

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter



Issue 25:

Should we coach our Churches and leaders?

Helping leaders become all God wants them to be

Dear Ces

Congratulations on your appointment as a regional leader!

You're struggling with your new responsibilities and wonder whether you should bother with coaching so early in your appointment. That's understandable. However, I suggest you put coaching at the top of your to-do list because skilled coaching is the fastest way to turn your churches around, as I've proved many times in other situations.

Coaching: A Journey of Discovery

I started coaching in 1986 and have been on a journey of discovery ever since. For the first 18 years, I've coached a wide range of churches from the very small to the very large. Then over the last four years I've been coaching one family of churches and that's been the most interesting phase of all.

These churches differ greatly from one another. But greater than the differences is the family likeness and DNA they all share. The key to coaching them is to tap into this DNA, draw on its enormous power and coach them to reach the dreams they all share.

Coaches, of course, grow into coaching over time. I used to put the most stress on getting the church dreams or plans right. As time went by I began to focus on getting the leaders right as well. Today I put equal stress on getting the leaders, and church plans right – *that way the best leaders are working with the best plans in the best possible way.*

Remember that coaches never 'arrive' because they're always learning more about how to coach, about the people they coach and about how to get the best possible outcome in every situation. I never leave a coaching session without learning something, and sometimes I learn a great deal!

Whether coaches learn little or much from sessions, coaching is the fastest way to turn churches around.

The Coaching Task

The coach's task is to help leaders become all that God intended them to be so they bear the 'much fruit' of John 15.5-8 for the glory of God (v.8).

Leaders come in different shapes and sizes:

- some are older and some are younger
- some have had much experience and some almost none
- some have many obvious gifts and some have few
- some work in favourable situations and some in the toughest situations in the country
- some build on the work of great leaders who have gone before them and some start from scratch
- some have been walking with God for a long time and some have just begun



Whatever the situation, the coach's task is to take people as they are and work with them and God to make them all they can become.

Leaders have different personalities and character traits, too:

- some are extroverts and some are introverts
- some are as bold as a lion and some as timid as a New Testament Timothy
- some have wonderful personalities and some have less attractive personalities
- some have mastered besetting sins and some may still struggle with them
- some have happy families and some have difficult family situations
- some are easy to work with and some are more challenging

Whatever a leader is like, the coach's task is to coach them so they become all God intended them to be.

Church Coaches

Church coaches, like the people they coach, also come in different shapes and sizes, but there are certain general things we can say about them:

- Ideally, church coaches have wide experience of life and ministry, a good knowledge of human nature and how it works, and are skilled at motivating leaders and churches to become all God intended them to be.
- Coaches become better at coaching as they get more experience – both the coach and those they coach have to start somewhere.
- Coaches need to walk with God because many surprises in coaching cannot be anticipated. In every coaching session the coach listens to those they work with *and* for the voice of God in the situation. Reading situations correctly can lead to major breakthroughs; reading them incorrectly can lead to disasters.
- Coaches also need to be masters of themselves and become a kind of 'Paul' to the many 'Timothys' they will meet. They should never lose their cool when coaching, never impose their likes or dislikes on those they coach, never be discouraged by coaching setbacks or disappointments, but model 1 Corinthians 13.4-8a in every situation.

The best church coaches, like the best sports coaches, take people and teams to achievements they could never reach on their own. I heard it said recently that a well-known sports coach takes a group of lesser names and turns them into stars – and does so year after year. *The church coach's task is to enable the people they coach to reach their potential in the ministry God has called them to.*

Basic Types of Church Coaching

Church coaching can be done in many different ways, from the most general to the most focused and specific. Here are a few examples of how the different models come together and may even merge into one another:

1. General Church Coaching

The best general formula for coaching smaller churches is to preach a well-prepared, highly-inspirational message on Sunday morning, mix with church folk over a shared lunch, fill out



some of the specifics of the emerging church dream after lunch and conclude with any questions people may still have.

