

CHURCH PLANTING TRANSITIONS: FROM TEAM TO COUNCIL

James W. Garrett

Two forms of church leadership are displayed in the New Testament. One form is that which is appropriate for church planting ventures and special mission activities. The other form of leadership is that which prevails in an established church.

In the early 1970's, Dr. Ralph Winter began developing the use of two terms to describe the redemptive structures found in the New Testament.¹ The two terms, borrowed from Roman Catholicism, are *sodality* and *modality*.

In the mid-1980's, Dr. Charles Farah, in isolated lectures, applied Winter's concepts to special ministry teams within the local church. Dr. Farah emphasized the need for members of ministry sodalities within the church to make a commitment beyond church membership.

For the purpose of our discussion, we will appropriate these terms and alter slightly Dr. Winter's definition of the terms:

1. We will define a SODALITY as a structured fellowship with a visionary leader, existing to accomplish a single goal.
2. We will define a MODALITY as a structured fellowship with plural leadership, existing as an extended family or community. All fully established churches, as pictured in the New Testament, would be modalities.

In this chapter we will study church-planting sodalities.

NEW TESTAMENT SODALITIES

The apostolic teams that Paul led are viable sodalities. A study of these teams, their characteristics and functions, can help us to understand some important dynamics of Kingdom expansion and church planting. Note the following characteristics of these teams:

1. They were sent out (at the instigation of the Holy Spirit)
2. They were a team
3. They had a visionary leader
4. They were on their own
5. They were economically self-sufficient, but were not opposed to receiving financial help from time to time
6. They had a clear goal

Let's take a look at the Biblical record of each of these elements

I. They were sent out

At the time of his conversion, Paul received a clear commission from the Lord (Acts 9:15-16; 22:13-15; 26:15-18). It was not until some years later, however, that the Lord released Paul to go and fulfill that commission. The leadership of the church at Antioch was the instrument used by the Lord to effect that release.

At the instruction of the Holy Spirit, the Antioch leaders sent Barnabas and Saul on their first mission (Acts 13:1-4). Paul (formerly Saul) and Barnabas returned to Antioch at the conclusion of their church-planting mission. They remained at Antioch for a lengthy period of time, reporting on their experiences (Acts 14:26-28). Evidently, Paul and Barnabas considered Antioch to be their *sending church* and felt the need to be accountable.

Some time later, Paul was stirred to take another missionary journey. He chose Silas from Antioch as his co-laborer. The brethren from Antioch sent Paul and Silas forth with their blessing (Acts 15:40). Early in the trip, at Lystra, Paul recruited Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). Following this extensive and fruitful trip, Paul once again returned to Antioch (Acts 18:22-23), his sending church.

II. They were a team

An important point that must be grasped is that *sodality* is not the same thing as *solo*. Teams rather than solo ministries dominate the New Testament record. There are exceptions, of course. Four exceptions that come to mind immediately are Philip (Acts 8), Peter's tour of Judaea (Acts 9:32ff), Apollos (Acts 18:27), and Paul's time at Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:15-18:4).

For obvious reasons, none of these exceptions could be models for the type of ministry undertaken by Paul and his companions:

1. Neither Peter nor Apollos, as cited above, were going out in pioneering work. Both were touring and ministering among existing churches. They were working with congregations that already had leadership in place.
2. Philip's excursion was one of those sovereign events that cannot be construed as a pattern.
3. Paul's time alone in Athens and Corinth was not one of choice. It was a time of expedient flight for his life. During this time, he eagerly waited for his team to join him (Acts 17:15-16; 18:5).

Although solo ministry seems to be appropriate when it is conducted in co-operation with leadership in existing churches, solo ministry is not the Biblical norm for church planting or evangelism in virgin territory.

