

Why We Are in Crete

Leadership Development as Preparation for the Unexpected

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The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town.

Titus 1:5 (CSB)

Introduction

If the world of missions has learned anything through this pandemic period, it should be that life and ministry are unpredictable. Situations change suddenly and thoroughly. Perhaps this was true in the past, but recent years have displayed the reality of change with ever-increasing clarity. And while the COVID-19 pandemic is front and center in most discussions, other factors, sometimes related, are also at play. Governments change, coups throw nations into chaos, security breaches reveal the identities of workers in sensitive locations, religious leaders double down efforts to eradicate the influence of gospel work, and the list could continue. All these challenges have played significant roles in the removal of missionaries from places of service. In such a world, how does one prepare for the unexpected?

Such a complex question defies a simple answer. Indeed, the proverbial “silver bullet” for preparing for the unexpected does not exist. There are multiple ways in which missionaries must plan for continued ministry when circumstances demand departure. In this article, however, I focus on one strategy that, biblically speaking, is essential in all settings and circumstances: the development of local leadership.

In what follows, I begin with a short study of Titus 1:5, focusing on the importance of local leadership in Paul’s mission strategy. In this section, I argue that Paul’s words to Titus in this text reveal the essential nature of leadership development in Paul’s missiological thinking. Next, I turn to a case study from my team’s experience in leadership training through the pandemic and security challenges. Here I present CTS (an underground seminary in a high-security setting) and the ways the missionary team’s commitment to leadership development prepared the way for a relatively smooth transition to non-residential ministry. Finally, the article will conclude with some reflections on lessons learned from both the biblical text and the case study that can apply in other mission contexts.

Why Titus Stayed in Crete

We begin with a few reflections on Paul’s words to Titus.¹ Following the initial greeting, the body of the letter begins in Titus 1:5 with a reminder of Titus’s missional objective in Crete: to complete some unfinished business and appoint elders in the churches. In fact, Paul says that this is the primary purpose for Titus’s continued stay in Crete.

Of particular interest is the appointment of elders in all the churches. While there may have been other tasks included, Paul places particular

¹ The authorship of Titus is beyond the scope of this article. In what follows, Pauline authorship is assumed. See Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 3–26.

emphasis on leadership development.² This observation is supported by the fact that Paul elaborates on the task of elder appointment in the following verses with the list of qualifications for church leaders. The exact nature of the appointment remains debated.³ What is clear is that Paul wanted qualified leaders in every church on the island and that his apostolic authority was behind the charge he gave to Titus.

A few key points should be noted. First, it is essential to recognize the missional setting of the letter. Titus 1:5 alone alerts us to the historical context: Paul moved on to another location and left Titus in Crete to carry on the mission. However, the context of Titus 1 further clarifies the cultural situation in Crete. Two features stand out: the existence of false teaching and the dishonesty rampant in the Cretan culture (1:10–16). These two contextual factors spotlight the need for strong church leadership. In Paul’s mind, trained leaders were needed to combat theological error and to lead the church into holy living.

Second, and related to the missional setting, the status of the church in Crete at the time of Paul’s writing alerts us to his priorities in ministry. That the appointment of qualified leaders was a part of the things left undone clues the reader to the infancy of the Cretan churches. It appears that Paul either preached the gospel in Crete but left before appointing elders or he arrived in Crete to find struggling churches devoid of leadership.⁴ In either case, the church was young and less developed than the church in other locations. Despite this, Paul opens the letter with the urgency of finding

² I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 152. Marshall notes that the $\kappa\alpha\iota$ joining together “set right what was left undone” and “to appoint elders” should be understood expegetically – “and especially to appoint elders.”

³ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 288. Knight argues that the term here means “ordination.”

⁴ Historically both are plausible. Cretans were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:11) and probably brought the gospel to Crete in the first instance. See the discussion in William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 626.

qualified leadership. Thus, for Paul, training qualified leaders was an early priority, not an afterthought.

