

With Whom Shall We Work? Transitioning Leadership God's Way

Wolfgang Simson

Recently, a group of friends met in our living room to pray together over a very special question: "With whom shall we work together in the future." Our group was not defined by membership in any common organization, so we did not come to pray for survival, direction or transformation of something that does exist. We were bound together by four things: a common vision, common values (not doctrines), proximity and friendship. We just prayed: "Jesus, please help us identify the ones we are created to work with in the harvest, and save us from working with people that just want to draw us into 'their thing.'"

Relationships in the Kingdom, I believe, are not an accident; rather God has created very special people for us to "be joined with," and He himself will choose them for us so that we can bond. God told Moses: "Take Joshua, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hands on him"(Num. 27:18). It was God who revealed Elisha as the successor of Elijah (1 Kings 19:17-21). However, this may not always be to our liking, like with Saul who had such great difficulty accepting David as his successor that he literally died with the issue. Saul was proud and therefore jealous. Other leaders are bound by other idols: tradition, fearing people more than God, and have long ago missed the boat of "laying on their hands" on anyone. If they remain in that trap, they will die lonely, like Saul.

The triune God, being trans-generational, covenantal and missional at his heart, creates these tailor-made relationships mainly for the sake of "our life's mission": a territory, a people group or, rarely, an issue. Should we put the welfare of an organization or a church before that question, we will muddy our own waters and wonder why on earth do the relationships with "these people" around us not work out. Simply put: we are being idolatrous and put, in all practical purposes, a system of work, ministry, doctrine or tradition before God-like an idol. And one thing we all know: God does not take to idolatry easy at all, starting with the first of the Ten Commandments.

Back to our living room, then. As we prayed, we felt the Lord very clearly point out three things to us:

1. Look for people who have not bowed their knee to Baal.

That reminded us of God's counsel to Elijah and made us to examine ourselves, and the idols of our own heart. And, my goodness, they were there! Selfishness, pride, denominational mindsets, ministry styles, pet-theologies, methodology, take-over plans, you name it. But we realized soon: anyone "who comes to Goliath in the name of XYZ-ministry," or representing "Mission X" or "Church Y" at the round table has, by default, a divided heart and a double agenda. Saul's army, who used to shiver for fear anyhow, would be duly impressed, but Goliath would just laugh. A Christian version of Baal-worship, yes, does seem to pursue God's agenda on the surface, but really be pushing its own alongside. "Would you like to see our brand-new brochure?" No, I wouldn't. I have seen all too many already. Here's the bottom line: Such a person has been bought by a system - usually for the sake of a hired hand job, status, or pension plan - and will most likely draw you into his trap, put you like a horse in front of his cart stuck in the mud, and quite seriously love you for a while, because you are so useful for his plans.

Beware, said God. Look for people who have died to this game, who laid their agenda on my altar and asked for the fire to fall.

2. Look for people who covenant with my purposes, with each other, and with the land I gave them.

This was a tough one, too. Ultimately, we like it the other way round: we love God to covenant with us, become a member of our board, our church, sanction our plans, be our, well, junior partner. Covenanting with Him, we saw, requires change, big time. We realized we need to stop asking God to bless what we are doing - and do what He is blessing. Stop asking God to sign our strategy papers, but we ourselves, with our life, sign His. We need to lay down our agenda, even die to it like the kernel of wheat that otherwise stays alone (i.e., stagnating, staggering on, barely making it, fruitless, taking up space but breaking no new ground). As we die even to our great evangelical agendas - and let's face it, many are again money-and-survival-driven, come with prestige and job security, with inherited human tradition that we carry proudly - we could become truly and undividedly part of God's agenda, pledge ourselves to Him no matter what, be separated for His purposes and thus covenant with Him. As we then covenant with those who covenant with Him in such a way-forming some sort of regional "Dead Poets Society"-we only need to find those that have gotten an answer to the question: God, what territory or people group am I assigned to, what is my mission field, my "apostolic territory" (2 Cor. 10:13-18), and who has "married it," like our African friends sometimes put it. People like Bob Becket in Hemmet, California-remember the Transformation 1 video-who bought his grave there as a seminal ministry statement not unlike that of John Knox of old: "Give me Scotland or I die!"

3. Do not trust anyone that does not limp.

This reminded us of Jacob wrestling with God. He "won" a fight with the most powerful being on earth and came away limping, with a glaring weakness for all to see-like Paul's thorn. Our biggest fights are never with ourselves, our peers, not even our wife, or even with the devil. Our biggest fight is always with God, and yes, we will come away limping - otherwise I believe we have never really fought with God, but with a harmless image of Him that we conveniently created. Beware of folk that come out of "meeting God" and seem pretty unharmed, with a triumphant smile asking you to join their winning team. Look rather for Jacobs-turned-Israels, losers-turned-limpers.

