

# Turning The Tide

## Training and Sustaining Biblical Leaders for Tomorrow

**Discussion document for Leadership Forum 1<sup>st</sup> November 2006**  
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*What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us, we will not hide from our children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power and the wonders he has done.*

*Ps 78:3-4*

living leadership  
training and sustaining  
biblical leaders

## Context

We currently face a crisis of leadership across the Evangelical Church. Nationally the number of evangelical leaders is diminishing and many more churches are closing than are being planted<sup>i</sup>. Our early studies indicate that the trend is not limited to any one evangelical constituency but is experienced widely, especially in free evangelicalism.

Crucially the trend is reflected variously in:

- the smaller number of emerging leaders
- the growing rate of attrition among existing leaders, especially in the 45-55 age bracket
- the diminishing size and increasing age demographic of many churches with the consequence that an increasing number are unable to employ (or even find) full time leaders nor to train them internally

The reasons for leadership decline are quite complex. The following factors are all significant:

- fewer conversions than a generation ago
- large debt being increasingly normal throughout the 20s
- few churches devoting specific attention and resources to training
- little teaching on leadership
- older leaders not wanting to bring younger leaders on and let them assume leadership
- accessibility and cost to the individual of thinking about leadership

In addition, surveys reveal other factors that hinder the young from perceiving Christian leadership to be an honourable and desirable task to set their hearts on, and reveal the need for nurture among existing leaders<sup>ii</sup>:

- 30% of church leaders have considered leaving Christian service for a long period
- over 30% feel their family suffers as a consequence of their ministry and inadequate income
- the vast majority perceive themselves as overworked yet struggle to have any interrupted time off
- the majority struggle to pray or give priority to the care of their souls
- 75% indicate that their pre-ordination training was only adequate or less than adequate
- 41% feel inadequately supported in their local church. Fewer than 25% indicated that their denominational supervisor is a means of support
- Many identify that the expectations they feel laid on them and their families are beyond their ability to sustain or where their perceived gifts lie

# The Developing Crisis

## Emerging Younger Leadership

For the reasons stated above the number of younger people considering whether God is calling them to leadership is declining sharply. Either entering leadership is perceived as unachievable by potential candidates or mechanisms for helping them are inadequate and inaccessible. There may also be those who are discouraged by witnessing an older generation of leaders struggling under unbearable. The current high rate of marriage breakdown, succumbing to sexual temptation and susceptibility to mental health issues among leaders does little to enthuse potential younger leaders.

Finance is a major hurdle facing a younger person who believes God may be calling them into Christian leadership. Almost all now have significant debt throughout their 20s and colleges, by and large, no longer provide bursaries. When the cost of three years of theological education can be between £30-60K in real terms, the average sized church can no longer sustain one person in any three year period at college and is also unlikely to have significant leadership training ability at home. It is interesting to note the number of free church trainee leaders currently looking to Australia and the USA for training because of finance.

*An average-sized church often can no longer afford to pay for one person in any three year period (ie, ever) to go through training. This represents a tipping point with enormous implications that we have not encountered before. As far as I can tell no survey work has been done on the rate at which the average-sized church is producing full-time leaders. Nor has any work been done on the consequences of the new debt among graduates on the level of people able to consider training for pastoral ministry.*

(In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that some institutions may be approaching the point where over 50% of their graduates do not continue in ministry until retirement, despite having set out with this intention. In these cases the training costs are facilitating many fewer years of ministry, in effect magnifying those costs by a large degree).

While finance is one issue, the broader, underlying problem is that we have ceased to see the local church as the primary locus for developing leaders. Over the last 100 years the increasing tendency has been to contract out the training of leaders to institutions disconnected from the local church. This is not to disparage the contribution colleges make to leadership development. However when we take their contribution and turn it into *everything* several negative consequences emerge:

- a. the vision and the skill for training leaders within the local congregation may be lost. This will tend to overemphasise the nature of leadership as restricted to the full-time professional
- b. those whom God is calling to leadership may be have insurmountable economic hurdles put in their way, preventing them from exploring God's purposes. Denominational accreditory mechanisms may add a further bar

- c. the local church has no accountability over the content or curriculum for leadership development
- d. when a vision for training new leaders is not on the agenda that situation is hard to change. A church's view will often be that someone else has always done it
- e. the normal expectation is that development and sustenance of leaders is expensive and that few should consider it.

The overall effect is to deter many. Far from making routes into leadership accessible, the system can actively raise barriers for potential leaders (and possibly has the additional consequence of exacerbating the clergy/laity divide).

### **Struggling Longer-Term Leadership**

At the other end of the age spectrum the numbers leaving Christian leadership prematurely are at an all time high as is clergy marriage breakdown. Some observations indicate there may also be a developing trend in suicides. There are alarming rises in depressions and stress related illness, over-workism, burnouts and breakdowns. The casualty rate is sky-rocketing. Not only are leaders not being identified and trained in sufficient numbers, they aren't being well sustained either.

