



Set my leaders free!

TN112 Training Notes series: Leadership

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These notes take the story of the seven officers appointed by the Early Church as recorded in Acts 6:1-7 and apply it to church or mission leaders today. The principle to come out of this passage is that leaders need to be released from operational detail to enable them to focus on their ministry priorities.

To enable that to happen we need what I will term 'organisers' as I want to keep the applications wide. Examples would be a Minister with a PA or Church Administrator. But I also have in mind a church Youth Worker with voluntary team members. Or any leader with a No. 2 or support team.

Some organisers are also leaders (such as church Operations Managers) who therefore need to see this passage from both perspectives.

Acts 6 is not a teaching passage so we need to be careful when applying it to ourselves. But it does have all the marks of a best practice case study and that is how I take it.

I have often spoken on this passage when addressing Church Administrators – there is much to learn. But in these notes I focus on seven actions taken by the apostles, the *leaders*, which should surprise us all. I then challenge both leaders and organisers to apply the lessons I believe come out of this case study.

Using the term 'organisers' here I have in mind people well involved in the church and in Christian ministry – because that is the context of this passage. There may well be others who help or assist in some way, but here we have people taking on some responsibility.

Whether you are a leader or an organiser, be ready to be challenged. What I want you to do is to view this passage through a fresh lens. So, please read the passage through and then let me show you seven surprising leadership actions.

Background

In the Early Church in Jerusalem a pastoral problem blew up. Ours, today, are nothing new!

There were converts there from two different groups of Jews. Those from the wider Greek world (the Hellenistic Jews) and those Palestinian Jews from Judaea and Galilee who would have spoken Aramaic (the Hebraic Jews). It was all about how the Greek speaking widows (with, of course, no Universal Credit of any kind to fall back on) were being treated by the church.

A simple issue, but my guess is that it could have developed into something quite ugly and split the church at a fragile stage of its life.

So what did the apostles, the leaders of the church, do? As we read through these verses, I believe seven contrasts come to light. I present them all in 'A not just B' format.

1 **They asked questions starting 'Why?', not just 'How?'**

Verse 2 '... it would not be right for us ...'

OK, so I am guessing. The apostles may have started with, 'How can we make sure this problem gets sorted?' But they must have then asked, in addition, 'But why does it have to be us as the solution?' Once they asked that question, other possibilities came to mind. It looks so straightforward as we read this today, but this was a radical line to take. Especially when they let the whole congregation choose the people (more about that in a minute).

Leaders and organisers both need to be brave enough to ask the 'Why?' questions before tackling the 'How?' ones. Otherwise you end up carrying on as before and, perhaps, doing the wrong things better! In this case the apostles might have been brilliant at serving tables, and the job certainly needed doing. But that would have led to a well organised church lacking spiritual power. By default people ask 'How?'. This case study demonstrates the value of starting with a 'Why?'.

Question to both leaders and organisers:

Are you regularly asking 'Why?' questions?

2 **They saw the big picture, not just the detail**

Verse 2 '... to neglect the ministry of the word of God ...'

The problem to solve, though important both pastorally and politically, was not at the centre of what the Church was there to be and do. All credit to the apostles: they had the big picture in view of what this was supposed to be about. Perhaps they still had Jesus' final words ringing in their ears: "Go and make disciples of all nations...."

Most people find it easier to stay in and organise something than to go out to a pagan world and preach the gospel. Many of us, leaders and organisers, default to detail because it is manageable. Big picture stuff is often scary. It was brave of the apostles to refuse to give in to this danger.

Question to leaders:

What are you currently neglecting to do that is your leadership responsibility?

Question to organisers:

What could you take off your leaders to encourage them to stay in big picture mode?

3 **They involved everyone, not just themselves**

Verse 3 '...Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you ...'

This was quite a risk: they gave the whole congregation the parameters they needed by telling them the basics of the solution. They did not abdicate their responsibility as leaders. But then they asked the congregation to choose the people for this task.

Would we, if leaders, take a risk like that? Or do we want to control every detail? It is fascinating to notice that the church selected seven people with Greek names (showing, it would seem, political sensitivity). And note too, in passing, that the apostles saw everyone as family: 'Brothers and sisters'.

