



## Two Decades of Leadership: Learning that I am Still Learning

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*Rohan Dredge has spent the last two decades in full-time ministry. He started his professional life as a high school teacher where he developed a deep care for young people, which in turn led to a role as a Youth Pastor in 1996, and eventually he transitioned into a Senior Associate role. In 2007, Rohan made the shift to balancing a combination of ministry and corporate work. Rohan has been the Senior Minister at Discovery Church (previously Careforce Church), since 2009, and has led the community through generational transition and cultural change. Rohan continues to balance ministry and his private practice in developing leadership and communication in Senior Executives. Rohan and Megan have been married for 19 years and have a daughter Zariah and son Maddox.*

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On March 1, 2016, I celebrated twenty years in full-time pastoral ministry. Certainly in comparison to many I look up to, and many I learn from, it is 'just the beginning,' and yet has comprised 80% of my working life. As a married man it is all I have ever known, and the one responsibility that I define as a 'calling' first, and a job second. In fact, if ministry ever becomes a job I have promised myself I will step aside, go, and do something else. A calling to me is defined by the inability to do anything else.

As March 1, 2016, drew nearer, it became more internally important to me to acknowledge the 20-year milestone. The only other things I have done for that length of time have been to be a son to my parents, and a friend to a handful of close mates. I have not been married that long, I have not parented that long, I have not even worked in one

place for that long. What I have done, is dedicated my life to the calling that God gave me in a high school teaching development day in August 1994.

At that meeting, it became apparent that I would be exiting school teaching, which I loved, and entering youth ministry, which I was called to. That began an adventure of leading, learning, loving and living as best as I could for the calling in my heart and the grace upon my life. Passionately, you bet. Imperfectly, guaranteed! Enduringly, I hope so.

Reflecting on two decades of leadership and ministry, I found it both a delight and challenge to identify what has most marked this period. The following eight keys emerged from that reflection as being the most significant in my ministry.

## **1. The Delicate and Intimate Dance of “To and Through”**

*Ministry is as much about what God wants to do to me, as it is what he wants to do through me.*

I am convinced more than ever that ministry is as much about what God wants to do in us as it is about what he intends to use us to accomplish. The key is knowing which experience is which.

I recollect when I was back attending services in a church where five weeks earlier, I had stepped out of my leadership role and was now in the beginning phase of developing a platform for the season ahead in corporate and ministry work. I had faithfully served that Church for just over eleven years, concluded my senior associate role, and was now seated in the fifth row with a hat on, having arrived five minutes before the service commenced.

On the way out, I could not help myself, and stopped at the main doors to greet my Pastors and various people who were there. I turned around and saw a woman I had not met before. Greeting her enthusiastically, I ask her how long she had been coming to our Church. “Three weeks,” she said. I responded delightedly and she returned the favour, “How long have you been coming here?” Then my internal film was suddenly set to slow motion and I distinctly remember negotiating with myself, “Do I tell her who I was? Does she need to know what a big deal I am (was) here? Is it important to me that she knows who she is talking to?” After what felt like an eternity, I simply said: “A bit longer than that, and I think you have made a great decision to be here!”

On my way home, I had an encounter with God that set up the next phase of the ministry that I am currently part of, and that continues to be foundational to my ministry worldview. I sensed God gently and clearly say to me “See, I do not need you on staff here to build this Church, or to build her life. I do not need you to be doing ministry. I grace you. I set you apart for my will and my purpose and my timing in my season.” In less than the 234 steps it took to walk home, the Lord had re-shaped my perspective of who HE was in my ministry and who I was in HIS story. It was a profound moment, to say the least.

I felt encouraged and rebuked at the same time. I felt like in an instant I was protected from a dangerous spirit of entitlement and given a fresh view of the way God wants to do ministry in me and ministry through me. Those two beautifully intertwine and are difficult to distinguish at times. I am learning to make sure I start first at his Word in prayer and humility of spirit before I do anything that might look like activity. I try to discern first if this is a work in me, rather than a work through me. Leadership out

of sonship, that is out of a growing and developing a sense of who I am as a child of God before I do anything for the Father, is becoming more of the priority and, I trust, will mark the next two decades and beyond.