There are some places that are beacons of light. The most deliberate steps to counter the trends are currently being taken by Anglicans rather than by non-conformists. In Anglican circles some groupings have been identifying and building a consensus around these needs for 20 years and have consistently allocated time, man power, finance and other resources to them, with significant success for their own constituency. Of course the Church of England as a whole has always provided a clear route into leadership with subsidised training and guaranteed ministry positions. In many other circles potential leaders can discover that training is inaccessibly expensive to them and that the mechanisms for finding positions after training are inadequate.

One consequence of this is that numbers of potential young leaders are disappearing from non-conformist churches into Anglicanism because they feel it provides a clear and obvious training mechanism for them that doesn't make unsustainable financial demands, or into focussed parachurch ministries with clear programmes for developing gifts and obvious outlets for their use.

There are currently very many leaderless non-conformist churches and the number is growing. The number that rely on full-time pulpit-filling is distressing. The average age of church leaders across the denominations is likely around 52<sup>iii</sup>. The average age at which people enter leadership is around 41, a marked increase compared with 50 years ago.

### **Training and Discipling of Lay Leaders**

In addition to these needs a third area that requires significant development is the training and nurture of lay leaders. The single largest group of people with

strategic and pastoral responsibilities in churches is the unpaid volunteers who shoulder significant burdens of spiritual leadership.

A small consultation of leaders in May 2006 noted that in many churches there is little expectation of training to help such lay leaders carry out their responsibilities, nor a general culture of encouraging reading or other external input into their vital leadership roles. House group leaders, for example, are often the key pastoral people in a church but are very often not trained or supervised with any consistency or depth. The general pattern is more often to look for the relatively mature and willing and godly congregation member and just let them get on with it. The result may often be little expectation of support in their roles or growth in their leadership over a period and a lot of lay leaders who feel ill-equipped to do what is asked of them.

Given the extreme busyness of all pastors the consultation identified that the local delivery of consistent training for lay leaders is unlikely for many churches on their own.

Consideration needs to be given to:

- how to provide for the training needs of lay leaders in ways that are as non time-invasive and as local as possible
- how to collate and disseminate best resources for growth and share best practice in review, evaluation and appraisal as freely as possible

Spiritual gifts, including leadership, emerge and flourish where there is the context for them to do so. Such a context surely becomes normal over time where there is:

- an expectation in the church that God gives leaders, that we should expect leadership gifts to emerge and that we should be ready to develop embryonic leaders when they do
- clearly understood mechanisms for training
- opportunity for lay leaders to use their gifts under supervision
- means for nurturing and sustaining this growth in the longer term

## **The Emerging Crisis**

When all these factors are considered together they give a strong indication that in ten to fifteen years there will be mass retirements of existing leaders with nowhere near enough people of the two generations below to stay demographically level, let alone seeing fresh waves of church planting to reach the nation and the nations.

One respected free church leader said recently "if in ten years time we haven't produced a clear, obvious and accessible route into leadership in the free churches we will have lost the battle - the stream of potential leaders will have dried up." I do not believe that to be alarmist or an overstatement. There are

already churches and networks that have always expected an external source of leaders who therefore didn't notice that their stream was drying up until it was too late. As a whole if we do not give great effort and resources to identifying, training, developing and sustaining leaders over the next 15 years then it will be too late for many.

One Anglican leader recently said, with no sense of gloating: "I'm not comfortable with my own communion but I believe that free evangelicalism is dying out whereas conservative Anglicanism won't, because we are working on this issue and you aren't."

There are some good initiatives currently looking to train and nurture leaders but with few exceptions they tend to be local and limited either geographically or by constituency. The result is that few contexts exist for synergy or broader strategy. Even taking the best current initiatives into account the overall picture of decline in leadership is still alarming. In training and nurturing leaders our whole is far less than the sum of the parts.

We are entering a crucial time in which we will either, by God's grace, develop ways to reverse the declines or lose a very great deal in a very short period of years through lack of vision and strategic leadership. The situation requires not merely growing numbers of people released into leadership and subsequently sustained, but a multiplication. Without very deliberate identification, training and sustenance of the current generation and the next then in one generation's time we will be very significantly weaker. This will not be because God has not given sufficient leadership gifts to the Church but because insufficient consideration has been given to how those He is gifting can best be trained, nurtured and used. Observing these issues among the Brethren, Dr. Neil Summerton notes that: "The challenge for the church in each succeeding generation, is how can it ensure under God a continuing supply of such spiritual leadership, at both the congregational and the supra-congregational levels."<sup>iv</sup>

Dr. Summerton further comments: "There will be no progress [in the development of congregational leadership] unless suitable training opportunities are provided. Nor will there be progress unless the potential students perceive their need and its significance, and are prepared to make the necessary effort. Improving the quality and spiritual vision of congregational leadership is critical to the fortunes of very many local churches."<sup>v</sup>

To summarise, the need is for a *lot* of Christ-glorifying, biblical leaders who are well trained, nurtured and sustained over their whole period in leadership. This vision is currently being frustrated at both ends of the age spectrum. By losing older leaders and by failing to find ways to remove insurmountable hurdles from in front of the young, patterns of decline are systematically being built into the system. Statistics and observation show we are already losing many full time leaders prematurely and will lose many more over the next ten years. More still will remain but subsist on the ragged edge, clearly in need of training and nurture but unable to access or afford it.

