



# How the wider family works (apostolic team)

*This document was written as part of the 2017 review of the Core Commitments, by the International Apostolic Team (LAT). It describes an apostolic team, its focus, and how it relates to local churches, to help clarify the relationship between local leaders, apostolic teams and the LAT. It sets out a biblical pattern for this leadership, and clarifies what we see as 'normative' practice for churches in the S&L international family of families, while being sensitive to national and cultural variations.*

*This relationship is vital, and so we understand that a church is only a part of the S&L family if it recognises and receives an apostle and his team. That apostolic team in turn will connect healthily with other teams, and to the LAT, as described in this document*

## 1. What is an apostolic team?

*This summary will be unpacked more fully in the rest of this document, but serves as an initial working definition.*

An 'apostolic team' is sometimes known as an 'Ephesians 4 team', 'translocal team', 'regional team' or 'fivefold team'. In its use referring to the team, 'apostolic' means the missional, pioneering and going DNA that is essential, and does not simply refer to apostles. Whatever title is used, it is important that such a team:

- *Is usually led by an apostle (at least, a leader with some apostolic gifting, or where not, supported by apostolic gifting from outside)*
- *Includes several other gifts, including at least some of pastor, teacher, prophet and evangelist (Eph. 4:11)*
- *Trains and releases others: 'equipping God's people for works of service' (Eph. 4:12)*
- *Ideally, includes men and women, mature and younger leaders*
- *Works translocally (beyond the local) serving an 'apostolic sphere' (2Co. 10:13) of churches, church plants and new territory (this document uses 'sphere' but it might also be called a 'region', 'zone' or 'cluster').*
- *Relates well to other apostolic teams, including, within the S&L family, the IAT. Depending on its maturity, the team may need input from more senior leaders outside of the team.*

## 2. Ephesians 4 ministry

Ephesians 4 ministries are essential to local churches becoming all that Jesus intends them to be. They were given by Jesus to equip the church until it comes to complete maturity as a bride prepared for her husband (Eph. 4:11-13, 5:25-27). Receiving apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers into local churches is therefore *essential*, not optional! Our roots are in a global movement of the Spirit to renew the understanding and practice of these gifts, and now we delight to see many networks of churches in which apostolic teams are both desired and able to function freely.

## (a) Six priorities

As we read the NT descriptions of apostolic teams, we see they fulfil a number of key functions:

1. **Extension**
  - a. Continually stimulating the call to mission
  - b. Leading in breakthrough and preaching the Gospel in new settings
  - c. Supporting churches in evangelism, church planting, and missional initiatives
2. **Supernatural impartation**
  - a. Ensuring local churches continue to pursue and experience Spirit-filled supernatural life
  - b. Imparting and helping others experience the power of God
3. **Foundation-laying**
  - a. Helping Christians become mature (baptising, filling with the Spirit, deliverance, etc.)
  - b. Establishing people *together* in Christ as church communities
  - c. Helping laying doctrinal, relational and vision foundations, through teaching and envisioning
  - d. Reviewing what is in place and what is missing, and attending to lacks and weaknesses
  - e. Advice at key points of development
4. **Leadership training and appointment**
  - a. Helping identify and then appointing elders
  - b. Helping identify and train future leaders
5. **Problem-solving**
  - a. Supporting churches through problems, e.g. relational, sin or vision
  - b. Guarding against false teaching and helping with doctrinal disagreement
  - c. Regular engagement with the leader, local team and church, not just crisis management
6. **Promoting unity**
  - a. Intervening in relational difficulties that are unable to be resolved locally
  - b. Concern for relationships with the wider church and its leaders

We often use a simple arrow graphic to teach these points, highlighting that extension and impartation of the supernatural should be at the leading edge. While apostolic teams will vary in their sphere of work (for example, are they working in a nation with an established church, or in a pioneering situation), all apostolic teams will have a concern to create a movement of healthy, growing, missional churches, not simply sustain and support existing churches.

