

Where are we now? A Discussion About YWAM's Leadership Structure **By John Dawson**

I've been meeting with a lot of YWAMers lately, people from Norway to Fiji. All are curious about the future of this movement. Their questions are probably some of your questions so I thought to take the time to write on at least one facet of our journey.

There has been a lot of talk about the role of elders in Youth With A Mission, most of it wise and helpful. At its core we are talking about a behavior demonstrated in the New Testament, which is uncomplicated and doable; something far more universal than a concept of church government. Let me explain by recounting a story.

For seven years I attended a national prayer conference in the United Kingdom. We often prayed for the political leadership in Westminster. One day I shared a meal with members of Parliament in the parliamentary lunch room. Around the table were a small group of MPs from four different political parties, all identified themselves as Christians.

I asked them how many fellow-Christians served in the House and they gave me a rough estimate. I asked how many were active in their faith, and they gave me a much smaller number. I then suggested that they take a position of eldership together as the redeemed in Christ. That set off a lively discussion because it sounded governmental, but that's not what I had in mind. I was talking about watchful united prayer, the spiritual authority exercised by a remnant of the whole, the praying minority that brings blessing to all.

"What do you do when you meet for lunch?" I asked them. They laughed. "We quote the Bible to each other a lot," one said. "In argument?" I asked. "Yes," they explained. "Our parties are on the left and the right, the whole political spectrum. We argue biblical ethics, but we like each other."

"This is what I'm proposing," I said. "Don't call yourselves elders or do anything formal, rather take a position of loving unity in prayer, prayer for each other, prayer for all your fellow MPs and prayer for the United Kingdom and its government. Things always happen when we pray, especially when we pray in loving unity. You can hear God together and come to agreement. You can stand in the gap, ask forgiveness, bind and loose, and proclaim blessing."

"We do a little bit of that," said one, "And, yes, we could do more. But why do you relate that to the concept of eldership?" she asked. "It changes your sense of responsibility," I said. "You begin to see yourselves as appropriate parental figures moved by what the Bible calls the spirit of adoption. Two Greek words are used in the New Testament, words that are often translated into English as elder, overseer or even bishop. Presbúteros literally means 'white haired one', hence the idea of an older person or grandparent. Episkopos alludes to the idea of a roof or covering. Put the two together

and you get the idea of a circle of covenantal love providing spiritual protection. That's what Paul was asking Titus to set in place in Crete following Paul's time of ministry there. It is recorded in the first chapter of Paul's letter to Titus."

We talked about this example and similar passages before returning to the simple implications for the MPs around the table. "You belong to many social units," I said, "families, organizations, towns, etc. Employ these principles there. Join with the peers that God gives you in every context, but never underestimate the potential spiritual authority gained by the followers of Jesus in Parliament if they pray in unity."

"What do you mean by unity?" one asked. "I don't mean intellectual agreement about everything," I said. "You will always see policy differently, even within the bounds of moral absolutes. What I'm talking about is affection and respect, friendship and caring love. Do you really know one another?" I asked. "Have you taken the time to deeply listen to the stories of your fellow believers? You can't say you love someone if you don't know them and you can't know them without knowing of their journey. A polite professional relationship means little. God's Kingdom is all about love. Caring for one another involves asking questions; questions about health, finances, family. Seek to uncover any area of stress or sorrow. With loyalty and discretion become faithful friends to one another. Such love is the foundation for Jesus' Kingdom. When you found yourselves assigned to this legislative body you gained an automatic responsibility to seek out and lovingly relate to the other followers of Jesus."

"What's happening in your lives right now?" I asked. A member from Northern Ireland then poured out his heart about a need to find adequate lodging in London and the related stresses of his political career that week. Everybody listened empathetically. There was some practical help offered, followed by a time of prayer. The prayers were compassionate. The Holy Spirit rested among us. Something simple, but powerful had been established.