Linger here for a while, would you? I had to, as well. It drove me to tears, I had to see some painful truths, and had to make some-yes, painful-changes, including closing down a mission work that I had started myself. I had to go wrestle with God again, and no, it was no piece-of-cake-business.

Can I make an altar call here? Would you please take off some serious time and pursue God for the sake of pursuing God and ask Him to remove any idols in your heart, address this covenant-business and start limping?

I do not claim all this to be biblical revelation, of course, nor am I very religious about these three issues, or five others, but as for me, they helped a bit.

Ways of handing on the baton without losing the race.

What does all this mean for the issue of handing on leadership for the next generation, then? If we, as fathers and mothers, are not able to turn our hearts to the sons and daughters and bless

them, the result will be curse, says the last verse of the Old Testament. And so, rather than blessing the next generation, I am afraid there has been quite a bit of cursing going on-and we are all a part of it. Look at the issue of structure, for example. Almost every godly work, church planting or mission movement . . .

1. Starts with a vision
2. Develops an ad-hoc organizational structure to facilitate the vision
3. The "ad-hoc" part bit is deleted, and the structure develops a permanent life of its own - through salaries, competition, pride, and tradition - and, amazingly, now the vision starts to facilitate the structure.
4. A little down the line, and this institution emerges that has developed bylaws, committees, in-house memos and special core-group retreats, and we spend our time remembering the original vision and spending 90% of our time living a memory, explaining why today this vision does not work, and talk of transitioning, reinvention, re-engineering, evolution and that the breakthrough comes surely at our next annual board meeting.

Why did Paul, John, Peter and Barnabas never seem to be carrying visiting cards of "PJPB Apostolic Ministry Worldwide, Inc.," giving pep-talks to Mission retreats, speaking at conferences on transitioning and writing the forewords for books by famous authors?

They left all this-including the successor question-in God's hands. They were friends of Jesus and friends of each other, they knew their mission, and trusted God to carry it on, once they were dead. They lived an "ad-hoc life," ready for changes anytime. If at all they had some organization behind them (e.g., Acts 6), it seemed all pretty unincorporated, ad-hoc, temporary, minimal-a minimum of organization for a maximum of organism. I therefore routinely advise any organization older than 5 years to reinvent itself regularly (close down, pray, think, start again with a fresh vision), and meet at least every year for a "lets kill any holy cow that grazes amongst us"-retreat. In other words, remain always in phase one and two of the four points above, and lead an ad-hoc life, a minimum structure to ensure maximum life.

If you are looking for someone to take over your ministry and would fit into it, think again. I see all too many that have a dream, call a committee to plan a reformation, and hire a PR-guy to communicate this to the next generation. This setup for failure is even worse than watering down any vision to such mediocre standards, that they appeal even to the stragglers, and then have them support it.

Avoid the 3 biggest mistakes in transitioning leadership:

1. ***"Our way or no way."*** don't strangle the next generation with tradition.
2. ***"Someone like me - only a bit younger."*** Face it: you did have your chance to change the world; why bind a younger hand to a plough that did not deliver the goods?

3. ***"Let the committee decide."*** This, by default, puts maintenance over vision and is a sure road to mediocrity, a compromise that will please everyone. This may be a fine strategy for a bank or business, but not for a church.

"I hate the way you do it, but I love you for doing it, anyhow"

Maybe we need to go back to gambling - and cast the dice, like the early apostles. Or we have to answer the "lifespan question." What, really, is the natural lifespan of a church? A ministry? It may be shorter than we think. So let the next generation invent these issues for themselves. Why on earth do you want to inherit it?

I like the way Pastor Alex Garth of Berlin put it recently in a conference on church planting:

"You may not like the way these youngsters do ministry-the music, the style, the clothes, and they have pierced what?! But they need to hear you say to them: 'I hate the way you do it, but I love you for doing it, since otherwise nobody will do anything!'"

Young people-and future leaders-need a safe place for a dangerous experiment of their own. You had your time-give them theirs. Even if you never had someone investing into you like that: they do need the hearts of the fathers to give them permission to invent-plus the keys, the checkbook and trust to make mistakes. Isn't this what new wine into new wineskins is all about, after all?

Wolfgang Simson works in Germany as a strategy consultant, researcher and journalist within the DAWN International Network. He is the author of [Houses That Change the World](#).

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