Alternatively, for churches of some size, the coach meets key groups over a weekend, preaches on Sunday morning and advises senior leaders after lunch about the likely way ahead. And ideally with both smaller and larger churches, the coach returns in 9-12 months to check progress and update the vision and plan.

Both forms of general coaching work well.

Indeed the most dramatic coaching experience I ever had was with a smaller church. One Sunday morning towards the end of 1986, I preached to a reasonable number at this church and worked with them after lunch. To my astonishment, the church doubled through conversion growth over the normally quiet summer months that followed, maintained a 90 per cent annual growth rate for several years and later moved to a large disused picture theatre. And it all started with general Sunday coaching (by someone who was still very green!).

Years later, I did a weekend's ministry with a church of 250-plus on Sundays. I met key groups throughout the weekend, preached twice on Sunday morning and reported my findings to the elders on Sunday afternoon. That church saw a 20 per cent lift across all three services over the following year and maintained good growth for the next few years.

The method of coaching the two churches was different in detail but the results were the same – reminding me that strategic targeted coaching is the fastest way to turn churches around.

2. Peer Group Coaching

Peer group coaching, where leaders coach leaders, can happen in various ways.

Sometimes groups of pastors/leaders meet to coach one another, often discussing a topic from prepared material with one pastor as the session's leader. The usefulness of this depends on how it's done. Be aware that smaller groups are often more effective than larger groups because of the intimacy and trust factor, and also that struggling young pastors in mixed groups can feel overawed by vocal successful pastors. So, while peer coaching may have its place, it's probably the least effective form of coaching. Personally I cannot remember any major church breakthroughs coming from this approach.

The most effective form of peer group coaching is when an outside coach coaches the husband and wife pastors of a church that's growing well – and those pastors then coach a young husband and wife team from the same material that they've been coached in. This is a highly effective way of coaching that multiplies the impact of the senior coach, especially when both sets of pastors then coach their own leadership teams from that same material.

Wisely handled, peer group coaching can play a crucial role in turning churches around – especially when it's part of a regional strategy to coach all the churches of that kind in a region.

3. Coaching Senior Leadership Teams

Coaching the husband and wife pastors of a church and their three or four senior leaders is another way of turning churches around, although the impact of geography and distance need to be considered in this form of coaching.

With this format, the coach meets the senior team regularly to check progress, work through issues they may be struggling with, help with major paradigm shifts in the way they run their church, possibly coach them from an agreed resource, encourage them and even have fun with them over a cuppa at the end of the session!



When coaches live within easy driving distance of the churches, these visits can be every month or two; where it involves flying, visits can be every 3-6 months with Sunday service progress monitored by videos or DVDs.

Since the Sunday question is hugely important I sometimes discuss this at length with the team, walking them through the changes that must take place if a church is to move into mission mode and reach Christians and seekers at the same service – as most churches have to (see further comment below).

Coaching senior leadership teams can be a very effective way of turning churches around.

4. Coaching Husband and Wife Pastors

Coaching a pastor couple is the ultimate in coaching, as it's in the safety of an intimate, trusting relationship that ministry upskilling and spiritual formation come together most perfectly. Occasionally it is necessary to coach just the husband, perhaps when the wife has other commitments with family.

Pastor couples can be coached in many different ways – coaching them to coach others being one possibility.

I frequently coach from an agreed resource. Recently I have used *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* by Stanley, Joiner and Jones, sometimes working through a chapter at a time and sometimes just a question or two per session. Upskilling and life change, not speed, are the goals of resource coaching, and I still remember what a total revelation (and even revolution!) Practice #1 in this book was for one experienced pastor. It was a turning point in his ministry.

Resource coaching may only be part of what a coach does during a husband and wife coaching session. As with team coaching, the coach works through the issues the couple are struggling with on the day, and because it's so intimate with no one listening in on it, the coach is proactive in picking up on the nuances in their discussion. Sometimes every statement the pastors make can be windows into their own soul. Good coaches understand this and build on it.

Sunday services are also an important part of pastor coaching, again leading on to discussion of other ministry areas. I sometimes attend (or view) a service, sharing lunch with the couple to talk about it and wider coaching issues before discussing these with their senior team later in the week.