## **2. Moments of Time in the Passing of Time**

*I have learned to treasure the profound moments, the personal encounters I have had and continue to have with God.*

Several times, I have sat down and plotted my encounters with God and the impact they have had on my life. What continues to jump out at me is that over three decades of faith, there are relatively few moments that have changed my life forever. There were three between ages fifteen and twenty. Two leading up to age twenty-five, followed by a period of silence. Not because I did not know how to hear the voice of God, but because I had a true north 'not to look to the left or the right for a decade,' so I remained faithful to that. Then the encounters started up again. One at age thirty-five, then again at thirty-six and thirty-eight, with this being the one that paved the way for the role I currently serve in. In thirty years of faith, I do not consider eight encounters like these as many. However, each one changed the trajectory of my life and remain to this day, a distinct point on my timeline that God has used to disciple, guide and lead me into his 'good pleasing and perfect will.' Layer this with getting married, buying our first home, travelling, moving states, having children, and all that tumbles out in the kaleidoscope of those experiences and you have the tapestry I enjoy right now, and what I am noticing is that the small things are becoming bigger.

I want to be closer to Jesus more than ever. I want to be a more faithful husband than I have ever been. I want to (privately) wear my 'best dad' badge. I want more sacred and less spectacular. I want deep changes, not just surface experiences. I want the Church to take her place in the world as a true friend to its community and be the 'salt and light' we were always created to be. I want the MOMENTS not to be missed in the PASSING. I want the moments to be recognized in the passing for what they are. Profound, personal, deep transformative encounters between people that God uses to disciple us and make us more able to bear 'fruit that will last.' I treasure those moments and pray I always will.

## **3. The Two Sides of Your Grace Place**

*The longer I lead the less I believe 'balanced' leaders exist. Nor should they.*

When Jody, one of the pastors on our team, got up to preach for the first time, I was struck by her ability to fill the room prophetically. She was able to effortlessly call out what God was going to do in that room. No pretension, no arrogance, no discernible lack of faith. After we debriefed her about her message, I inquired as to what extent she was aware of that. This was not only new information for her it was groundbreaking. Being given permission to preach out of that gift has been core to her development as a leader on the platform. My wife Megan has a platform authority in the areas of teaching, and faith, which creates a dynamic response in her hearers and sees people ministered to and transformed time after time after time. Why? Both Jody and Megan lead from their place of grace, where God has most gifted them to contribute. In my view, the more we do that, the better.

I am growing to believe that leaders are graced and gifted to do specific things. We are not graced and gifted to do everything. The longer I lead, the more I want to lead from my grace, what flows naturally and spiritually out of me in the context of ministry.

The longer I lead, the less I want to lead shaped by the expectations of a congregation, a board, the history of the Church or what is considered either effective or even popular at the time. I watched Jody lean into a prophetic grace that continues to shape her leadership today. I watch Matt, another team member, lead with his artistic, musical and storytelling grace. It is incredible. When we know our grace and affirm it in community, we are better positioned to expect THAT from one another and not project what we think a team member, a leader or a senior pastor 'should' be doing.

When we lead from our grace place, we give our best contribution to the community we lead. When we lead from history, expectation, a job description, or the influence of dominant individuals, I am increasingly convinced we are less likely to contribute our best.

My dominant gift is leadership. I bias everything through that gift. I think about the Church from a leadership perspective, from grassroots to grandiose vision. My best contribution is to be 'out of balance' as a leader and lead primarily from the grace God has given me to serve and contribute to the Church I lead. In being 'out of balance', I stop trying to be a well-rounded Pastor, I stop trying to fit a mould, I stop trying to live up to competing expectations. I simply 'lean into' what I am best at and build a team of people around me significantly better at other things than me. In that way, my being 'out of balance,' contributing in and through the grace God has given me, actually contributes the most and the best in ministry. I do not plan to be a balanced leader in the future, in fact, I suspect, I will get increasingly unbalanced.