What I'm trying to communicate through the above illustration is that we become a gathered eldership when we join with others in taking up a loving ambition for the wellbeing of all the people within a larger group. Much of our discussion about eldership degenerates into a focus on the qualities and qualifications for leadership. The members of Parliament mentioned above were already men and women of character and influence; the missing ingredient was their need to intentionally gather and take a position of united loving intercession, a distinctly different responsibility from their legislative duties as MPs. Among the churches there will be groupings formally recognized as elderships, however the core behavior that they model should be constantly implemented informally by all mature believers in every sphere of life, beginning with husband and wife in the home.

Several years ago in China, the Holy Spirit began speaking to what was then called the Global Leadership Team of YWAM International about "a new apostolic season

(innovation and growth) supported by New Testament principles of eldership. We've been seeking to both pioneer new initiatives and develop loving communities. This has led us to questions about our own protocol of meeting as international leaders and the quality of our relationships with one another.

Instead of being served by a prayer shield of volunteers who met separately to pray for us while we legislated policy, we realized that we needed to become the prayer shield. This led us to an even deeper understanding: the priority and practice of building an altar of worship to the Lord, inviting the presence of God into the Mission from a place of repentance, unity and praise.

We realized we needed to limit the operations and obligations of YWAM International to a smaller role in our gatherings. First we delegated tasks to some of our members who operated as a sub-committee. We found that we still felt entangled in governmental processes, which kept us from our true priorities. We realized that we were confronting a fundamental question: Is Youth With A Mission International a movement guided by common relational history, vision and values or are we an organization governed by delegates to a legislative body?

After a decade of thoughtful deliberation we have become convinced that we are a movement of allies, not an institution. This has been in our DNA from the beginning. We changed our name to the Global Leadership Forum, seeing ourselves as simply one of many forums or roundtables of senior missionaries. Our unique task was to model something and then converge with and convene other groupings in a way that was simple and reproducible, modeling a life practice that could accommodate infinite expansion.

You might ask about the appropriateness of multiplying bodies of elders in a movement dedicated to youth and largely consisting of young people. We think it is appropriate. When we look at the New Testament (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:1-7), we see that in a typical list of qualifications for this function, almost every virtue is mandated elsewhere for all believers. Only two things stand out as distinct. First this person must not be a novice, and secondly they must be able to teach.

At first glance it would seem that this is a role served largely by older believers, however the term 'novice' as used in the New Testament is a relative term, largely dictated by how recently the church in question came into being. In Acts 14:23 we see reference to Paul appointing elders mere months after conversion in some cases.

Being able to teach, although benefiting from age and experience, primarily presupposes a growing grasp of the Scriptures and the ability to communicate the Gospel well. Above all, the members of a gathered eldership must excel in the qualities expected of all believers.

If eldership is not really about age, why use the term, you might ask. We have thought a lot about language. Youth With A Mission personnel will always use and adapt to the language and structure of the institutions of business, government and education, etc. This is an unavoidable necessity, especially at the point where we administrate an enterprise locally. However, we also want to multiply the foundational culture of the Kingdom of God. We want to affirm the transcendent relational structure of the church mission sphere. We want to affirm faith in God, family love, and the calling of the YWAM movement in biblical terms.

When understanding and describing ourselves as the family of God, the Word of God is a great gift to us. We want to use the primary language of biblical metaphor and story. If we lose touch with this gift, we could drift into imitating the institutional thought and practice of the common society and cease to be an agent of transformation. Having said that, we may not use the term 'elder' much when we describe our roles and gatherings. Appropriate terminology needs to be developed in the languages and cultures in which we operate. The importance of this discussion is that we anchor our language and practice in the meaning imparted by God's Word. The Word of God is our foundation.