However it's done, coaching husband and wife pastors, often in combination with coaching their senior team, is the most potent coaching method of all. It leads to huge upskilling and life change in the pastors and their team.

Ces, if you've got strategic churches you particularly want to see win, ensure that their pastors get this one-on-one coaching from you or someone else. Remember that focused coaching is the fastest way to turn these churches around!

The Coaching Session: An Overview

Coaching sessions tend to follow a simple format, but with variations that flow from the deepening relationship between the coach and those they are coaching.

I always prepare well before a session. Then, after an initial greeting and prayer, I start by asking how things are going. The responses, which can never be predicted, set the tone for the remainder of our session together.

During the 'how's it going?' phase I look for trends in attendance, conversions, discipleship and moves towards membership. I also look for how the pastors are coping and consider



how to craft our discussion for a session that may be anything from an hour-and-a-half to three hours or more in length.

When we discuss services I've attended or viewed, I start with the positives, which may be the message. From there I move to the challenges, which may be the opening songs. Pastors pick up on this deliberate strategy, comment on it, and then follow the same principle when coaching their own leaders. *That's because the ability to coach is caught as much as taught.*

If I'm using *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* as my coaching resource, we talk first about any personal and ministry issues that are important on the day. Only after we've completed that discussion do we give our undivided attention to the issues the book raises. This discussion, as I mentioned, can be life and ministry changing because it takes people to a leadership competency that they and their colleagues may never have dreamed possible.

With husband and wife coaching, many other issues come up in the discussion – like how to hear from God early enough in the week so that they don't have to toss aside a nearly completed message because it doesn't fit; how to coach their leaders, and so on.

Finally, as we conclude our session, we review the issues to prioritise over coming weeks or months, set a date and time for our next meeting and share in prayer as we end the session.

Common Coaching Issues

Coaching sessions typically focus on a number of major issues that are of vital importance to any church. These include:

1. Growing Our Church Leaders

When I started coaching I wondered whether leaders are born or made. I have concluded that while a small number may be born as leaders, most are 'made by effort and hard work' – as one famous sports coach put it. This was a liberating discovery, and in the years since then I've seen this work out time and time again in unlikely situations and where others may have written struggling leaders off.

Indeed, I'm so sure of this leadership fact now that I put it this way: 'Give me any person of average intelligence, and with their commitment (see below) and God's help I'll make them an effective leader.' So I approach the coaching task with great optimism, believing that most, though not all, can be coached to a much higher leadership competency.

All coaches have their favourite coaching books. I use these (and others) to help leaders reach their potential:

- The best introduction to the world of leadership is John Maxwell's little book, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* – with its easy style, wonderful stories and life-changing homework; it's a little gem.
- Maxwell's *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* is likewise still the best tool to help senior leaders grow their teams.
- *The 7 Practices of Effective Ministry* is probably the best book to help pastors and teams do mission effectively in today's changing world.

As you start strategic coaching, I encourage you to coach on these two primary principles: *everything rises and falls on leadership (Maxwell), and leaders are made by effort and hard work*. If you do that, you'll certainly win!



2. Growing Leadership Teams

The need for teams is, in the most practical and earthy sense, driven by attendance numbers.

With a bit of practical help, pastors can usually run churches of 50 or less without much trouble because the church is still really a large home group, with many of the ‘family’ dynamics that go with that. With more help, pastors can even manage 75 on Sundays; but by 100, teams are becoming necessary. By 150, teams are mandatory, and it’s impossible to get much past 200 without top teams leading the church. *To grow your churches you’ll need to grow the teams that will drive the churches’ future growth.*

As we’ve seen, the fastest way to grow a team is to use a book resource to coach the pastors, and for the pastors to then coach their team from the same book. One pastor couple I coach actually coaches their team in the evening of the same day I’ve coached them.

You can start coaching most senior teams from the *7 Practices* book at a pace that fits the team. Teams meeting weekly may only do a question or two at a time, while teams meeting monthly may consider several questions or even a whole chapter in some cases.