III. They had a visionary leader

Our third point, *The team has a visionary leader*, is modeled well by Paul's apostolic teams. It was a true team; every member was a contributing member. One important aspect of team ministry is the team's ownership of the vision and goal. It wasn't just Paul's ministry; it was the team's ministry. Even so, the vision for direction of the team usually was Paul's.²

Some have argued that Paul really was not the leader, but that the team moved by consensus. From the descriptive narrative, however, it is apparent that Paul clearly was the dominate leader of the teams. Consider the following evidence:

The first journey

Although the first missionary journey seems to have begun with Barnabas as the leader of the team, leadership quickly shifted to Paul.³

1. Acts 13:8-12 Paul became the aggressive actor in the encounter with Elymas.
2. Acts 13:13 The team was called, *Paul and his company*.
3. Acts 13:16 Paul took the lead in ministry in Antioch of Pisidia.
4. Acts 13:13ff Beginning with the episode in Pisidia, Paul's name is listed first in the record, except in the Acts 14:14 report of the drama in Lystra.
5. Acts 14:8-12 Paul is the miracle worker at Lystra whose ministry stirred the people.
6. Acts 14:19 Paul, not Barnabas, was stoned by the Antioch/Iconium/Lystra crowd.

The second journey

The second missionary journey presents a clearer picture of Paul's leadership.

1. Acts 15:36 Paul introduced the idea of the trip.
2. Acts 15:37 Barnabas, assuming the role of leader, began to put the team together, but Paul objected to Barnabas' plan to have John Mark on the team.
3. Acts 15:40 Paul recruited his own team.
4. Acts 15:41ff Even though the team consisted of two men (initially), the record focuses on Paul. The singular pronoun, *he*, is used rather than the plural pronoun, *they*. At this point, it clearly is Paul's ministry, with Silas as his companion.
5. Acts 16:1-3 Paul recruited Timothy as a third member of the team.
6. Acts 16:9-10 Although we are not told how the Spirit forbade them from ministry in Asia and Bithynia, we are told that it was through a vision given to Paul that the team was directed to Macedonia (Luke joined the team at Troas. Note the transition from *they* to *we* in vs. 8-10).

7. Acts 16:14 At Philippi, it was Paul's preaching that opened the heart of the first convert.
8. Acts 16:17 Luke described the team as *Paul and us*.
9. Acts 16:16-18 Even though all of the team members over a period of time had opportunity to address the spirit of divination, none did so until Paul took the initiative. We wonder if they felt free to take such action without Paul's leadership.
10. Acts 16:26-28 Although Paul and Silas both were witnesses to the earthquake and the opening of the prison doors, it was Paul who was the spokesman to the jailor.
11. Acts 16:29-34 Both Paul and Silas participated in presenting the Gospel to the jailor and his family, but the jailor recognized Paul's leadership (vs 36-37).
12. Acts 17:1-4 Paul was the spokesman in Thessalonica, with Silas as his team member.
13. Acts 17:13 Paul was the primary spokesman at Berea.
14. Acts 17:13-14 The hostility that Thessalonian Jews stirred up at Berea was directed at Paul, forcing him to leave. Silas and Timothy were able to remain in the city.
15. Acts 17:15 Paul sent a *command*⁴ to Silas and Timothy to come to him.
16. Acts 18:5-11 After Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth, it was Paul who became the actor in the ensuing drama. The singular pronouns, *he* and *I*, rather than, *they* and *we*, are used in the record.
17. Acts 18:9-10 It was Paul who received the encouraging night time vision.
18. Acts 18:12-13 Again, the hostility was directed against Paul.

The third journey

Acts 18:23, introducing the third journey, intimates that this was a solo journey:

And having spent some time there, he departed and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Since this was not a pioneering trip, but a trip of encouragement to existing churches, we would not be surprised if this trip were solo. However, the terminology used to describe the unfolding team (*those who ministered to him <Paul>* - 19:22; *Paul's traveling companions* - 19:29; *he was accompanied by...* - 20:4) clearly present Paul as the leader of a team.

IV. They were on their own

A feature of a sodality, as exemplified by Paul's team, is the team's sense of being on its own. The team had to provide for itself and make decisions on its own. It was not directed by Antioch, but was released⁵ by Antioch to go out and do what it was called to do - evangelize and plant churches.

V. They were economically self-sufficient

The team was on its own to the point of providing for its own finances. At times, even the team leader, Paul, was the one who worked to provide the income.⁶ The team had a goal and did what was necessary to achieve the goal, as directed by God. There were times when the team received financial assistance from existing churches.

