



Raising Our Game in Ministry Training

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The following was delivered by Orlando Saer, Senior Pastor, Christ Church Southampton, as a Training Masterclass at the 2020 Maximise Conference.

Pass the baton // motivation, foundation, priority

When we started out in ministry, we were clear about what our priorities were going to be. We knew about the separation of responsibilities in Acts 6:4 – ‘we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word’ – and that’s what we set ourselves to do. In reality, though, that phrase ‘ministry of the word’ is quite broad and we wanted to be explicit about reflecting the priorities of Paul in Acts 20:20 (teaching ‘in public and from house to house’). So many of us set about ministry with the 3 Ps as our template: Preaching, People and Prayer.

But if read the pastorals, we are given at least one more P to add into the mix: Preservation. ‘Guard the deposit entrusted to you’ (1 Tim 6:20). Same instruction in 2 Tim 1:14 - ‘By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.’ Preservation of what has been entrusted to us is a non-negotiable part of pastoral ministry.

How guard good deposit? Again we look at the pastorals. We guard it by staying loyal to Paul's message, by teaching Paul's gospel and the Scriptures as a whole, by persevering in suffering for the sake of the gospel, by devoting ourselves to good works and living lives that give credibility to the gospel, and so on. But preservation of the good deposit for generations to come and places beyond this one clearly also involves *ensuring others are equipped to do all those same things after we're gone*. So Paul to Timothy – 2 Timothy 2:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

In other words: pass the baton! There are 4 generations in the verse: Paul to Timothy, to the faithful men, to others. Equipping, training, preparing, commissioning others to carry the torch is an intrinsic part of pastoral ministry.

That priority / motivation has to be planted deep in our thinking. Because ministry is busy. Life is busy. If you're a curate or assistant minister, you may be fine with all this. But when you're carrying the can, there's so much to think about. You're not sure how you'll get through next week, let alone provide for next generation!

So that is the issue of motivation: looking for opportunities to pass the baton to others has got to become instinctive for us

Sort out your game plan // strategy in training

Paul had a clear goal for Timothy and a clear idea of how he planned to attain that goal. 1 Timothy 1:18-19:

'Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience'

Paul knew where he was going, and so must we.

Obviously training and equipping others for ministry is something we're going to want to work out in all sorts of contexts. E.g. in our context:

- We want to get young men preaching, so we've established a relationship with a couple of smaller local churches and help with their preaching rota from time to time to give people opportunities.
- We want to get children's workers better equipped for their work, so we include training and going to conferences in the package they sign up for.
- We lay on training for one to one discipleship, for small group leadership, for welcoming, for musicians, for – everyone really. We want people to grow in their gifts and be better equipped to serve the body.
- In fact, we also do non-optional whole church training.¹
- When we moved to Southampton 8 years ago to try, under God, to get Christ Church Southampton off the ground, we took the view that given the context where we operated, a ministry training scheme was a very obvious thing to invest in.

At any one time, we generally have 5-10 full-time ministry trainees – which keeps us busy! But a sizeable scheme like that does concentrate the mind in regard to what exactly we're doing with them, what we're

¹ The 'Partnership Course' - initially aimed at the church core, but subsequently offered to all those who join the church, the course takes ten weeks and covers key doctrines, church ethos, practical ministry skills and a look at how the Bible fits together.

aiming for. Many of us follow some form of Philip Jensen's three Cs of ministry training. That is, seeking to grow our trainees in (1) Christian character, (2) biblical convictions and (3) ministry competence. Those 3 Cs provide a helpful grid to look at what we're actually doing, in terms of week-to-week routines and the like but also provide a big picture view.

For example, how are we going to grow our trainees in their convictions, their biblical understanding?

1. Some churches do all teaching and training in-house. Run their own courses.
2. Others team up with a couple of other churches. So for example, in our neighbouring city of Bournemouth, 3 like-minded churches get together and teach a training course between them [c.f. Johnny Prime doing a similar thing in N London]
3. The majority of churches sub-contract to a local gospel partnership training scheme, or Cornhill, or some kind of equivalent.

Our approach has been this last one (sub-contract). We thought about setting up our own training scheme and maybe we will yet in future. But rubbing shoulders with peers at SCMTC in Oxford has been a positive thing for our lot, they love it. So we'll use that and supplement with a short training workshop one afternoon a week, plus read some books together and set projects for the trainees to get into during the quiet part of the year.

That's us. There are different ways to skin a cat. But key is: we do actually need to have game plan for the shape of the scheme and what we're trying to achieve. 'Hit and hope' is no good. We need to be more considered than that.