It has been suggested that we use terms such as "council", "forum" or "roundtable" and that attendees be referred to as "council members", etc. That works for the English language, but needs to be interpreted into other languages wisely. My only caution is that the assignment of a gathered eldership should be distinct from other necessary forms of leadership meetings, such as a legal board in session or a heads of departments meeting. The nomenclature we use should reflect that distinction and reinforce the gravity of taking a position in prayer.

There is an account in Exodus 17 that we have pondered deeply. Joshua and Caleb and the young warriors of Israel's army, 18 to 30 years old, are facing Amalek. (Amalek represents the spirit of intimidation.) What got our attention was the assignment given to the three generations represented. Youth With A Mission, post-50, also has identifiable generations. Let's look at the text:

Exodus 17:8 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." vs.10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up – one on one side, one on the other – so that his hands remained steady until sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword...vs.15 Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my banner. He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord."

The practice of united prayer preceding breakthrough is of course magnified in the New Testament. Let us not forget our beginnings. When Jesus ascended, He told His followers to remain in Jerusalem until they should receive power from on high. As this group of 120 were praying in an upper room, 50 days after Jesus' death, the Holy Spirit descended with a sound of a great wind and with tongues of fire. They began to speak in diverse languages and to proclaim the Gospel boldly. 3,000 came to faith. This great manifestation of divine power has ever since been regarded as the Church's birthday.

"What about the other things elders do?" you might ask. Granted, there are issues of discipline, restoration, commissioning and prophetic judgment just to name a few of the tasks that may be handled by a gathered eldership. The point is, that all these flow out of the foundation of loving tested relationship and diligent prayer. Obtaining God's favor must come before all else. We are still being called to the upper room.

There is also a need for wisdom when recognizing and naming those whose most prominent function has become the duties of eldership. The Apostles Peter and John both referred to themselves as elders in the latter part of their lives and we will also need to recognize certain people whose grandparental role has come to model all that we are talking about here.

I had to grapple with this personally. Long ago I rejected the term 'president' as misleading, inaccurate and inappropriate in most circumstances. I have been using the term 'convener' if I need to introduce myself in the marketplace and 'elder' if I'm relating to people in the religious sphere. Language is simply a tool to describe who I am to a particular audience. Language and terminology do not define who I am, only a facet of who I am, but I must do my best to use terms that enhance understanding and avoid unnecessary difficulty.

We think in language therefore language, influences the way we think. We have always had age variation in Youth With A Mission, but now we have over fifty years of family history. That long story has produced identifiable grandparents, and it is this group that most needs to grapple with the questions mentioned above. Pray for us. We are working on it.

The most important thing that I have to report to you is that the members of our Global Leadership Forum love each other and that the other forums of leadership within the Mission that I attend are also occasions where vision and planning are overshadowed by kindness and friendship.

There is a simplicity about the Kingdom of God that makes it accessible to all. When the disciples asked the question, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" (Matthew 18:1), the Scripture later shows that they were thinking about power. "Who will sit on Your right hand and Your left?" How did Jesus respond? He changed the

metaphor from institutional authority to family relationships. (Matthew 18:2-5) “He called a little child and had him stand before them and He said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in My name welcomes Me.’”

I find this passage deeply sobering. It corrects my obsession with responsible leadership. It calls me back to being a child in the presence of the Everlasting Father. It prepares my heart for the spirit of adoption toward others because a secure, unworried heart becomes a generous heart. If I am loved, I am not afraid; if I am not afraid, I do not need to control. I am free to rest until the hand of the Lord comes upon me and assigns me a task. The government rests on His shoulders.

So dear ones, don't worry too much about Youth With A Mission and your role in Youth With A Mission. There are tangled knots, impossible dilemmas, insurmountable walls, empty storehouses and approaching enemies. Form a circle of covenantal love, enthrone Jesus in your praise and welcome the Spirit of God. He'll take it from there. We don't even know how to pray as we ought and apart from Him, we can do nothing. Not a bad deal really... A little child can do it...youth with a mission.

Yours always,

Your brother,

John Dawson