



Step 1: Identifying a leader

In early 2017 when we first laid out the plans for the REAP course, we wrote this:

Church planting requires only two things: the favour of God and those willing to respond to his call to plant. Therefore, we pray for God's favour, and develop those who God is calling. The shape of any given plant will depend largely on the call placed by God on the church planters. Rather than define the shape of any given plant, our first task is to help potential planters grow.

REAP was, and is, all about leader-led church planting. Time has not made us soften this idea. Whenever we have tried workarounds, or planted without a clear vision laid out by a leader, the results have been painful for everyone. The leaders of the church plants are the key factor, under God, which causes new churches to thrive or wither. Why is this?

Why the leader?

Leaders are the vision holders of the church. They hold that vision before God and before the congregation. They hear from God and then answer the question: why are we here? Unless the team, and then congregation know the answer to that question, they will struggle to pull together, struggle to endure the inevitable struggles of planting, and struggle to come back to the basics of living in a new church. Leaders are shepherds, who lead the sheep to pasture, through the dangers of the journey. They work under the chief shepherd, **Jesus Christ**:

5 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Notice the way that elder and shepherd are used together. The leader of the church plant watches over the plant and guides it. The challenge of church planting is that the flock are moving to find to the grass. Whereas many churches have established patterns, families who may have been in the church for years, and a building that they have long maintained, the new churches of the Antioch Network, and others like them, rarely have buildings, strong structures, and established patterns. We move to find the untouched grass of the unreached across our towns and cities.



Without a clear idea of where the new congregation is going, people will struggle to stay in the course in the church. We'll come back to some of these questions in 'questions leaders answer.'

Who is a leader?

We aren't using leader here in a wider sense. In a wide sense, everyone has influence, so everyone leads. But this is specific; we'll look at the ideas in the passage.

To the elders among you: The leader is among the congregation. They aren't a separate and distinct group but live with and in the church. They are emotionally engaged with the congregation, but they are, at the same time, elders. That is, they watch over, govern, rule, or judge the congregation. Humility is a key characteristic of a leader. Eldership without humility is oppressive, eldership with humility is deeply refreshing to everyone. The task of leading sinful people on a journey through a dark world requires gentleness, patience and kindness, as well as understanding that God himself has 'entrusted us' with the wellbeing of the congregation.

I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed. We keep our eyes on the prize. Whenever we lose sight of eternity, we will be unable to lead. Peter had seen Christ's suffering and His glory. He was willing to lead others towards that glory through suffering. Leaders of church plants will often stand on the edge of burnout without this perspective. This is also the call that we offer to those around us: we go to make disciples. We go because others need to see, taste and live with and in Christ. Our attitude towards Jesus will spread to the congregation (for good or ill!)

2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them. We've already picked up the idea of a shepherd, leading the flock of a church plant to new pastures. A lot of new church leaders aren't ready for what it's like to watch over someone's heart. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12: 28 *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?* Jesus himself wept over Jerusalem, and wept when he saw Martha's pain. When people drift away from Christ, it hurts. We can't keep our lives free from the pain of the sheep. That doesn't mean that we have to abandon all boundaries, or drive ourselves to exhaustion trying to fix everyone's problem. It does mean that we have to care.

Not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. There is a time for many when their leadership becomes a burden. Of course, leadership is a duty, and if you only do it when you feel like it, you won't do it for long. But on the other hand, God loves our enthusiasm. Leadership without enthusiasm isn't good for us, and it isn't the pattern here. We have to work on keeping our enthusiasm high.



This is why networks, friendships, training, and prayer matter. They keep us close to the One who called us. Whenever you feel the willingness to lead ebbing away, talk to someone. If you're honest with yourself and others, and process that feeling early on, everyone will benefit, and there's more chance of recovering the joy of leadership.

...not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve... Financially, the changes of dishonest gain out of leading a church plant in the North of England are so low that we can ignore them. However, finance isn't the only kind of dishonest gain. We can lead for 'my church' or, 'my people/ our people'. It's easy to want to be loved and needed. We can look for people to depend on us. But service is different. It asks, not what is best for us, but what is best for that person under Christ. Understanding that distinction is crucial to a thriving church plant leader. Those who are able to hand people on to other churches, who can see why the church they would, or would not benefit someone's walk with Christ, and whose hearts are focused on Christ will bless those they serve, whatever happens to the church. Those who have the opposite attitude can grow a church of a thousand, yet do them no good at all.

