
Asking better questions

Guidelines for strengtheners and receiving churches

When strengtheners go into churches they need to do so asking good questions. This document sets out some examples of how to do this. Receiving churches would also be wise to be alert to these questions.

1. WHO AM I TO THEM?

When serving as a strengthener into churches it is essential to clarify how that church perceives the strengthener. What kind of relationship is this?

- ▶ Is the strengthener a gift to this church who is being asked simply to make a one-off contribution in a particular area?
- ▶ Is the strengthener a coach to this church who is providing longer term help in some area? [NB This contribution will probably not be primarily worked out through ministry in a church service.]
- ▶ Is the strengthener oversight to this church who is the first port of call when big decisions are being made?

Another way of picturing this is the family language of friends, brothers and fathers.

- ▶ A friend is welcomed into a church on an ad hoc basis to offer help, encouragement and ideas. A church can happily welcome them, receive from them and enjoy times together, without extending expectations of them beyond that visit or specific investment.
- ▶ A brother has a closer relationship with the church and would be expected to be around and involved in key family moments, such as the appointment of elders. Our expectation is that all partner churches can identify these brotherly gifts from within the hub they are part of. These gifts should develop a growing relationship with the elders, wider leadership team and congregation.
- ▶ A father exercises more authority in the church, and while not supplanting the elders, would be received as an authoritative voice. Some of our churches have an ongoing relationship with the person who played the initial role as founder and foundation layer; or with someone who didn't start the church but has had a long and fruitful fathering influence in it. This gives that person a vital and primary 'Pauline-like' role and relationship in that church's story. Theirs is, and continues to be, the primary voice and rich apostolic relationship that has been enjoyed over many years. This relationship should be invested in, invited in and developed for as long as the Lord allows.

2. WHO ARE THEY TO US?

Any strengthener has a capacity and limit to the number of churches they can help and serve. Therefore it is important that in any strengthening relationship the strengthener is clear what the expectations of the church are. Painful misunderstandings can arise if a church is looking for oversight and fathering when the strengthener is expecting simply to preach a Sunday message; and vice versa.

Strengtheners need to be clear about which churches they are helping, which they are befriending, and which they are truly partnering with.

3. WHAT IS THEIR TRINITARIAN EMPHASIS?

Every church tends to lean more towards one person of the Trinity than the others. Some churches are more 'Jesus' churches, others more 'Father', and some more 'Spirit'. This emphasis will show itself in the sermons preached, songs sung, and focus of prayer and ministry. Often this isn't a deliberately chosen emphasis but one that develops in response to the gifts and character of the elder team.

A role of a strengthener is to discern the Trinitarian emphasis in a church and help bring greater balance and appreciation of the fullness of God. Is a church so focussed on an intimate relationship with Jesus that it risks losing a sense of the greatness and grandeur of God? Is a church so Spirit-focussed that there is excellent prayer ministry and appreciation of the gifts but little application of the gospel? Is a church Father-centred in a way that reinforces the sense of family but perhaps misses joy in the Spirit? A good strengthener will see these trends and be able to speak into them.

4. WHAT IS THEIR CHURCH INSTINCT?

The Bible contains beautiful metaphors for the church: Family, Body, Army, Bride. Each of these metaphors is needed and brings out distinct elements in the life and ministry of a local church. Just as with the Trinitarian emphasis, every church tends

to lean more towards one or two of these metaphors than the others. Strengtheners need to discern this and help strengthen churches in those areas where they are less developed.

We want our churches to be characterised by a sense of healthy family. We want them to function as a body made up of different parts and abilities. Our churches need to have a sense of gospel militancy about them. And we want our churches to understand the great prophetic promise of our position as Christ's bride. Good strengtheners will breathe fresh life into those areas where a church is strong, and help them grow into those areas where they are weaker.

5. WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE OF GOD'S GRACE?

There is a key distinction between flattery and encouragement. Flattery is in the end hollow and meaningless; it's like feeding on sugar. Encouragement is meaty and purposeful. No one can suffer from too much encouragement.