Pick your team // recruitment for training

Specifically: don't just let your team pick themselves.

'Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands' (1 Tim 5:22)

And it is a tricky issue at the moment. We're all struggling to find trainees in our own churches, so we're advertising around the blocks, and everyone's competing with each other, but there just aren't enough prospective trainees to go around, so we're all left a bit frustrated. I know. It's a problem.

I wonder if part of the answer: getting a bit more imaginative in the kind of person we might view as a potential trainee, so become a bit quicker to tap someone on the shoulder from within our own congregation who might not have struck us at first glance as the kind of person we're after. We all have our prejudices and a tendency to look for people a bit like us, but after a while you start to see that God really can and does use all sorts of people. For example:

- One guy – going back 15-20 years – who didn't look anything like the other trainees we had at church, but there was something about him and we decided to take the risk. He turned out to be the real deal. Now runs a major mission agency and is a great agent of gospel growth.
- Another guy we recruited about 6 years ago. He'd left school early. No degree. Real introvert. But wanted to be useful for the kingdom. We decided to take a risk on him. He's now church-planting.

Most of us could do with being more imaginative, and go and tap some people on the shoulder. This is also a key way of ensuring *diversity* in our intake of trainees. Whether it's true or not, most people will assume we're looking for people like us. It's not until you go and take the initiative with someone that it would even occur to them that they could be a trainee. We have a mix of men and women, a mix of nationalities and ethnicities on our scheme, but some of them needed some serious convincing that it was for them.

It's also a good way of avoiding people just becoming trainees because they've got nothing much better to do. I often come across people who think of the MTS as little more than a final resort for people who can't find a proper job or who just can't make up their minds what to do: 'Maybe a PGCE? Maybe the MT scheme?' My response: 'Go away, and don't come back until you're burning with a passion to get equipped for ministry.'

Pick your team. Don't leave it to them to pick themselves.

Train on the front foot // mindset, mentoring

Allow me to reminisce. I did the equivalent of a ministry traineeship 25 years ago down in Devon. The first time I sat down one-to-one with my vicar – apart from my interview for the role – was a 20-minute debrief on my final day in the job. A whole year with no real input at all about anything I was doing!

A few years later I was in Sydney, at the Club 5 conference. It was a huge thing. I looked out on the Saturday afternoon and found myself almost weeping. Because that was the slot where everyone got to meet a coach of some kind and get advice about what to work on and where to go from here in ministry. Hundreds of people were doing exactly that. Often the coaches were only a couple of years older than the people they were meeting with. But that was OK, because the ministry culture was that you only had to be a little bit further along the path to be useful in developing someone in their ministry. So all these people were being encouraged to grow in their ministries

Two very different experiences there. In one, there was a culture that just didn't think about training; in the other, training was in the lifeblood of the culture. I hope it goes without saying: the latter is a better model for us. My illustration for this from the Pastorals is a surprising one perhaps.

'Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses' (1 Timothy 5:23)

It's an extraordinary verse, wedged in between instructions on ministry commissioning and warnings about differing manifestations of sin. But the point is Paul's training mindset was not narrow and superficial, but broad and deep. He spotted things all over the place that needed attention.

For some of us, this approach will need a bit of working through. It won't come naturally. So what I'd suggest is 3 things:

1. Include both scheduled and unscheduled mentoring sessions. Great to have a 45 minute sit down each week to go over things, but some of the most effective things I've found are the more random moments. I sometimes take a trainee to the cemetery to look at what's written on people's gravestones, as a way of getting talking about character issues. Or I include them in a family teatime. Or take them with me when I'm driving to give a talk somewhere and just chat about issues arising on the way back. Or whatever.
2. Include both training issues and basic discipleship in our remit. A lot of our trainees are young, and they sometimes need some relatively basic direction. Some real-life examples of things I've had to say:
 - "I know you think you showing manful persistence with this girl you're pursuing but actually it's a bit weird, and it looks more like stalking to me. It's certainly not kind."
 - "Do you think it's helping people engage with God's word when you turn up for a Bible Study group on the way back from the gym and stink the room out?"
 - "Are you aware of what it communicates when you sit down for lunch in the same room as others, but leave your earphones plugged in?"

3. Include second-hand feedback as well as first-hand. The mentor is often not there in the room when the trainee is doing his thing – leading a study, meeting one-to-one with whoever it is. So hard to have anything to say. But it's often possible to have delicate conversation with someone who was there to gauge how things went. Needs to be done subtly, so as not to undermine. But if we're serious about looking for every opportunity to train, we'll go the extra mile to make sure we've got something to say.

