

UNDERSTANDING APOSTOLIC RELATIONSHIPS

**Crosslink Christian Network,
Australia**

Crosslink - An Apostolic Network in the Making

One of the core features of the Crosslink Christian Network is a commitment to pursue a better understanding the way apostolic relationships should work. While the term “apostolic” has been misused, we have taken up the challenge to see how a genuine strand of Biblical Christian leadership could operate in contemporary circumstances.

Our commitment, while based on what we read in the New Testament, came about because as a result of pragmatic issues – which sent us looking for Biblical answers. We wanted to find out how to support church leaders who lived a long way from one another. Most of us had seen the peril of scrappy independence as well as the institutional impotence. Since we had nothing to protect and little to defend, we opted for a structure where each local church leader group as well as each Crosslink Endorsed Minister would need to nominate at least two people who provided apostolic mentoring to them.

The idea of developing and sustaining relationships with apostolic leaders is of primary importance. Most of the people and groups who join Crosslink have made a transition. It came about because they have come to a fresh understanding of the kingdom of God. That means the Network itself is a tool to be used in a work, not a badge to wear. This shift from “tribal” to “kingdom” is tectonic in proportion. All around the world there are people and groups whose identity is attached to serving Jesus and the kingdom rather than a particular human organization. Christian leaders had serious levels of discomfit inside of them and knew that there was a better way to get the job done than the comparatively inflexible and restrictive structures to which they belonged.

But they were neither rebellious nor independent. They just wanted to focus on hearing from God and doing what he said in a given location. To discover something that had Biblical integrity and would serve this purpose we have tried to develop what we would call an “apostolic” model. I would say that Crosslink is either an “apostolic network” or more precisely a network of “apostolic networks.”

In terms of Network structure we require all Affiliated Churches and all Endorsed Ministers to identify at least two people who provide apostolic input and support. These persons are not required to be members of Crosslink. They do need to be distinctively apostolic. While most movements or denominations have chosen to elect or appoint overseers on a regional basis we believe it to be either dysfunctional or at best, ineffective. Instead we ask each Church and Endorsed Minister to make sure they have organic connections with people whose ministry with them has proved to be apostolic.

As we have journeyed together we have developed a working set of criteria that would seek to describe what makes a relationship apostolic. I think we have a much better handle on that now compared to when we started out. The main challenge is to make sure the persons nominated are functioning with the pastors and churches in a way that is clearly makes a difference to the week-by-week life of the church.

What are Apostolic Relationships?

There is a growing mountain of literature and gigabytes of electronic resources seeking to describe or define apostolic ministry. Some of it is scary and some helpful. All of it is testimony to the fact that we are in a period of transition toward restoration. The main issue is to see what Ephesians 4 might look like in the week-to-week operation of a ministry or church.

This ends up being a bit like driving along a multi-lane road with rough ground on either side. There are extreme views on either side of the roadway, but there are also multiple lanes and we can choose a different lane from someone else but still get to the same destination. It is the destination I am interested in, not arguing about which lane someone else should choose.

I am convinced by New Testament revelation in general and by specific references in Ephesians 4 that apostolic ministry is essential to the health and the effectiveness of Christian enterprise. The best way to understand apostolic ministry and relationships is to get a picture of what it was that made Jesus and Paul apostolic. They are not the only examples of course, but they are the ones we know the most about. Apostolic distinctives ought to be the things that happened every day in different ways rather than one or two things that happened occasionally. The search for apostolic distinctives should not be limited to a few verses from Romans 15 [1] or 2 Corinthians 12 [2]. I would suggest that it was neither planting churches nor working miracles that were distinctively apostolic. Many others did both of those things but were not apostles.