When going into a church, strengtheners should be intentionally looking for those things that are commendable – all the signs of God's grace, whatever they may be. These things need to be encouraged. Speaking encouragement into these things can be the surest way to see a flagging church gain fresh energy. Encouragement can be the best way of helping a church persevere.

Bringing encouragement also creates a context in which churches can be warned or challenged. Strengtheners are far more likely to gain a hearing when correcting something in a church if they have already established a foundation of encouragement. Search out the evidence of God's grace.

6. WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO GROWTH?

In the grace of God there are things churches do that can either facilitate or limit growth. Factors such as venue, vision, leaders, finance, and capacity all play a role in the extent to which a church is growing, or not.

Strengtheners can help identify these factors in a way which is often more difficult for those in the church. Very often we are blind to things in our own house that someone with a fresh pair of eyes spots immediately.

While calling out the evidence of God's grace in a church, strengtheners also need to help a church see the things that are limiting growth, and which can be adjusted. Is it a capacity issue – is the quality of hosting or worship putting people off? Is it a leadership issue – are the elders not themselves committed to outreach and growth?

These conversations are not always the easiest to have, so it is important that churches give strengtheners permission to have them.

7. WHAT IS THEIR HISTORICAL PRAXIS TIMELINE?

Crisis changes praxis. Every church goes through seasons of crisis. This might be leadership transition, a building programme, serious illness, or some other event or factor that causes a church to make a course change. A wise strengthener will ask questions that help provide this context, and a wise church will want to help a strengthener understand it. Knowing some of this hinterland is a significant help in a strengthener being able to discern how to connect with and serve a church. No friendship is complete without an appreciation of one another's histories and this dynamic holds true in the relationship between strengthener and church.

8. WHAT IS THEIR DECISION MAKING CULTURE?

Different churches operate with different decision-making habits. In some teams there will be a clear, strong, leader who tends to make quick and decisive calls that the rest of the team and church follow. In other churches the process will be much more consultative. A strengthener needs to understand this culture both to avoid unnecessary clashes and to help facilitate change where that is needed.

9. WHO ELSE WOULD DO THEM GOOD?

While some strengthening relationships will be long-lasting, strong and deep, we don't want to build overdependence on any one relationship. One of the most helpful things a strengthener can do is to provide a church with other connections – to open doors to other gifts and ministries that will further strengthen them and increase their gospel effectiveness.

10. WHO COULD THEY DO GOOD TO?

Similarly, a good strengthener will look for ways in which to encourage the grace on one church to be shared with others. This church-to-church strengthening is a vital component of our partnership.

11. WHO ARE THE PRIMARY VOICES THEY ARE LISTENING TO?

A good strengthener will discern the influences that are significant in a church. What podcasts are the elders listening to? Which books are they reading? Who are their most significant theological influences?

These outside influences can be very helpful for an eldership and a church yet we must exercise caution; if a church has too many teachers and not enough brothers and fathers. In a time of crisis it is a genuine strengthener who will pick up the phone at 3am and disrupt their schedule to catch a plane – the podcaster or author won't do that.

12. WHAT DOES THIS CHURCH MOST NEED?

When going into a church it is easy for a strengthener to fall into the trap of mapping what is happening in their own church onto this church. Rather than doing that, strengtheners need to be alert to the particular context and issues of the church

they are seeking to strengthen. In that sense, all strengthening is cross-cultural. Good strengtheners will learn how to listen (in the broadest sense) to what is happening in a church and then, by the grace of God, bring their own gifts and experience to bear in the most helpful way. Just as a wise father does not treat his children as identikit replicas of one another, a wise strengthener will appreciate and work with the particularities of each church they serve.

13. WHAT ARE THE CURRENT OR LONG-TERM SENSES, ENCOURAGEMENTS, PICTURES OR PROPHETIC WORDS THAT THE ELDERS ARE STEWARDING FOR THIS CHURCH?

Oftentimes these have helped to define or clarify who God has uniquely called a specific church to be and should have ongoing bearing on how the elders lead. You may want to press further to understand what some of these are, how they came about, how they have played a part in their story. You may then find an opportunity to explore how these words are currently shaping their leadership, or how they may need to be reminded of these and called to fresh courage or clarity as an eldership, or even the church as a whole.