## (b) Keeping a balance

- **Apostolic and pastoral:** We have to keep a healthy combination of the development of local churches and the call beyond. At one extreme we could simply be caring for existing churches; at the other, we could become simply a missionary movement, with no care for existing leaders and churches. We have a concern of caring for local churches and their leaders, while also maintaining a constant concern for 'regions beyond' (Romans 15). We see this in the ministry of Paul, who was always thinking about the call beyond, as well as providing ongoing support for the churches that had already been established.
- **Inspired and coordinated activity:** We see Paul sending others into churches, as well as asking churches to receive certain people to come and labour among them. There was a continuous flow of people ministering in and through churches, not in a disorganised way but with coordinated efforts of the team. He was strategic, yet open to the Holy Spirit at times disturbing and redirecting his plans. Liaising with local elders, apostolic teams may coordinate activities, including helping determine what is needed and then sending various ministries and teams into churches; coordinating mission and extension activity to stimulate and train leaders; travelling with emerging leaders, like Timothy and Titus, for further training.

### 3. Relationship is key

While some would label us a network, our core vision is to be ‘a family on mission’. Networks can tend to function on a more organizational level, while we desire and pursue relationships and ‘family’, because we see that *everything in the Body of Christ is relational*. Paul had a constant desire to build people together in family relationships because he understood God’s design for his people (Col. 2:1-4; Eph. 1:9, 2:19-22, 3:3-9).

Therefore, there was always team as Paul travelled! There seemed to be core people closely joined and working together, as well as others who were involved in short term assignments. We see women working alongside men in these teams, along with younger trainees.

#### (a) Appointed and joined by God

The NT gives insight to how apostolic teams and local churches relate. A key issue is a strong sense of divine relational connection (“joining”) that allows the various teams to interact in a healthy way even over sometimes challenging issues.

The phrase “the apostles and the elders” occurs several times in the NT, perhaps most importantly in Acts 15, where apostles and elders met to consider difficult theological and practical issues arising from the unexpected extension of their mission. As churches are established, translocal teams continue to work together with churches and leaders to solve problems, understand God’s agenda for each church and pursue the wider mission. (In our generation, similar issues arising from mission might include how we deal with churches forming among Muslim Background Believers, or how we incorporate new Christians in existing same-sex relationships and with children. African churches already grapple with difficult issues where polygamous families come to faith.)

The local church views the apostolic team not as ministry partners or special guests, but as fathers and mothers from whom they receive God’s authority and care. The apostolic team cares deeply for the churches, as fathers and mothers, with a posture of ‘your good at my expense’. The apostolic team does not ‘lord it over’ or dictate to the local church, while the local church seeks to submit to the godly leadership being offered.

It is sometimes asked who is *really* the final authority in the local church – the elders or the apostolic team? In the NT, some strong statements from apostles and their teams reveal a direct authority in the local church (3Jn 9-10; 1Cor. 4:14-21; 2Cor. 11:28, 13:10), which the apostles sometimes exercised by addressing letters, not just to local church leaders, but directly to the whole local church. However, this apostolic authority prefers to appeal rather than to command (2Cor. 4:2), because the goal is really a partnership in ministry. If we ask who is *really* in charge, it’s rather like asking whether a child needs a mother or a father! Rather, we value both and keep working relationally to arrive at a point of unity.

How are apostolic teams appointed? Where the team were involved in planting or adopting the church relationship will be strong, and the question is straightforwardly answered. When circumstances require that a new team gets involved with a church, or there are significant changes of personnel in either team, it is important that there is fresh agreement to walk together. The principles and attitudes described below (section 4) and in the document *Adopting Churches into the Family* will also help us.

## (b) A maturing relationship

In 1Co 4:15 Paul speaks of the apostle as a fathering ministry, working alongside the church leadership to bring maturity in leadership. Rather like a ‘parent’, his goal was to bring the ‘child’ to maturity. Paul’s relationship with Timothy *continued* even as Timothy went to lead Ephesus, a significant apostolic base.