Jesus was pressured to compromise with the demonized religious traditions that had congealed around the message of Moses and the prophets. It blocked people from God rather than drawing them to him. It was robbed of its power to bring life. His apostolic message and ministry was that of the “kingdom of God.” Jesus lived, modeled and taught this message every day. Each day the disciples were with him they saw and heard him offering people the very best of the kingdom of God no matter who or what they were or weren’t. Even though they didn’t always understand, it was to become the rock upon which they would place their feet and the plumb line against which they would measure every issue. The end game was the kingdom of God and the way to get there was to discover and embrace the kingdom message. To put it in context, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God [God ruling according to his will] in an environment that wanted to hear about the kingdom of Israel [one or other group of people having status and power; e.g. Acts 1:6]

Paul, likewise, had an apostolic message and ministry. In his case the challenge was to make sure the message of the gospel would not be compromised and constrained by religious overlays of traditional Judaism. His “Jesus-only and the gospel-only” message had to be restated and restated. Perhaps one of the core expressions of that was contained in his words to the Ephesians [2]:

“For he himself is our peace,For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy

¹ Romans 15:14-22, where Paul talks about some of the specific aspects of his calling, without actually offering it as a qualification for apostolic function.

² 2 Corinthians 12:12, where Paul is challenging the legitimacy of his apostolic function.

temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Paul had to pound this message throughout the whole of his ministry in the face of tremendous pressure from conservative Jewish believers [cp. Galatians 1,2] as well as Greek mystery-spirituality and culture. [Colossians]. In every case his response was to keep pointing to Jesus Christ and the gospel. He even had to stand up to Peter on one celebrated occasion when the core of the gospel message was being compromised. It is Paul's apostolic gift that saw what is going on in Galatia for the threat that it was. Paul saw the division and immorality in Corinth for the threat that it posed to the integrity and power of the gospel. Again and again, he interpreted God's plan for the church through the ages in the context of what is happening in the present. The insight and authority to do so came from God, not from any human appointment or reasoning. Even though Paul's calling was clearly from God, Paul's apostolic function was openly attested by his peers (cp. Galatians 1 where Paul goes to Jerusalem and is confirmed in his revelation and ministry by the apostle there) as well as by the recipients (e.g. Paul is apostolic to, e.g. the Corinthians [1 Cor. 4:15] and a father to Timothy [1 Cor. 4:17]).

This is a core issue for us. Apostolic leaders are not self-appointed. They will have a calling from God, but one that is recognized not self-proclaimed. It's the same as leadership itself. There is no such thing as self-proclaimed Christian leadership. Without peer and recipient recognition apostolic function is nothing more than presumptive self-aggrandizement. It is our experience in Crosslink that apostolic leaders are to be discovered more than appointed. They exist because of what God has done *in* people and therefore *between* people.

As Crosslink has developed as a Network we have worked hard to sharpen our understanding and shape our goals and values. We have tried to ensure such key relationships exist for all Churches and Endorsed Ministers. We try to help leaders and churches to identify whom their apostolic coach/mentors are. The outcome or fruit of the relationship one-way or the other soon indicates their legitimacy.

We have tended to think of apostolic relationships as a mix of father/mother and coach/mentor. In both cases the relationship presumes mutuality, commitment and the best kind of accountability. It presumes skills, insight and Holy Spirit authority on the part of the apostolic person. It presumes a desire for relationships, change and accountability on the part of the recipient(s). This accountability has much less to do with crass authoritarianism. It is about heart relationship and kingdom increase.

When sportspeople commit to a coach the emphasis is on producing a better game. There obviously is an ethical part to it as well, but that happens best in the context of the other. The coach is not just a moral policeman. If someone is genuinely helping me to better serve Jesus as a Christian leader I will be much more willing for them to speak with me about my personal behaviour than the person acting like police sitting in a car beside the road with a speed camera.

What Makes Someone Apostolic To Me/Us?

In our experience, apostolic ministry does not operate like a title or a military rank. A General may well be a General wherever he goes. The instructive reference here is when Paul was with the other apostles in Jerusalem. We take note of the fact that they

used the phrase “apostle **to**.”³ Paul was apostle to the Gentiles and they were apostles to the Jews. There may well be spheres of apostolic calling and authority.

Some people who are apostolic to us, are apostolic to everyone. There are leaders who are apostolic to other people but not to us.