What I'm really saying is: taking on a trainee is a serious responsibility. Yes they'll pick things up just by experience. But they'll learn more by you being proactive in trying to make everything a training opportunity.

Get them diving in the deep end (but do have a life belt to hand) // breadth, challenge

What does Paul say at the close of 2 Timothy?

'Discharge all the duties of your ministry'

Not just the ones you feel comfortable with. It's very tempting to get trainees playing to strengths. It's comfortable for them. There's immediate value for the church. They're doing something they're already quite good at. It seems like a winner all round.

But I want people to try things they've never done before. Or have another go at something that went really badly. Or have a crack at something they're terrified of. Because when they do that, they're actually learning to serve others, rather than themselves.

The language of 'gifts' can actually be really unhelpful sometimes. At its worst, it can sound like a spiritual gift is something you're good at and need to give expression to, regardless of whether it's really needed by anyone else. Hence we tend to use the language of service more than gifting.

I want our trainees to play to their weaknesses as much as their strengths, so will deliberately put them in situations where they feel really uncomfortable. They know that's the deal from the start. Unless they're up for that, we won't take them. But they will be thrown in the deep end – whatever that means for them. It will vary according to who they are. For one person, the prospect of chatting to mums at the Toddler group, or doing a short kids talk on a Sunday will be the thing that terrifies them. For someone else, just standing at the front leading the church in prayers. But I want them to learn about themselves, to explore new things, to test their gifting and to get used to the idea that the ministry life involves doing what needs to be done, and giving help where help is needed; not just doing things they feel comfortable doing.

There will be a lifebelt at hand. We won't let them sink. I'll pull them out if necessary. And of course I'm going to be sensitive to their personal capacity to try new things. It's not a boot camp we're running. But I do want to push them.

Get them diving in the deep end.

Work your set pieces on the training ground before (not the dressing room after) // Timing feedback

One of the tightropes we walk as trainers is the line between training someone up for future service and serving our congregations well here in the present. And when it comes to things like preaching, or even leading a Bible Study group, that's a really hard line to walk. Because as an elder I'm responsible for the spiritual diet of the church. If the church is being told things that aren't true, or even things that are true but are unhelpfully taught, just because I wanted to test a trainee and use the church as guinea pigs, that's a problem. It's all very well giving feedback after the event, in the dressing room as it were, but what are you going to do about fact that the church was treated to an absolute shocker on Sunday?

With inexperienced trainees, give the bulk of input and feedback *before* Sunday not *after* it. On the training ground, not in the dressing room. Because they need to get it right, not just learn from the experience. Remember Paul in 2 Timothy 2:15:

'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.'

With preaching, I want to see a general shape of the sermon 10 days ahead of time, then hear a full first draft of the sermon no later than Wednesday morning. And probably a second draft on the Friday morning. So I've had 3 bites of the cherry at helping them shape the talk, before Sunday comes.

This is good for the church as well as for them. It's good for the church, obviously, because your experience has fed into the talk. But good for the trainee too, because feedback after the event is really problematic. For a start it's just hard to hear. Once they've actually given the talk, they're invested in it and likely to be defensive about it. And you're now having to pit yourself against all their friends who've told them nothing except how wonderful it was. But you've also lost the opportunity of really helping them to be self-critical and grow in their ability to make decisions about what to say and what not to say, and what to cut, and what to rework, what to major on and so on.

Back your calls (and skip the VAR) // Training with confidence

Whatever feedback and critique you might offer to your trainee, there will likely be others who would react in very different ways.

For example, you give your trainee their first opportunity to lead a service. And what happened? They were hesitant and uncertain. They ummed and ah-ed. Clearly underprepared. Result: the congregation spent the whole time feeling for him, and almost willing him on rather than engaging with God and his Word. Visitors were on edge the whole time, because the guy at front didn't seem to have a clue about where he was going. But then at the end, one of the regulars comes up to you and says: "Didn't he do well?! He's got such a lovely, gentle manner. So unassuming and natural." And you lose your nerve. You think: I'm just seeing things through a particular grid, and maybe there's another perspective. Maybe I'll pull my punches when I feedback.

Please don't. It's not serving him, or the church, or any future churches he may serve if you don't give him the feedback he needs. You have the experience and the instincts. So your judgement is probably right. It may not be, but it probably is. And even if it isn't, he's your trainee, your apprentice, so at least at his stronger moments, he wants your feedback.

Encourage and rebuke with all authority. (Titus 2:15)

That's got to be Titus' attitude and the tone of the Pastorals suggest it's Paul's too. So *back your calls*. Don't put it out to the VAR. Slow motion replays can miss the actual real-time effect. Yes there are lots of contexts in Christian life where we want to restrain ourselves and say less rather than more. But I don't think training is likely to be one of them. Yes, think about timing and pacing your input. But if it needs to be said, say it!