Third, Paul's qualifications for elders are mostly ethical and moral in nature, except for the last thing he mentions: an elder must be one who is "holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it" (1:9). While in general the qualifications in Titus 1 are more abbreviated than those in 1 Timothy 3, this feature is expanded when compared to "able to teach" in 1 Tim 3:2. As Marshall notes, the expanded form here most likely coheres with the Cretan context.⁵ That is, the existence of false teaching in Crete probably led Paul to elaborate on this qualification. In any case, the point is that theology matters. The elders in Crete needed to understand sound doctrine so that they could both teach and rebuke. The implication is that Titus must invest time and energy to instruct potential leaders in the truth of the gospel. Of course, Paul makes clear in Titus 3 that the fundamental truths of the gospel should lead to fruit in the lives of believers.⁶ Nevertheless, the essential nature of sound doctrine cannot be overlooked.

Fourth, Titus 3:12 tells us that Titus himself would be leaving Crete in the near future. In fact, Paul encourages Titus to leave Crete to join him in Nicopolis. While easily overlooked, Titus's planned departure further highlights the urgency of appointing qualified leaders for the churches of Crete. To be sure, Paul planned to send another worker to Crete, yet the emphasis remained on appointing and developing Cretan church leaders. We may assume that, on arrival, either Artemas or Tychicus would carry on the work of training the local leaders.

In sum, Titus 1:5 clearly displays the high priority Paul placed on leadership development within his mission strategy. What this verse particularly

⁵ Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 165.

⁶ Chiao Ek Ho, "Mission in the Pastoral Epistles" in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul's Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, edited by Andreas J. Kötenberger and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 247.

emphasizes is the necessity of leadership in the absence of the missionary: Paul departed Crete but left instructions for leadership development, and Titus's soon departure pressed the urgency of the work. These observations set the stage for the next section of this article in which we examine the recent work of theological training in Asia.⁷

A Case Study – CTS Asia

CTS (name and location identified only by these initials for security purposes) was launched by a missionary team in Asia in 2010 with the goal of establishing an indigenous seminary dedicated to training leaders for the church. The situation was somewhat analogous to Paul and Titus's context in Crete: CTS started in a nation that had experienced exponential growth in the number of Christians and churches for more than a generation. However, leadership development had not kept pace with this growth, resulting in a dearth of qualified leaders for the new churches. Moreover, the growth of the church was accompanied by (1) increased persecution from a hostile government and (2) a rise in the number of cults and quasi-Christian groups. CTS was created to help fill the void of leadership by providing high quality theological education on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Academic rigor, spiritual vitality, and applied ministry skills were central features of the degree programs. CTS quickly grew into a multi-site, non-residential seminary.⁸

The subsequent history of CTS is complicated with, as one might expect, numerous challenges. The longer story of the seminary need not detain us here; however, two key strategic decisions in the early days of the work

⁷ I recognize that Paul's instructions were for church leaders and the case study to follow will focus on seminary leadership. Nevertheless, I think this is a valid application of the biblical text.

⁸ Within two years, CTS had expanded to eight locations and nearly 200 students. By "multi-site" I mean that classes were meeting in rented or borrowed spaces in various cities across the country rather than on a traditional campus.

proved crucial when security issues and the pandemic forced the missionary team to be removed. First, the missionary team sought out partners among the local churches to help with the leadership and administration of the seminary. In some cases, these partners were also students. At other times, they were simply believers who saw the importance of the seminary's vision. The important point is that the work of the seminary began through partnerships with local churches.

A second key decision was to place an emphasis on raising up a generation of scholars and teachers. That is, while the primary focus of the seminary was to train pastors, missionaries, and other church leaders, the team also had the long-term vision of a fully trained national faculty. As such, all seminary faculty members were encouraged to identify and invest in students showing academic giftedness and teaching ability. Though the necessary structures and advanced academic programs were not yet in place, the goal of national faculty and leadership was firmly communicated. I will elaborate further on this decision in the lessons learned below.