VI. They had a clear goal

It is important to realize that the sodality existed as a means to an end. It was not the end in itself. Its purpose was to see in every city a fully established church. A church was not considered to be fully established until plural leadership had been put in place (which in some cases may have been city elders, presiding over several small assemblies). Examples of such activity may be seen in Paul's leaving Titus in Crete and Timothy at Ephesus.⁷

The fact that the team formed to achieve a goal leads us to conclude that sodalities have a temporary existence. When the goal is accomplished, the sodality disbands. Each of Paul's teams disbanded at the conclusion of each missionary journey.

THE APPLICATION OF SODALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY CHURCH-PLANTING

How does the understanding of sodalities apply to contemporary Christianity?

Several years ago, Roland Allen wrote a book with a very intriguing title, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's Or Ours?*⁸ Whether or not one agrees with Roland Allen's conclusions about Paul's methods, the question posed by the title is one that the church of this century needs to face. The apostle's modeling of the sodality remains as the best plan for planting churches.

My own experience in church-planting ventures has proven this to be true. For about fifteen years, I was a part of a team that existed to plant new churches in Northeastern Oklahoma. During that time, we were instrumental in planting thirteen churches, both in major cities and smaller towns. Although we did not by design follow the sodality patterns of the New Testament, looking back upon our work it is obvious that the Holy Spirit orchestrated these patterns into our work.

A key to the success of every venture was the presence of an aggressive visionary leader who knew how to pray. Each time that we undertook the planting of a church we recruited a team leader with these traits. We provided the finances for his support, enabling him to assemble a team and undertake the venture.

Two of the most effective team leaders were men whom the world would have overlooked. One had a speech impediment. The other one was plagued with diabetes that interfered with his

stamina; he also bore the lifetime consequences of what we called, in those days, *a nervous breakdown* that had occurred earlier in life. Both of these men planted two churches.

We should be praying for the Holy Spirit to form sodalities, called to plant churches in unevangelized communities. Church planting teams, with a visionary leader, sent out by existing churches would do much to enlarge the kingdom. Such a responsible church-planting scheme would have accountability, as contrasted with the independent entrepreneur style that is often seen. In our city, Tulsa, it seems that a church is started every week and one dies every week. This is the result of individuals who, on their own, for various reasons, inaugurate a church without any spiritual accountability.⁹

Those on the team should understand the goal and commit themselves to it. The goal becomes the reason for the group's existence.

When a church is launched, the sodality must provide the initial leadership. All or a part of the team must remain in the newly planted church to lead it until the Holy Spirit raises up elders.¹⁰ There are times when the sodality or a part of the sodality will settle in the community and become a permanent part of the congregation. There are other situations in which the members of the team move on to plant another church, or return to the congregation which sent them out.

The sodality must not be in a hurry to abrogate its leadership. In some rare situations, the Holy Spirit has raised up elders rather quickly. However, the usual pattern is for the development of elders to take a long time. A common mistake made by team leaders of church-planting sodalities is to become hasty in appointing elders. This is done because he believes in such plural leadership. However, his haste produces future tragedy.

An opposite, and probably more common problem, is the tendency of the team leader of a sodality to drag his feet in releasing leadership to the elders, when they are raised up. This especially is true when the leader remains a part of the congregation and becomes *the pastor*. Having been the visionary that God used to direct the church-planting team, it is difficult for many team leaders to trust God's direction for the church through elders.

This more common problem is heightened by the current professional view of ministry. In that view, a man is called to *ministry*. His next step is to obtain whatever schooling is necessary to make him qualified in the eyes of the church; he then looks for some place in which to exercise his profession. He hopes that some existing congregation will call him to the *pastorate*. If not, he may decide to start his own church.

Such a perspective is not found in the New Testament. Paul is a good example. Here is a man who had the best ministerial education available in his day.¹¹ At the time of his conversion, he had a divine encounter with the Glorified Lord, containing a clear call to ministry.¹² In his usual zealous fashion, he immediately, launched into a vigorous preaching ministry in Damascus, which was aborted by a plot on his life.¹³ At some point, he spent time in Arabia,¹⁴ where, it seems, the Glorified Lord instructed him in the Gospel.¹⁵ He went to Jerusalem three years later,

but was not readily accepted by the church there. He spent time with Peter and James, then was sent by the Jerusalem church back to his home town of Tarsus.¹⁶ There he waited until Barnabas sought him out and took him to Antioch, where Barnabas apprenticed him for a year.¹⁷ It was after this that the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul (later Paul) to become an apostolic sodality.¹⁸

