctionality, unable to break patterns or seasons of inward, self-serving behaviours. The Australian church must become aware of the ability of the broader community to sniff out dysfunction and unhealthy relationships in church life. *For the church to be the light of the world, and the salt of the earth our model of healthy community must exceed the expectations of the world.*

It has always been God's intention that the church (read local expression of faith) is His only strategy for transforming the world. The extent to which leaders and church members model an environment for transformation, impacts others by what is caught and taught.

Leaders who build trust, also create safe environments for conversation and differences of opinion. Healthy churches encourage different perspectives but do so in an environment of continuous improvement instead of critical or negative bickering.

Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. (Titus 2:2-3 NIV)



For discussion:

- *How do leaders build trust in church life?*
- *What qualities or character traits are important for leaders to model safe relational environments?*
- *What conditions can you identify with, that make a church un-safe or unhealthy?*

Relationships – Moving Towards the Other in Pain and Conflict

Conflict management and resolution is without doubt one of the more difficult skillsets for church leaders to acquire and practice. Most of us prefer to avoid conflict than stimulate more pain for both ourselves and for others.

Jesus reminds us: *“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ (Matthew 18:15-16 NIV)*

“When it comes to risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information (from themselves and others) out into the open.” (Patterson)

The primary relationship skill for conflict management is to stay engaged despite the intensity of pain. Healthy leaders learn to run towards the other in pain, to step into the eye of the storm and remain engaged for the good of both the other and the church.

For conversation:

- Share your experiences of church conflict? In what ways is conflict able to be addressed without attacking the other?
- How do you rate yourself and your ability to manage conflict? What skills do you need to acquire to become a better relational leader?

Kingdom and Trinity – 2 Compass Points as Important Bearings

In navigating relational leadership, church leaders can rely on two critical theological compass points to guide and shape their development. The Kingdom of God is translated in Scripture as the 'reign or rule' of God on an individual's life. Jesus came to extend the Kingdom for all peoples (not just the Jewish nation) and so God's heart is that he would bring Christ-like order into the lives of disciples. He taught us to pray – Let your kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven, to deliberately remind us of the priority of God's Kingdom.

Church leaders would benefit greatly from studying Scripture and Kingdom theology to understand important nuances in that God's 'order' has a corporate and person impact. When disciples are 'ordered' in character and relationship, the church genuinely makes an impact under the Father's love.

Similarly the Trinitarian nature of God, inexplicitly reminds us that God is a God of relationship and community. Trinitarian theology addresses the individualistic orientation of culture, calling church leaders to welcome others into community and life. The relational interplay between Father, Son and Spirit are crucial reminders of the mutual respect needed when we understand that all peoples are created equal in God's economy despite race, status or privilege.

For conversation:

- *How can your leadership community explore and prioritize the study of Kingdom and Trinitarian theology?*
- *What impacts can you potentially see if church's understood God's design for his Kingdom in relationship?*
- *How might you prioritize the reading of one or two books from the bibliography?*

Dr. Andrew Ball is the Executive Ministry Director of Churches of Christ in NSW. He has led the Fresh Hope network for over a decade and is passionate about the local church strategically impacting community.

*Andrew can be contacted via the Freshhope office
02 8719 2600
PO Box 3561
RHODES NSW 2138
office@freshhope.org.au*

Recommended Bibliography:

- Bass, Bernard M. Riggio Ronald E. *Transformational Leadership*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2006.
- Blackaby, Henry T. and Richard Blackaby. *Spiritual Leadership : Moving People on to God's Agenda*. edited by Henry and Blackaby Richard. Nashville Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001.
- Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly : How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012.
- Cloud, Henry and Henry Cloud. *Unlocking Your Family Patterns : Finding Freedom from a Hurtful Past*. Chicago Ill.: Moody Publishers, 2011.
- Crabb, Larry. *Connecting : Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships : A Radical New Vision*. Nashville, Tenn.: Word Pub., 1997.
- De Pree, Max. *Leadership Is an Art*. edited by Pree Max De. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- Friedman, Edwin H., Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal. *A Failure of Nerve : Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. New York: Seabury Books, 2007.
- Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Cornerstone Concept : In Leadership, in Life*. Falls Church, Va.: Leading Systems Press, 2008.
- Glasser, Arthur F. and Charles Edward van Engen. *Announcing the Kingdom : The Story of God's Mission in the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Halter, Hugh and Matt Smay. *The Tangible Kingdom : Creating Incarnational Community : The Posture and Practices of Ancient Church Now*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008.
- Herrington, Jim, Mike Bonem, James Harold Furr, and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.). *Leading Congregational Change : A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey*. edited by Mike Bonem James H. Furr Jim Herrington. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.
- Herrington, Jim, R. Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor. *The Leader's Journey : Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*. 1st ed., edited by R. Robert Creech and Trish Taylor Jim Herrington. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Hirsch, Alan. *The Forgotten Ways : Reactivating the Missional Church*. edited by Hirsch Alan. Grand Rapids Mich: Brazos Press, 2006.
- Keller, Timothy J. *The Prodigal God : Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*. New York: Dutton, 2008.
- Lencioni, Patrick. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team : A Leadership Fable*. 1st ed. ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- Lewis, Robert, Wayne Cordeiro, Warren Bird, and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.). *Culture Shift : Transforming Your Church from the inside Out*. 1st ed. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- Mackay, Hugh. *The Art of Belonging*. 2014.
- Malphurs, Aubrey. *Leading Leaders : Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence, a New Paradigm for Board Leadership*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2005.
- McManus, Erwin Raphael. *An Unstoppable Force : Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind*. Loveland, Colo.: Group, 2001.
- McManus, Erwin Raphael. *Seizing Your Divine Moment : Dare to Live a Life of Adventure*. Nashville Tenn: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002.
- McNeal, Reggie. *A Work of Heart : Understanding How God Shapes Spiritual Leaders*. 1st ed., edited by McNeal Reggie. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Patterson, Kerry. *Crucial Conversations : Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- Quinn, Robert E. *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It : A Guide for Leading Change*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Roxburgh, Alan J. and Network Leadership. *Missional Map-Making : Skills for Leading in Times of Transition*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Steinke, Peter L. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times : Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Herndon Va: Alban Institute, 2006.
- Wright, Walter C. *Relational Leadership : A Biblical Model for Influence and Service*. edited by Walter C. Wright, Jr. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000.