The apostolic is therefore not a ‘super-elder’ or episcopal ‘bishop’, but an equipping ministry who comes in and impacts churches, then leaves them to work it out. (This is a challenge in our generation, where instant communication means that elders can become overly dependent on apostolic teams, and so not grow to maturity in God.)

Apostolic teams are formed to serve local churches, either for an occasion, for a specific task or over an extended period of time. We are not looking for a one-size-fits-all model, but to find the mind of God for a particular church or mission.

In particular, the ministry needs of churches vary according the life-stage of that church:

1. *A new plant* needs much more regular and on-the-ground investment and foundation-laying.
2. *A developing church* needs elders to be appointed and trained to take proper responsibility.
3. *A mature church* needs ongoing provocation to ‘think big’ and to release resources to others.
4. *A church in transition* needs more support, training of new leaders, fresh attention to foundations.
5. *A church in difficulty* needs careful and practical help to find a way through its problems.

## (c) Relationship between generations

In NT teams we see emerging leaders (e.g. Timothy, Titus, Mark) working alongside more established leaders (e.g. Paul, Barnabas). This inter-generational working is vital for training, for multiplication and for succession. There are several attitudes that will make it effective:

1. As in natural families, older leaders must be eager to *train and release* sons and daughters, entrusting to them what God has given. They want their children to grow and develop.
2. Younger leaders must understand *stewardship*. Leaders are stewards, but God is the owner (Mt. 20:8; Lk. 12:42, 16:1-8; Tit. 1:7). Every generation continues the stewardship God has given the previous generations, and has a dual purpose: to serve God’s calling for their own generation (Acts 13:36), and to pass on the stewardship to the next generation (Ps. 145:4; Eph. 3:21).
3. We must continually talk together, asking *what should be changed, and what must not*. God’s mission does not change. While methods, function, and leaders may change, each generation is responsible to move God’s mission forward.

## 4. How do we work in our family of churches?

In this section we look first at some key attitudes in our relationships. We then look at how apostolic teams and elders work together to find agreement, and how we work across our international family.

### (a) Principles

Firstly, how do we want the family to operate normally?

- We want to be more than just friends – we want to foster family relationships that do each other good.
- We want to relate honestly and openly, in order to create a culture of care, challenge and change.
- We are determined to be accountable, receiving each other such that ‘iron sharpens iron’.
- We believe that “*every Pastor needs a pastor*” (i.e. every senior leader also needs to receive personal oversight and care).
- We believe that every church needs to relate well to an apostolic team.
- We value diversity but also want a measure of common purpose, practices and priorities.

- We operate under the leadership of the IAT, a council of national and sphere leaders who walk together in interdependence. Their authority is the authority of agreement, and they agree to talk together before making any changes in their own sphere that would affect international relationships.
- We have minimal central financing. Rather we encourage a culture in which churches financially honour the apostolic team and other ministry they receive, as well as releasing those ministries to expansion and mission.