3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. Do what you want your church to do. So simple, and yet so hard. Do you want them to pray? Pray. Do you want them to give to the church? Give to the church. Do you want them to serve? Serve. Do you want them to smile? Smile. Leading a church plant isn't a job; it's a journey with Jesus. It is possible to do it for a small power trip, but you will likely get hurt alongside your congregation. Instead, leading is a journey with Christ, stepping into a challenge to make disciples alongside others, and showing the behaviours you want to see in the flock. Every time you feel frustration or pain, pause to reflect: am I an example to the flock.

4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. We lead churches because Jesus is coming back. We will see him, and he will judge the living and the dead. Our works don't save us, but they shape us, and our shape on earth becomes our shape in heaven. We lead with Jesus, our pattern, our lord, and our brother. When we look beyond the spam in the whatsapp chat, the little quarrel over the refreshments rota, and the disappointments that grow among the encouragements, we see Jesus, cheering us on, walking with us, and we hold on to hear 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

Questions a church planter has to answer:

1) Who are we here for? We're here for Jesus. He's the chief Shepherd and we are all working for Him and through him. That needs to be built into everything we do. The church leader is the prayer leader of the church.



It's very frightening to hear Paul say in 1 Corinthians 11 *"1 Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."* But well, that's why we're here.

2) Why are we here? This is where you have to be able to tell people about why you all came to plant the church. You have to be able to explain the reason for the cost of planting. You have to be able to explain how you are planning to reach the lost. This is related to the question that we say sums up the vision of the church: Why should I join your church? The answer shouldn't be that you are an amazing person, and your church is the only one that really makes disciples. Instead, it's the church taking on the shape of Christ in the area that it's called to. There are cases where people have joined launch activities or even new congregations and thought of it as a ministry, not a church. You have to be able to answer the question of what the whole project is about.

3) Will I be safe? The answer to this is ...ish. The church will, of course, follow safeguarding policy. But as we've seen, church planters get hurt. As a teenager I didn't mind getting hurt playing rugby. Other things being equal, I'd rather not, but it was part of the game and I loved the game. If someone is really pain averse, church planting is going to be tough. You're going to meet some messy people. One church planting video says that our commitment to our team is going to be to patch them up enough to get back into the fight. If people need huge amounts of pastoral support from you, it's going to be difficult for you to carry that. Having said that, people have to be safe around you. Losing your temper is a huge red flag to people around you. Lashing out at people, criticising them, blaming them or gossiping about them are toxic traits for anybody, but for a church planter, they will drain the confidence out of your team very quickly.

4) Is there a role for me here? The answer to this question is 'yes'. The church plant leader thinks about how they can bring people alongside them. Every church has, at its core, love and trust, - a kind of Christian friendship. You, as the leader are making space for other people to thrive in the ministry, but also thrive as people. Yet, you have to be careful. There's only one of you to go round.

5) When's tea? Leaders have to be able to answer basic questions around practical questions. For example, people will want to understand how money works in your church, and they'll want to understand when and how you're going to do things. Being able to plan and communicate is really important for a leader, unless, by a stroke of great blessing/ good marriage/ lots of money you have someone who can do that for you?



How do we find leaders?

REAP, step one is about identifying leaders. How do we, in Antioch, do that? The first thing we do is listen. When someone speaks about church planting as a passion, when they naturally move in that direction, we are listening very carefully. In almost every case, the leaders we have in the Antioch network were focused on church planting, not simply ministry, evangelism or service. They wanted to plant, or help plant a church, before they came to us. The passion and desire to plant, born often out of a desire to reach a space and change it for Christ is a powerful force. This is calling.

The second is character. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul describes the character of an overseer (the term is probably largely the same as an elder):

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. In other words, there are criteria of character and the ability to teach the word of God faithfully in the congregation. We've already covered a lot of this above, but being generosity with our houses, where possible is a mark of the character of a leader.

The third is gifting. To some extent, you can patch gifting. If others have different gifts, you need to pray them into the team. But a leader who can't communicate or who can't empathise isn't going to be able to hold a team together. We'll cover training in the next section, where we talk about how gifting can be built and later, we'll talk about forming the team, where we look for wider gifts.

Finally, there is a special feature of a good leader in a small church: they can be told. A big character who struggles to admit that they are wrong, can't take correction, and struggles when they hear hard words will probably not grow a thriving church. As we identify leaders, this character trait has become more and more important to us.

Church planting requires only two things: the favour of God and those willing to respond to his call to plant. Therefore, we pray for God's favour, and develop those who God is calling.