We became acutely aware of this when we were making a decision as to whether or not we would separate from the Uniting Church. In one of those sessions, we decided to write on a whiteboard the values that we felt were non-debatable for us. These were the things we would be willing “to die for.” It didn’t take long for us to write down five or six things. When someone suggested we write down the names of the human persons who were used by God to plant those values in us we were able to do so quickly and easily. We didn’t fully realize it at the time, but what we were identifying were the names of the people who had been “apostolic” to us. They weren’t just the people we liked, or people we had been friends with. They were people with a message that we had heard as from God. Their message and ministry had been received and was shaping us and bearing fruit in us. It wasn’t a franchise. It assumed a different expression in us. We received from God what they were telling us about and helping us to understand.

When the disciples stood up on the day of Pentecost, the story they had seen in Jesus for three years and the message had taken root in their hearts. His story had become their story. What they saw in the life of Jesus now shaped their own lives and decisions, even when they were costly decisions. He had been apostolic to them and the proof was in what they were able to accomplish.

It was the same with Paul. Timothy became a “son-in-the-faith” to Paul because the things he heard and saw in Paul had taken root in his own life. He had imparted those same things to faithful men and they, in turn had experienced what was being shared so that they had their own story. Armed with their own story, they were able to share with others. The message inside Paul became the message inside of Timothy. It looked different, but it was the same stuff from heaven.

This is another example of apostolic ministry happening from the present generation to the next generation. If you extend that model, it explains how I received from heaven what came from Jesus, to Paul, to Timothy and thento me – and you. It has been apostolic ministry that has guarded, embodied, rediscovered and proclaimed throughout the history of the church. Like the Bible says, it always a foundational testimony to Jesus the cornerstone.

As we seek to serve Jesus as leaders today, we need these relationships as much as ever. We need it for the equipping value. Ephesians 4 is very specific about this. The challenge of identifying leaders who are apostolic to us should have more to do with what God has called you to do than it has to do with who you are friends with. A friend is a friend, but friendship is not the same as apostolic connection. What is flowing in an apostolic relationship is much more than friendship although it will likely include friendship. I am assuming that Scottish tennis player, Andy Murray has a lot of friends. But that doesn’t qualify any of them to be his coach. Friends will encourage him and support him, but if he is going to win more Grand Slam tournaments he needs a coach who can look at his game and tell him what he needs to do to play better. His friends sit in the supporter’s box at the matches as does Amélie Mauresmo, his coach. The relationship the friends have could not be more different to the coach.

³ Galatians 1

Choosing Apostolic Relationships

My observation of the Crosslink experience with respect to apostolic relationships is that many leaders have not given consideration to this matter. The other point is that often these relationships have developed naturally – or perhaps supernaturally. Dysfunctional experiences have simply turned good people away from the track. Like other areas of Christian leadership this has been plunged into the mire of western business and marketing culture among other things.

When an individual Endorsed Minister or church leadership group consider pursuing apostolic relationships they seem prone to opt for what is available or what is safe. Since it is a requirement for membership of Crosslink, we often find people putting names down of leaders with whom they have a good relationship. That would be okay as a temporary measure of course. In a non-ideal world its better to start badly than not to start at all. We are more concerned to help genuine apostolic relationships formed and operating. If it takes time, so be it.

Imagine if Andy Murray chose a coach on that basis. He would probably end up winning nothing. When you choose a coach, you choose someone you think is going to help you to play better. They may become friends and probably will, but the friendship is a result of the commitment. It's like choosing a brain surgeon. If you had the choice between choosing the best brain surgeon in the world but who happened to be a cranky person with no hint of a bedside manner, OR a lesser qualified surgeon who happened to have a wonderful bedside manner which one will you want? I want to one with the skills any day of the week. The other one may well give you a nicer experienceon your way to an earlier grave. The cranky one will give you a less pleasant experience with more chance of recovery.

The big issue is looking for the person with the particular gifts that you or your congregation need. Too many leaders sell themselves and their churches short by accepting what is available rather than going after what they really need.