## (b) Attitudes

- **We recognise that apostolic teams have authority from God:** The NT letters show us that the apostles and their teams made no apologies for exercising their authority with the churches, when they had concerns. They carried God's authority to intervene in issues like heresy, unresolved sin, and various local practices that cause disruption (1Cor. 4:14-17, 11:16, 16:10; 1Thess. 3:2-6; 1Tim. 1, 3). Although NT apostles placed a high value on relationships with local churches, their authority does not simply arise from a good relationship, but from their calling by God, which was then recognised by churches.
- **We act with humility, recognising that our culture shapes our perspective:** As God's Kingdom expands globally, cultural and generational differences will become apparent. We are all shaped by our culture, upbringing and experience! We must avoid the attempt to make Biblical truth submit to culture, and instead exercise sound principles of interpretation to determine what revelation was generationally and culturally shaped and what transcends culture. For example, as Paul and Peter (and others) grappled with the changing revelation of the gospel and its scope as they moved in the Gentile mission, they were willing to submit their theology to other mature leaders in the Lord rather than acting unilaterally. They were willing to be direct in addressing any problems they saw (Gal 2:11-14). For us, this includes more senior leaders, as well as learning from theologians of other cultures and generations.
- **We allow for diversity, and are sensitive to the effect of our actions on our whole family.** We are not seeking to impose a standard way of doing church; rather we seek to be a truly international family, understanding and honouring the various cultural expressions of God's family across our international family, while challenging one other to ensure we are building biblically and in line with our principles. Diversity will naturally lead to some tensions in our wider family, and so we wish to remain interdependent and accountable. If our perspectives or plans will impact negatively the wider family, we will not act in a unilateral way, and will want to talk to others within the family.

## (c) How we make decisions together in S&L

We have seen that 'apostles and elders' often came to decisions together, in Acts 15-like councils. In similar instances today, the leaders involved will gather and, with the aid of Holy Spirit, will seek the mind of God over the issue to bring resolution. Where doctrine is under discussion, such gatherings will naturally include those gifted as teachers. In the end, after a patient process, the acknowledged chairperson may need to make a ruling like James did in Acts 15:13-18 and seek agreement from the gathering.

The model of Acts 15 is helpful for showing how a council of apostles and elders should work out their differences through prayerful dialogue at national and regional levels.

*S&L faces a further question, which is how our various apostolic families around the world are to relate and to work through their differences. What do we do when an apostle and his sphere work through an important issue in a relational way and reach some conclusion, but then another apostle/sphere disagree with that decision or reach a different conclusion?*

Early church history may give us some precedent. In early church history, church councils (similar to the Acts 15 Council) met separately in various regions, but then communicated their decisions to each other with a view to securing common policy and discipline. They recognised their mutuality and interdependence.

In 2017 we clarified the following principles for our S&L family:

1. **We make decisions relationally, through dialogue.** Our commitment to walk together means we are not free to simply act unilaterally, but for the sake of family and relationship we will talk and pray until we come to a decision together. In other words, through relationship I am aware of those things that matter to, cause concern to or might offend my friends.
2. **We facilitate a structured review conversation every 7-10 years,** or as prompted by a significant change of leadership. As a complex and diverse international family, this helps us ensure we are still walking together in agreement. This review will involve the IAT and national/sphere apostolic teams, and other teams as necessary, depending on the issues being considered.
3. **We write down our Core Commitments** to clarify and explain our current international common understandings and shared commitments (of doctrine, values, practices, purpose and mission).
4. **Churches coming into relationship will, as part of the process of adoption, discuss our Core Commitments.** Significant variance from these should cause further conversation between the adopting team and the would-be-adopted church, until such time as adoption can proceed with agreement.
5. **Any sphere or church wishing to diverge from one of these Core Commitments** should talk it out with their sphere team. Through relational discussion, it may be decided that the matter needs referring to the apostolic team that oversees their sphere team, or to the IAT, depending on several factors including: (a) whether it changes a core principle or point of theology; (b) how it affects others in the family and our relationships together; (c) to what extent it would be seen to set an unhelpful precedent for other churches.
6. **If substantial disagreement remains,** particularly if it is impeding our mission or is considered to be a matter of primary doctrine, we may decide that we can no longer walk together in agreement and relationship. If the ruling agreed by the majority cannot be adhered to by any leaders, apostolic teams or churches due to a violation of conscience, it may necessitate a practical separation. This would be extreme and only pursued after careful and prayerful consideration. The overseeing apostolic team will normally consult with IAT before pursuing this course of action.

We are grateful that God has helped us walk together as an international family of families for many years, and trust that these guidelines will help us grow and guard good relationships as the family gets bigger and more diverse.