Note a related issue here which we need to think through particularly in our current climate. When you're being quite directive like this – and even more so if it's a character issue rather than a competence issue – it is worth thinking through the power dynamic in your relationship. Spiritual abuse is a relative recent phrase, or at least it's only passed into common usage in ministry circles relatively recently. This is not the place for exploring the issue in depth. But I just want to at least flag it, because if we're not careful, our well-intentioned direction might come back to bite us if we're naïve about the dynamics of the relationship or just careless in the way we throw out advice.

Keep the coach's office door open // Access

"You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance..." (2 Tim 3:10)

Time and again it comes out that the thing which ministry trainees value above all else is access to the minister or the staff. And that is exactly as it should be. We want to show by example. We want to be on hand when we're needed. Not distant or unapproachable.

I have an office at our church building, which is actually a public library, and a study at home. I get almost nothing done when I'm at the office. But I spend best part of 3 days a week there basically to be accessible to the trainees and the other staff. And I literally leave my door open most of the time I'm there – unless I'm meeting someone or on the phone. I want the guys to know that if there's something they're trying to think through, they don't have to wait until their next scheduled sit-down with me next Wednesday at 2pm or whenever it is. It's fine for them to pop their head round the door.

It could be a ministry issue. It could be a discipleship issue. It could just be a practical issue. Money for example. Finance for Ministry Training Schemes works very differently in different contexts.² But however you do it, the likelihood is that finances will be tight for the trainee, and I want them to know they can ask for help if it's needed.

Sometimes it's relationship issues. We have rules about exclusive relationships: no going out with somebody you have spiritual responsibility for; or with a colleague on the staff team. We exercise grace and make exceptions and so on. It's hard to regulate these in a draconian way. But the age of our trainees means that relationships are a constant area where input is need.

That's just two examples of issues bubbling away that could be nipped in the bud early, if trainees have access to us. I want them to have access to my thoughts. But also access to my *home*. One of the things I miss most now that we have a larger scheme and a busier church life and teenagers in the house is that I just can't do that as much now. In the early years, the MTs would be round our house all the time. And we loved it. And they loved it. They could breathe the air of our family life and home priorities. They could chew the cud about this and that in a more relaxed context. They could see what ministry lifestyle looked like. I find it harder to maintain that now. But if you've got just a couple of trainees and a church of less than 200 say, chances are you could open up the home in that kind of way. And I'd encourage you to do that.

² See <https://ninethirtyeight.org/download/ministry-traineeship-finances-guidance/>.

Play the man not the ball // flexibility, individualising

By which I mean: do *individualise* your training goals for each trainee. Play the man (or woman). As opposed to just having a set plan that takes little regard of the individual and just gets the ball from here to there. Personalise your goals for your trainee. You see that individualising in Paul addressing a specific issue for Timothy:

'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young' (1 Tim 4:12)

It's just a little example. But clearly his age and the potential for different reactions to him was – in Paul's mind – an issue that Timothy needed to work through.

I do have a number of general goals for all our MTs. For example (keeping the whole sports metaphors thing going):

- I want to see them learning to carry the ball. That is to grow in their leadership abilities.
- I want to see them learning to roll with the punches. Being able to suffer and yet still stay in the ring seems to me intrinsic to New Testament ministry.
- I want to see them working as a team. That is, listening to others. Finding their place in the community of the church. Growing in self-understanding. Learning to encourage. And be encouraged, and so on.
- I want to see them reading the rulebook. Rubbing their noses in the Scriptures as much as possible.
- I want to see them not dropping their guard. That is, learning to live for Christ as much off the field as on. As much behind closed doors as in public.

These are all general goals I have for all our trainees. But for different trainees we've had, I've had all sorts of other goals. Like:

- increasing their confidence,
- helping them to grow in verbal dexterity,
- helping them be more interesting and engaging when they get up to speak,
- get boys to treat girls better,
- teach them how to lead a group Bible Study which doesn't turn into an exegetical monologue,
- help them make it to the end of a Christian book (any book),
- increase their sense of presence as a preacher,
- fight against porn addiction,
- open the Bible in their discipling of individuals,
- *stop* using the Bible in their discipling of individuals (or at least stop just quoting verses)

And so on. Different individuals. Different goals. Play the man, not the ball.

That's enough. But one last thing to underline: being involved in the training and equipping of others can be such an enormous personal encouragement, joy and privilege.