With this brief background established, we fast forward to 2019. As noted above, CTS was established in a country whose government was unwelcoming to such work. However, the years leading up to 2019 brought a significant shift in the nature of government persecution. What had been localized, sporadic crackdowns on unregistered church activities became a centralized, national campaign to bring all religious practice under government sanction. In addition to a few high-profile cases, smaller churches across the country were faced with new difficulties in surveillance and threats. The surveillance included both facial recognition technology and digital monitoring. In addition, foreigners were scrutinized at increased levels leading to interrogations, revoked visas, and police escorts to the airport for expulsion. This led to the departure of some foreign CTS faculty members in 2019, and by March 2020, all foreign faculty were effectively blacklisted.⁹

⁹ This paragraph is largely based on personal experience. While documentation could be provided for several incidents, I withhold references to maintain anonymity.

Of course, the year 2020 carried with it additional challenges with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government used the opportunity to further restrict religious activities and to remove any remaining foreigners suspected of religious propagation. Moreover, strict lockdowns prohibited most public meetings. Thus, CTS students were left isolated from their professors and mentors and from one another. With the dual challenges of security and pandemic, the survival of the seminary was at stake.

Lessons Learned

Rather than recounting the recent history of CTS, this section of the article will attempt to detail some of the lessons learned through the experience of remote theological training. These will include positive (what we did well) and negative (what we didn't do well) lessons.¹⁰ In so doing, I will argue that key decisions made in the early years of CTS prepared the seminary for survival through the pandemic and security issues.

Develop Leaders by Teaching Theological Processes

First, after about two years of serving in theological education, the CTS team made a paradigm shift in our pedagogy. In the early days, the team realized that many of our students came to CTS with little or no prior theological training. As such, the faculty felt burdened to teach the students as much biblical-theological content as possible and impart all the practical ministry skills that our students would ever need. Of course, we soon realized that this was an impossible goal. Thus, a change was needed.

That change came in the form of a shift in goals which also led to a shift in course delivery. **What we needed was not to teach as much knowledge as possible, but to train students to read and interpret Scripture, theolo-**

¹⁰ In this section, I will describe the ideals behind some strategic decisions. It should be noted that each of these areas was imperfect at best.

gize within their contexts, and apply their newly gained practical skills to their ministries. In other words, our focus shifted from content to process. Thus, we stopped giving all the answers and started teaching students how to answer the questions. This type of training is implied in Paul's instructions to Titus to ensure that local leaders were trained in sound doctrine such that they were equipped to teach and rebuke (Titus 1:9). As Tan and Brooks argue, in every context "it is highly likely that specific and complex theological questions will arise for which no one has previously sought an answer. Western systematic theology textbooks will not likely address those questions. The missionary must train new believers in exegetical skills in order to apply Scripture to those questions."¹¹ This became the new aim of CTS.

Develop Leaders within Functioning Ministry Structures

Second, it was crucial to have functioning leadership structures in place, especially in the seminary context. CTS went through several structural changes over the years as the seminary grew. The shift to a remote, online format brought on through the pandemic also demanded change in structure. Nevertheless, having an existing structure that included academic and logistical arms provided the necessary foundation for continued ministry.¹² Thus, while the day-to-day operations looked very different during the pandemic, we were set up to continue the work.

The lesson in this regard is that it is crucial to think long-term about the ways we establish structures within our teams and ministries. Perhaps the temptation is to simply teach and train in an ad hoc manner, especially when resources and personnel are limited. Yet, giving upfront and ongoing careful

¹¹ Sunny Tan and Will Brooks, "Theological Education as an Integral Component of World Mission Strategy" in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, edited by Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 187.

¹² The academic arm included the faculty and academic oversight of the programs. The logistical arm included financial administration and registrar.

thought to the overarching organization of the team and ministry proved essential to continued work when security and pandemic forced dramatic changes among my team. The flexible structure well supported the fluid dynamics of the context. While Paul does not record his entire plan, the facilitation of Titus's work in appointing elders and the intention to send additional workers to Crete implies that some level of structure was in place. Thus, for Paul, the structure enabled effective ministry.