## **Living Leadership**

A consultation of leaders of 16 churches and ministries gathered in November 2005 to discuss these issues. It was immediately obvious that there was a consensus, which has subsequently been shared by many others.

*A common conviction emerged of wanting to work in fellowship to find ways to enable and nurture leaders in ways that are high quality but cheap and accessible to the recipients. We wish to see as many unnecessary hurdles as possible removed from those who may otherwise flourish as leaders.*

### **Vision**

The object of Living Leadership is to bring together as many leaders, churches and supporters as possible to produce fresh solutions over time.

*Our long term vision is to arrive at the point that whenever God lays his hand on a person's life for leadership it will be possible to assure them that the necessary training, development and sustenance for their life, soul and marriage will be available, accessible and affordable to them as a matter of course for their entire period in leadership.*

We recognise that this basic necessity is sadly absent in many churches and situations of leadership today. Our core desire is to see a generation equipped for effective and sustained ministry, to provide for the spiritual health of leaders and to work with families in ministry for their joy.

### **Strategy**

We aim to fulfil this vision by building a warm, wide, confessional family of interest in the issues with the goodwill to work together on specific projects over time. Our aim is not organisational unity but synergy. We believe that a collaborative response is needed across a wide range of evangelical constituencies. It is through such collaborations that existing skills, resources and personnel will best be used for the snowballing of high impact leadership training and nurture. The community of interest is also essential for the establishment of trust, best practice, strategic sharing of new ideas, resources and coordinated training programmes. Finally, it is the family of interest that roots the development of leadership primarily in the local church rather than in independent institutions.

Key strategic questions to consider are as follows:

- how can we collaboratively raise up large numbers of spiritual leaders?
- how can we best provide for embryonic leaders?
- how can we sustain and nurture longer term leaders?
- how can we provide accessible training for non full-time leaders?
- how may it be possible to provide consistent high quality training and nurture in the long term at accessible cost to the recipients?

- how can we communicate with and resource the wider evangelical world so as to create a broad expectation that these things are both vital and possible?

A few quotes:

*Living Leadership is a very timely initiative. Pastoral encouragement, spiritual sustenance and sustaining grace are often neglected priorities for Christian leaders, but they are absolutely essential in today's hazardous environment. I am delighted to see such a network being launched, and support it wholeheartedly.*

Jonathan Lamb, Director Langham Preaching, Langham Partnership International

*I have wanted to go this conference for years! Faced with the demands of full lives and busy ministries it is all too easy to find we are neglecting our souls, our friendships and our marriages. I believe this will be an excellent opportunity to get our priorities right and to seek from God the refreshment we need.*

John Risbridger, Senior Pastor Above Bar Church Southampton, on Living Leadership's Pastoral Refreshment Conference

*I doubt there is a better way to start an apprenticeship year than with other apprentices and leaders, focussing on and rejoicing in the grace that shapes our identity, our mission and relationships. Thanks to the "Formation" conference for church based interns there is now somewhere to find it*

Peter Chilvers, Associate Pastor Benthany City Church, Sunderland, on Living Leadership's Formation Church Apprentices Training

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For analysis and comment see, for example *Religious Trends 5* (p9.6). Such statistics as there are are not always easy to decipher. Peter Brierley notes in *Religious Trends 2006* (p.12.8) that the trends are more marked in established denominations but are also masked by a large increase in part-time ministers in black-majority Pentecostal churches. Brierley further notes that of new churches opening before 2020 almost half will be Pentecostal, a quarter will be New Churches and 10% will be from various nationals from overseas. Very few will be from established non-conformist backgrounds

<sup>ii</sup> Figures and conclusions from *Leaders Under Pressure*, Colin Buckland and John Earwiker, EA 1996

<sup>iii</sup> See analysis in *Religious Trends 5* (p12.8)

<sup>iv</sup> *Leadership in the Church* (p.15), Dr. N. Summerton 2005, [www.benrff.org/documents/Leadership.pdf](http://www.benrff.org/documents/Leadership.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> *Fan the Flame – Developing Gift and Leadership in the Local Church* (p.29), Dr. N. Summerton 2005, [www.benrff.org/documents/FanTheFlame.pdf](http://www.benrff.org/documents/FanTheFlame.pdf)