The above account does not present the picture of a man who was trying to find some place to *practice his profession*. Instead, it is the story of a man who was not self-conscious about who he was or whether or not he had a place of ministry. He just did *what came naturally*. It is interesting that it was not until he was recruited by Barnabas and interned by Barnabas that the Holy Spirit commissioned him to accompany Barnabas on apostolic trips.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In the light of these reflections, we reach the following conclusions:
2. The sodality, as defined above, is the best instrument for responsible church-planting ventures.
3. The sodality must remain in leadership of the new church until the Holy Spirit raises up elders.
4. When elders are raised up, the sodality must surrender the leadership of the church to the council of elders.
5. After elders are in place, the sodality may disband and serve as a part of the local church, or the sodality may remain intact and move on to establish another congregation.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission*, an address given by Dr. Winter at the All-Asia Mission Consultation, Seoul '73, Korea, August 27 - Sept. 1, 1973. Winter defines **modality** as a structured fellowship in which old and young, male and female, gather together as normal biological families in aggregate. A modality is led by a council. Synagogues and local churches are examples of modalities.

Sodalities, on the other hand, are defined by Winter as structured fellowships in which membership involves an adult decision beyond modality membership and is limited by either age or marital status. Sodalities would function as teams with a leader. Paul's apostolic team and most missionary bands are examples of sodalities.

2. Acts 16:6-12

3. There are hints that Barnabas, being the older man, continued in at least a titular leadership role. Note that Barnabas is listed first when the team is described as, *apostles*, (14:14). After the stoning at Lystra, Paul departed *with Barnabas* to Derbe (15:20); the implication of the language is that Barnabas took Paul to Derbe. At Lystra, Barnabas was mistaken for Jupiter, the father of the gods, while Paul was thought to be Mercury, the messenger and sometimes servant of the gods (14:11-12). We are informed that Paul was called, *Mercury*, because he was the chief spokesman. We would assume that Barnabas was called, *Jupiter*, because of his dignified authority. So, although Paul became the activist leader, and the story of the journey became the story of Paul's ministry, and the traveling group became *Paul and his company*, Barnabas seems never to have lost his role as the elder statesman of the team.

4. Greek-*entole* (ἐντολή)

5. The Greek term, *apelusan* (ἀπέλυσαν), meaning, *they released*, or *they dismissed*, implies a releasing of the team to go fulfill its mission

6. Acts 18:3; I Cor. 4:12; 9:14ff; II Cor. 11:7; 12:13; I Thess. 2:9; 4:11; II Thessalonians 3:8

7.7.. Titus 1:5; I Timothy 3; I Timothy 5:17-22 (esp v22)

8. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (Chicago, Moody Press), 1956.

9. This does not deny the fact that there are times when God sovereignly may call forth a body of believers through some other plan. Neither does this deny that there are times when a church split may occur, producing a second congregation. This is the least desirable result, but there are times when it seems inevitable. When this happens, it is important that the new congregation, in its embryonic days, seek spiritual covering and counsel from a healthy church. Satan often is the only winner when a congregation is launched without such accountability.

10. This was the consistent pattern of Paul's team, except on the first missionary journey. The account of the first missionary journey, beginning in Acts 13:1 and continuing to the end of Chapter 14, contains the following statement in 14:23: *and when they had appointed for them elders in every church*. The striking thing about this is that Paul and Barnabas had left each of the churches in haste, because of threats on their lives. On their return home, passing back through each city, they ordained elders. No member of the apostolic team had remained to lead the churches in the interim. We wish that we had more information about what happened in the intervening months between the time of the apostles' departure and the appointment of elders.

11. Acts 22:3

12. Acts 9:1-16

13. Acts 9:19-25

14. Galatians 1:15-18 It is very probable that Paul went into Arabia shortly after his conversion, then returned to Damascus to preach.

15. Galatians 1:11-12

16. This seems to be the best manner of harmonizing the material in Acts 9:25-30 with Galatians 1:11-19. The ministry referred to in Galatians 1:22-24 would describe the ministry of Paul after Acts 13.

17. Acts 11:19-26

18. Acts 13:1ff