#### **4. Theming Out Your Life**

*When I know what my primary themes are, I can grow and contribute most effectively.*

The application of the previous point has been for me to discern what I consider my life themes and become disciplined about them. I have said for many years now that a theme is better than a goal because it gives a goal a place to live. Themes are the combination of my core responsibilities and my core contributions. This takes time, study, diligence, reflection humility, and courage. To declare them enables me to say 'yes' to some things and 'no' to many others. I have six primary themes in my life and to make them feel even more important, I have placed an adjective in front of each one to help me quickly and easily discern if what I am doing 'fits.' Theming out my life has made the responsibility and discipline of leadership easier. It has made decision making quicker. It has made discipleship richer. It has made personal growth easier and so much more pleasurable. These are my themes:

- To be an irresistible Husband
- To be a memory making and future creating Dad
- To be a loyal Friend (Son)
- To be an influential Leader
- To be a transformational Communicator
- To be a multiplying Mentor (Disciple Maker)

These fuel my daily activities. They shape my prayer life, my time, my energy, my resource allocation and pave the way for a life of alignment, delight, and blessing.

#### **5. When "Lean Not" Meets the Wall**

*I know less now about leadership now than when I started, and it's better that way.*

For my first four years as a Senior Pastor, I knew what to do. Maybe it was

experience, confidence, or even arrogance! I knew my mandate was to lead our Church into a new season and spearhead a generational shift in the way we functioned and did ministry. That mandate has not changed all that much; however, the way I have experienced people working in and through it certainly has. Let me clarify this frame. I was desperate for God to speak, hungry for His Spirit to move and I spent significant time walking with God to listen and receive guidance. However, I was clear about the journey and what it might entail. It was not easy and it was not comfortable, but it was largely what needed to happen over time.

For the last season, it has been much more of a journey that I imagine the rest of ministry might be like, more of seeking the Lord with our elders and key team members. Much more collaboration with leaders to hear the voice of God, to be clear on the heart of our Church, and what 'God's agenda' is for us right now. More agile, less fixed.

In addition to that has been the personal journey that relates to my initial reflection of God wanting to do a work in me as much as he wants to do a work through me. I began to realize that I can only 'lean not on my own understanding' (Prov. 3:5) when I am out of understanding. I could only hear the whisper 'this is the way, walk ye in it' (Is. 30:21) when I needed to know the way, not when I knew the way. Leadership today is much more a process of listening to the Lord, checking in with trusted team members and making the best call we know how to at the time, with a humble willingness to change it if so directed.

To add to my 'lean not' that we as a Church navigated our way through, was Hagberg and Guelich's (2004) teaching around *The Critical Journey of Faith*. The six stages in the life of faith described therein hold some discipleship gold around the process of maturing in our faith journey. The transition point between stages four (*The Journey Inward*) and five (*The Journey Outward*) is called *The Wall*. I have discovered it is called the wall for good reason. It is where little feels easy, good, right, fun, effective, or even worth continuing. It is also called the wall because on the other side of it is an experience of humility, maturity, perspective and grace that simply does not happen without the wall season.

I spent two years at the wall, and the only redeeming feature was knowing that was in fact where I was. The rest was like sprinting through waist deep mud. The other side of the wall is a more joyful, peaceful, attractive place to be, even though with the same challenges, some even bigger. However, one emerges with a different set of tools to work through it, as a son, brother, disciple, and leader. Fear not the wall. It teaches us what we need for the rest of our lives. Embrace the wall it IS worth it.

## **6. Being a Hero and a Villain on the Same Day**

*Navigating the highs and lows of what people think and say has been harder to make sense of than I expected.*

At one point in my role as a Senior Minister, I remember turning to my wife after seeing a child from church celebrate a card and gift we had sent them for starting school. I said to Megan, "I'm not sure I will get used to what it feels like to be a hero to one person and a villain to another on the same day." At the very same time, there were people happy to defend my character in my absence and people who were happy to denigrate it without so much as a thought about how that might damage our Church or the people they were speaking with. It just seemed like such a paradox, as was the gap between those two experiences.

Remembering the 'lean not meets the wall' section has served me well, to stop expecting perfection from myself and become even more attentive to the motives of my heart. The guarantee I bring to the table is that I am an imperfect leader who is doing the best I know how to at the time.

As it turns out, personal criticism knocks me around significantly more than I ever expected. In transitioning and leading, I have come home and discussed with Megan if it was truly worth continuing. I have had days where I felt the pain of regret, the mistakes I have made in my leadership role, hoping there was a way I could make it all right. I have laid my head on the pillow stunned at the things people consider appropriate to say in my absence, or on social media. I struggle to understand why, when personal responsibility would suffice, people want to project their incorrect conclusions on to the leader without so much as a conversation. We have a guiding principle for our Church. That principle is, 'Talk TO and not ABOUT.'

