

## Learning the lessons of succession – for real

### Adam Eakins

At the end of March this year I handed in my 'Director of Joshua Generation badge' temporarily to take on the leadership of our church on a full-time basis while our pastor was on a three month sabbatical. In my role with JoshGen I get to talk about leadership succession a great deal but now I was experiencing it first hand. Could all that I talked about be put into practice?

Well my three months are nearly up and the church is still standing. I would like to use a few moments during my time in charge to reflect on the development of leadership and the whole area of succession. I am sorry if it comes across as a bit self-indulgent. Please forgive me but I have found it quite cathartic. I hope to drop in on five moments in the life and ministry of Jesus to give it a biblical foundation and even if you get nothing from my ramblings at least you may from the greatest of leaders.

#### *Training Others*

There was a temptation to take on everything having been placed in leadership, thinking I needed to do all the preaching etc. For me, this maybe a desire to prove myself (to whom? – I am not sure, maybe God). This is one of the dangers anyone faces taking on a new role that in the desire to establish ourselves we miss opportunities to pass on leadership.

Church leadership is not a one person job and whenever you step up to fulfil a new role it is important to look out for those who God may be leading into new roles to fill the space you have left behind. I needed to remember that I had been given numerous opportunities which had contributed to my development. Now I wanted to do the same. This meant putting in place a team that would work with me during this time period.

You can see this clearly in the life of Jesus, who on beginning his wandering teacher role made sure that he gathered a team around him. These men would spend time together and be given opportunities to develop their leadership skills ready for the time when Jesus would move on. **Mark 6:6-13**

My team were a mixed group of people in the same way that the disciples were but they have been invaluable to the church and me with many displaying hidden talents/gifts which have added to the flavour of the church. Thanks guys - standing shoulder to shoulder with you has been brilliant.

#### *The Right Balance*

When ever I change jobs it is often very exciting for me and I am very guilty of allowing the whole job to take over my life. The people in this case who normally suffer with the adjustment are not me but my family. Another day off interrupted by an important phone call or a vital meeting. Those of you who have children must know the strange experience of being at church with your family. Who else takes their family to work with them once a week and then is too busy to speak to them. My son, Joel, loves to join me on the platform or shout out (he once asked me out loud if I was having a bath as I entered the water for a baptism).

Keeping that balance between work and family is one of the hardest aspects of these three months as I have struggled to know where the boundaries are between work and family. Thankfully I have a very loving wife who is very patient with me and I have found the stuff Mike Breen wrote about our work coming out of our rest and not the other way other way round very helpful. You can find more in his excellent book 'Passionate Church'.

Jesus knew the importance of rest although like many of us he found it hard to come by. **Mark 1:35-39** It is vital to chill out with God and we often read of Jesus going off to spend time with his Father. How much more do we need to do that than Jesus, if I'm honest a whole lot more. You see

most of us don't need solitary confinement, which is punishment; we need solitary refinement – the space to allow God to refresh us. Still haven't got this one sorted – I'm a 'work in progress' on this one.

### *People First*

The one aspect of my new role which I was not looking forward to was having to visit those who are elderly or housebound. It's just not me I thought. I do enjoy being with people, but taking time out of my day when I could be doing something productive, to visit someone was not high on my agenda. It has therefore been a pleasant surprise to discover that placing people first (the priority of the Kingdom, no less) has been the biggest joy of these three months.

One person I visited who had been widowed just over a year ago asked me at the end of our time together why I had come to see her that day. "Honestly", I replied, "when I was thinking about my day ahead your name came to my mind". "That is amazing", she replied. She went on to tell me that when I had been speaking on loving mercy a week ago she had said to herself that is all very well but I need to see it in action not just words. She had prayed to God that someone from the church would visit her and here I was.

To be used by God in this small way to bless someone reminded me that Jesus was a people first person. One of my favourite moments in Jesus' life was when he was stopped by a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. He turned and calls her 'daughter', the only time it is recorded that Jesus spoke these words. Jesus even on the way to doing something else never missed out on those who just needed a moment of his time. Jesus completed his mission but never lost the value of placing people first. **Matt 9:18-26**

### *Vulnerable*

The other day I had one of those 'need to change my pants' moments during a normal Sunday service. Now I do have a bit of a reputation for doing some odd things in services to grab people's attention but this moment was in no way planned. Halfway through my talk a woman approached the stage and started shouting and swearing. For a split second, I was frozen to the spot, as I recognised her as the woman who had hit one of our congregation two weeks before. However, I knew I needed to act. I approached her and told her that this was not the time and asked her to leave the platform and be quiet. At the same time two elders arrived on the stage and escorted her off the platform still swearing and now lashing out. The scene continued outside as I reassured the congregation and I lead them in prayers for this very disturbed lady.

The experience had left me feeling very vulnerable and exposed; I still twitch slightly if anyone gets out their seats now. It is at moments like this that you realise how much we need God's strength and protection because we never know what we might face. I also think feeling vulnerable although uncomfortable is a good place to be for leaders. Jesus himself was vulnerable in front of Peter, James and John in the garden of Gethsemane and he faced the temptation to walk away. **Matt 26:36-46**

However, many leaders (me included) have wrongly assumed that showing weakness is not a good thing in a leader. Admitting 'I don't know' or 'I got it wrong' truly is liberating if we dare to do it.

### *Succession*

The most challenging aspect of this temporary succession has been the balance of honouring what has happened in the past while seeking to move forward in a new way that reflects your leadership style. It can be very insulting to come in changing everything as well as very unsettling and unnecessary. Yet, when someone said to me that they hardly noticed the difference since the change it made me want to do things in such a way so that everyone felt the difference. I have been able to do stuff that has reflected more of who I am but I hope that in doing that I have honoured God and those who went before me.

Jesus knew that succession needed to take place as he went to be with his Father. The last thing he said to his disciples just before his goodbye was go and do the business all over the place and do it by God's Spirit. Jesus had indicated that these men would do far more than him and in regards to succession we need to be willing to let those we pass leadership onto to go further than we may have without getting precious about our ministry!!! ***Matt 28:16-20***

So now I begin to plan the handing back to our pastor after my caretaker role. It has been a challenging and rewarding experience but I guess maybe even more testing maybe letting go of the reins, no longer being the boss and allowing God to use me in a different ways again over the coming years.