Different Kinds of Apostolic Input

We need to recognize that there will always be different kinds of apostolic input. If you compiled a list of the books, Mp3's, videos, conferences that have actually shaped the way you have travelled and the way you do ministry you will have an idea of one form of apostolic input. It isn't necessary for you to have a relationship with a person in order to receive insight from them and be transformed by their ministry. In some cases the authors would be dead in any case. The key factor needs to be clear. All of these instances are ones where you are sitting in a circle on your own and the book, audio file etc. have come into your circle and you are the only one who decides what to embrace and what not to embrace. All of that is a hundred percent valid and important. It's just that it is not enough.

We also receive shaping through peer relationships. These may be friends or groups of pastors or leaders. Where there is a commitment to help one another to change and grow there can be great value and benefit. To keep my sporting metaphor going, this would be like a group of athletes sharing insights with each other –probably not as likely if they are competitors, but it would definitely be helpful if it happened.

Both of these are good and desirable. Neither of them represent apostolic relationships. They do not carry the distinctives of the Jesus-disciples relationship nor the Paul-Timothy [or Paul-Corinthian church] relationship. I hope that will be clear. We

must recognize every good thing for its own goodness, but if we substitute one kind of relationship for another we will be in danger of missing out on what God has in store for us because he has provided anointing that is designed for that relationship [see Ephesians 4]. My own passion to discover whatever it is that Ephesians 4 is talking about is purely driven by my desire for Canberra and other places to get a chance to see the fullness of Christ being lived out in their midst by a church that has been equipped by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

Who's Inside the Circle and Who Visits the Circle?

There are too many Christian leaders who live and work in a form of isolation that is not healthy. Even the best will reach a point where they are no longer experiencing Jesus-looking increase. Most of those won't even be aware of it. Churches and church leadership groups will be the same, perhaps even more prone to the tyranny of the familiar, the comfortable, the preferable. Those with comparative success will be even more unaware that there is no kingdom advancement. There is nothing like a reputation to make you immune to reality.

What tends to happen is an institutionalizing of whatever it is that provides the most gratification for the least discomfort. Our language can remain upbeat and can sound convincing but the heart is sated when it comes to the territory yet to be conquered.

It is genuine apostolic relationships that have the capacity to keep us from that fate. They need to be in our lives and in the room often enough to know what goes on and they need to be loving and strong enough to tell us what they see and what they think. This goes for senior ministers, associate ministers and leaders. The primary role of apostolic relationship is with those persons in any local church or ministry.

Apostolic Identifiers:

Someone could be apostolic to me if:

- Understanding:* they are committed to knowing me well enough to know the call of God on my life and the journey I am to the point where they can competently speak INTO my world, not just speak OUT OF theirs.
- Love:* what they say and do is motivated by genuine love for me and belief in my calling.
- Time:* they are willing to spend an appropriate amount of time so that the relationship and awareness are maintained.
- Better:* have a capacity of wisdom, insight and experience in a way that genuinely produces measurably better outcomes for my ministry.
- More:* I get more of what I need through the outworking of our relationship.
- Respect:* I have genuine respect for them and their input into my life.
- Supernatural:* this relationship involves a mutual sense of Holy Spirit confirmation and presence.
- Challenge:* they are willing to speak openly and challenge me in positive way about the things they see and notice in me and in what I do so that I become a more holistic person and a better leader.
- Authority:* I sense that they have a God-given authority about what they say to me.
- Same Journey:* they are on the same journey as I am but further along the track.
- Father/coach:* what they do in my life produces some of the qualities and experiences associated with a coach/father.
- Strategic:* they are able to offer strategic, big picture perspective for my stage of the journey - that will help me get from where I am to where I need to be.
- See Potential:* they have a capacity to know my potential as a servant of God and as a Christian leader - and are able to help me achieve it.
- Closer to Jesus:* my relationship with them results in me walking more closely and faithfully with Jesus, not just with them.
- Increase my own faith:* they stir me to gain my own faith rather than just trying to mimic or ride on theirs.
- Two-way:* our relationship is free and mutual, not one-way and obligatory.
- Impartation:* the message/revelation they carry resonates within me and makes me want to discover my own version of what they have experienced.