That said, personal criticism is my Achilles heel. It keeps me awake at night. I talk to myself about it. I win arguments over it, talking to the bathroom mirror. The impact of it has led me to get spiritual and professional help to address it for the sake of my future, my family, and equally for the sake of my responsibilities in ministry.

## **7. Preferring Seasons Over Calendars**

*Dates and times are far less important than what God is doing, and with whom.*

My leadership style wants to achieve things, make progress, and get things happening. The longer I lead, that drive begins to nest inside a much bigger sense of the humbling and privileged role I get to play in the bigger story the Father wants to do in me, through me, and in my generation, for my generation. The change is connected to the ever-increasing need to be dependent on my Father and less concerned with what I cannot control. The paradox might be that I am no less ambitious about serving God than I am about doing my best and seeing fruit for the kingdom. I believe the change is perspective. I will do my best in the season I am in and at all times trust my heavenly Father.

I am learning that a season is much more important than a calendar. What the activity of God is, and how to best respond, is much more important than the driving focus of a date and a time. Of course, dates are important in the sense that they give us a point to measure from. It is just that the season we are in, and the walk we are on, is EVEN MORE important. Discerning the season is a leadership imperative. When I know the season, I can consider the options for response in that season. A wrong response in a season can be catastrophic. Knowing the season and responding wisely, has become even more critical in my pastoral leadership. Knowing the season matters more than ever before.

Calendars have to do with tasks, even though they involve people, whilst seasons have people at the centre. I remember reading a quote that said, "None of us can become ourselves by ourselves," and seasons teach us who and how to serve, in what way, and for how long. Thinking seasons has meant a much greater pastoral emphasis and much greater boldness in leading people. It has allowed the beautiful mix of care for the broken and courage with the stagnant to be more of a hallmark of our leadership. It has meant I am kinder to myself, and to others. Seasons do not let me off the hook in doing my best. Seasons put doing my best in the context of my submission to the will of the Father.

## 8. A Question From Dad

*When God calls you, he also graces you. Live under that grace.*

An annual ritual for Megan and me is to take my parents out for a seafood dinner. We live in different parts of the country and see each other as regularly as possible. For us, this night is our check in time on all the important stuff of life.

At the most recent meal, Dad asked me a question I have not been asked in my role of several years as Senior Minister. He said, ‘Rohie, how is your sense of call?’ On one hand, it was a natural question. On the other hand, it was a bolt from the blue because I had not been asked that for several years and was immediately confronted with its depth and the seriousness of my answer. If my sense of call was waning, what did that mean? If my sense of call was changing, was I willing to confront that reality and serve my community through the implications? Was I even brave enough to ask the question of myself? My view on calling is that you stayed for as long as you are called and no longer. I equally believe that when you know you are called, you give it everything you have with no sideways energy.

We sat for a few seconds, though it felt much longer, before I responded, “More called that ever Dad and thanks for asking.” Dad is the catalyst who helped me declare that in the midst of the triumphs, the challenges, the wins, the setbacks, the celebrations, and disappointments, God has clearly called me, and for that I am grateful and humbled.

To be able to give voice to the conviction I have about my future was an unexpected bonus of that meal. To hear myself declare, “I am called and graced to do this” affirmed the belief I have held to for the last several years and the belief that has held me. The truest conviction I have is that God has called me and, therefore, graced me to be his representative at this time, in this place.

Two decades into ministry, I am more passionate, more dedicated, and more convinced than ever that this is what God wants me to do. I expect each year to be a better friend and teacher than the previous one and hope to continue to learn and pass on the lesson of life, leadership, and ministry. As the year unfolds, I intend to be more focused on my most effective contribution to my local Church and wider Kingdom possibilities.

I want to be as much a learner as I am a leader. I want to lead under grace and with grace more effectively. I want to make sure my lack of formation does not lead to a loss of fruitfulness, for others or me. I want to live called, in every season as best as I can.

Ministry is the hardest and the most beautiful thing I have ever done in my life. For as long as I am called, and for as long as I live under His grace, I will give my whole heart to it. This is my prayer for all God’s people.

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