However frequently teams meet, you and your coaches should put as much time as you can into growing them, especially in your ‘must win’ churches because to grow your churches you need great pastors and great teams. And you get them through effort and hard work!

3. Prevailing in Sunday Services

Your churches’ Sunday morning services are the key to growing the churches because if churches can’t win on Sundays, they won’t grow – unless they are niche-market churches that meet during the week.

We typically struggle in several areas of our Sunday services – and three in particular. These can be good areas to review in coaching sessions.

- Generally speaking, **we try to sing songs that people can’t sing**; they are performance songs, not congregational songs. Unfortunately, with our tendency to put these songs at the beginning of the service, our Sunday services never recover from their poor start. You must change this for your churches to grow.
- **We’re often still doing church for the present church family**; *7 Practices* warns against this. Seeing most churches are too small for two Sunday morning services, we have to reach Christians and pre-Christians at the same service, as the highest performing churches I coach increasingly do. Help your churches make this paradigm shift.
- And **we need to sharpen our preaching**; it’s vital that we craft carefully prepared, well thought out, relevant, biblical messages that speak into our people’s lives and end with a clear challenge to take the next step on the faith journey. Generally speaking, our preaching is letting us down badly, and you should take this up with your pastors immediately.

I’m so concerned about our services that I’m giving them even greater coaching priority and I urge you to do the same.

4. Attempting To Do Too Much

Many churches attempt to do too much, whereas the key to growth is to focus on the few things that will grow the churches. The best way to fix this tendency is to get all your pastors studying the *7 Practices* book, especially Practices 1 and 3; and when they’ve studied it, to teach it to their leaders.



When churches clarify the few wins they need, and narrow their focus as a result, they'll start to grow. Help your pastors and leaders do this.

Does Coaching Really Help Pastors?

But does coaching help the pastors themselves? It does – in many interconnected ways. Here are just a few examples:

1. **Pastors like to have someone competent outside the church to bounce ideas off before they take them to their leaders.** Skilled coaches have a good idea of whether or not something will work.
2. **Coaches help pastors work through the big issues they struggle with** so they don't need to battle through them on their own.
3. **The coaching environment provides a safe place for pastors to talk** about their deep personal struggles, greatly advancing their personal development.
4. **Coaching brings accountability into a pastor's ministry**, and with accountability comes greater focus on what to prioritise and spend time on so their ministry bears greater fruit.
5. At the most practical level, **coaching helps pastors and churches reach goals they'd never otherwise reach.** Neither of the two churches mentioned at the beginning of this letter would have grown the way they did without coaching; coaching gave these churches the keys to the breakthroughs that transformed them.
6. **Coaching empowers higher performing pastors to coach young pastors**, using the same material they've been coached with, which helps them grasp the principles more clearly themselves and widen the senior coach's influence. In coaching's purest and most advanced form, all higher performing pastors coach less experienced pastors so all reach new levels of effectiveness.

Coaching – An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Ces, it's thrilling that you've taken up your new role and that you're aware that your biggest challenge is to get your churches growing again. We're right behind you!

To get started:

- bring your coaches together and develop a regional strategy
- decide which coach will go to each church
- choose the book you'll all coach from
- and do some coaching yourself so you get a feel for this important and privileged ministry

I encourage you to give coaching your highest priority because nothing will turn your churches around as fast as skilled strategic coaching. Be assured, we're praying for you and will give you all the help we can.

God bless you, and let's keep in touch.

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To Discuss at Local Church Leaders Meetings

1. What steps has our church taken to provide skilled coaching for our pastors and leaders? What further steps should we now take to lift this coaching to the next level? (For example, using the *7 Practices book*)
2. Which of the four coaching issues mentioned (in 'Common Coaching Issues') are we struggling with the most? What steps should we now take to get on top of them so our church reaches its mission potential?
 - When you've answered both of these questions, record your intentions in your next local strategic mission plan document so they become part of your strategy for the coming year. Make sure you put names and dates against each step you'll take.