Develop Leaders by Recruiting Local Leadership Early in the Work

Third, and related to the above point, CTS leadership determined to integrate local leadership from the outset. This often proved challenging in an academic setting because the team was providing theological education to leaders who had little previous academic experience. Thus, few, if any, local partners were academically qualified to take on leadership positions within the seminary. As such, the team made a few key decisions: (1) to include local leadership in the development of academic programs; (2) to work with local leadership in non-academic leadership roles; and (3) to develop academically qualified local leadership.

Practically speaking, these decisions led the team to dialogue with local church leaders and mature students about the curriculum, course delivery, and academic requirements of the seminary. While they may have lacked academic credentials, local leaders possessed a deep and invaluable knowledge of the context and needs of students. These local leaders (mostly local pastors) gave input into the courses included in the curriculum, the delivery format, and other practical issues involved, such as tuition costs. In addition, local leaders took the lead in logistical and administrative duties, including maintaining the teaching locations, registering and interviewing applicants, and handling seminary finances. Moreover, the missionary team serving as faculty were strongly encouraged to identify and invest in gifted students. As a result, by the time the missionary team was removed from the context, we had a national faculty member enrolled in a doctoral program through a

partner seminary while also teaching courses at CTS. Thus, when the team could no longer be present, we had local partners in place to continue work they were already doing. As Lawless points out, such partnering requires a trust in others to carry out the ministry as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit.¹³ In short, paternalism of any sort must be discarded for long-term health.

Partnering with local leaders follows the Pauline pattern of ministry as seen in his instructions to Titus. As noted above, though the church in Crete was young, Paul urged Titus to appoint elders, implicitly local leaders from among the church members. Thus, Paul encouraged the engagement of local leaders early in the work on Crete.

Develop Leaders by Facilitating Connections among Students

In addition to training for theological thinking, establishing functioning structures, and co-laboring with local leadership for the seminary, developing close connections among students proved to be essential for the seminary experience. These connections became especially important when the faculty, though teaching online classes, was no longer physically present. While we believed that our lectures, reading assignments, and interaction in the classroom equipped our students to preach, teach, and lead, we also learned that community is crucial for seminary students. As Bonhoeffer wrote, “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”¹⁴ The pandemic has made this clear to Christians across the globe; CTS students learned the lesson early in the institution’s history. When the pandemic and security issues hit, students strengthened these connections further.

¹³ Chuck Lawless, “Paul and Leadership Development” in *Paul’s Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours*, ed. John Mark Terry and Robert L. Plummer (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 230-232.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 29.

In our context, pastors serve in high-pressure environments that are often lonely and exhausting. For most, the expectations of the congregation meant that they were overworked and under supported. The student body became a source of community and gospel partnership. Prior to the pandemic, students from various parts of the country joined forces for the cause of missions. They partnered to send both short-term and long-term cross-cultural workers, primarily ministering among the minority peoples within the country. Learning Scripture and theology as classmates drew these students together in common faith and purpose. After the CTS faculty departed and the pandemic began, several students formed a pastoral network for the purpose of mutual encouragement as well as partnership in gospel ministry. Thus, while the faculty was no longer physically present, the students continued to build strong community among themselves.

The lesson here extends beyond the ministry of theological education. In any context, joining local believers—especially local leaders—together is an indispensable piece of ministry strategy. While missionaries can and should build strong relationship with the people they serve, the relationships between national brothers and sisters are perhaps even more important. The reality is that we cannot know the date of our departure from the field, but most missionaries eventually leave the field, even if only in retirement. Serving the local body through helping them build community should be central to our strategy.

Conclusion

The adage “the only constant is change” applies to every mission context. Sometimes the changes are small shifts in strategy, structure, or ministry focus. Other times, the changes are so significant that everything in life and ministry must be reconsidered. Missionaries must prepare as much as possible for changes.

As the world is moving into a post-pandemic phase, more changes appear to be forthcoming. For CTS, the security issues continue to intensify. More broadly, the global shift to online theological education is most likely permanent. Of course, pandemics and security issues are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Yet, this article has argued that missionaries can best prepare for the uncertainty of the future by investing in local leadership in the churches and in the various strategies we start. Such a vision is consistent with the biblical pattern that sets the stage for long-term gospel ministry.

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