Question to leaders:

Provided you know your role, are you prepared to involve others in solving problems?

Question to organisers:

Do you always have eyes open to find your successor or others you can involve?

4 **They selected on spiritual maturity, not just on competence**

Verse 3 '... who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom ...'

Notice again that the leaders provided the person profile before they asked the congregation to choose. And because this was clearly a tricky pastoral issue they set the bar high. It wasn't that anyone could join the rota: a specialist team was needed and the key requirements were their discipleship and their wisdom.

This is somewhat scary for organisers. The character requirements, for a role of this kind, matter. You find the same thing in the requirements for both elders (as you might expect) but also deacons (that is interesting) in 1 Timothy 3.

Question to leaders:

Do you seek out Christian disciples to be administrators, treasurers, secretaries?

Question to organisers:

Do you appreciate that your work demands high standards of spiritual wisdom?

5 **They delegated responsibility, not just task**

Verse 3 '... We will turn this responsibility over to them ...'

Having set it all up, the apostles clearly had no intention of micro-managing what went on. That demonstrated great courage. But it gave the organisers scope to develop in the role. If leaders don't do this they remain caught with concern about the detail – and the big picture is lost.

Too often we delegate 'task', enabling us to hang on to rather more than we should. In this case the leader not only defines the end result but exactly how to go about getting there. No mention of that here – they seemed to trust the seven to get on with it.

Question to leaders:

Do you ever micro-manage those you delegate to – or leave them without any help?

Question to organisers:

Are you seeking to be reliable in taking on responsibilities and handling them well?

6 They focused on their priorities, not just on the pastoral

Verse 4 '... and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

This comes back to point 2 but not only did they see the big picture, they knew their priority within this. When we think in big picture mode we have to work out what that means in specifics. So they needed to give time, that precious commodity, to prayer and utilising God's word in, presumably, preaching and teaching.

Note that a priority does not mean other things are unimportant. Both the pastoral issue and the spiritual leadership are vital in this setting. But *for the apostles* there was a clear priority of one over the other – and once they focused on it we are told the church grew. If only, today, we could release our leaders to focus on the same priorities!

Question to leaders:

Does your diary demonstrate your proper priorities in ministry, or are you just busy?

Question to organisers:

Do you see one of your key roles as setting your leaders free for their priorities?

7 They modelled God's calling, not just people's appointment

Verse 6 '... they prayed and laid their hands on them ...'

These were the first Christian ordinations – of organisers! These seven guys needed to know and to see that their appointments were from God, not just service on a rota. And so the prayer, the hands laid on, and the sense of awe.

Today we often lay hands on Ministers or other leaders but not so often on those who serve them. We make a severe mistake if we think organisers are unimportant and anyone will do.

Question to leaders:

Are you selecting and then 'ordaining' those who will release you for your ministry?

Question to organisers:

Do you sense a 'calling' from God to this role of releasing others for their ministry?

Some overall lessons to learn

- 1 Note that the formula above is not 'A instead of B' where B is unimportant. All the B's above are vital, but for leaders the A trumps the B every time.
- 2 Leaders need to know and then work to their priorities. The trouble is that many churches are structured and resourced in a way that makes this difficult to achieve.
- 3 But we need organisers to release leaders – and so we need to seek and pray for them whether as Administrators, No. 2's, support team members, or whatever.
- 4 We need to see the *partnership* of leaders and organisers as vital for the growth of the Church.
- 5 Leaders need organisers to enable them to lead. Organisers need leaders to set the context and direction.

As a result

This passage, as a case study of good practice, has some great outcomes. It is not so much a question of well-fed widows (although we can assume that was sorted too) but:

- 1 Peace – we never hear of the problem they faced rumbling on after this.
- 2 Outreach – Luke tells us that the word of God spread (v7).
- 3 Growth – that in turn led to God giving the blessing of growth (v7).
- 4 New leaders – two of these seven organisers develop into leaders themselves, Philip as an evangelist and Stephen as a fearless preacher. That can be true today too.
- 5 New helpers – we never hear again about the other five: Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas. That tells me they were doing their stuff well because good organisers become invisible. But I'd love to know how these five went on, and how their CVs developed. They are the unsung heroes of this piece.

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