

February 2007

Understanding NewFrontiers' thinking

Church:

NewFrontiers is more committed to the concept of the church triumphant than to the church incarnate. In practical terms, this means that as a movement, they will do anything to further their own vision of the church and rationalise any negative consequences on the human level as spiritual opposition. They believe they have the definitive "New Testament" way of doing things. Overall, inter-church activities exist only to the extent that they are seen as an opportunity of promoting this or being of strategic interest. (There are local exceptions, but leaders are liable to get into trouble if they are seen doing as much with other local leaders as with NFI).

Authority:

At the end of the day, authority within NewFrontiers works from the top down with no checks and balances. Terry Virgo has supreme authority and there is no way either procedurally or theologically that this can be challenged. This is not self-evident in the day-to-day life of NewFrontiers but it is the bottom line.

The 2003 financial reports of New Frontiers International Limited (available via the Charity Commission website) state on page 3 that "the power of appointment and removal of Trustees is vested in the Apostolic Team". This line has been removed in subsequent years, but there is nothing to suggest anything different. In the mean time the Apostolic Team as such has been disbanded in favour of an ad hoc team which has no terms of appointment, mandate, or removal, leaving Terry as the sole leader (though the team was never really in a position to challenge him from what I know). (Note: the trust gives a large part of its income to the Clarendon Trust, which is apparently the trust which pays Terry Virgo's salary, so the latter is not self-evident from the New Frontiers financial report).

In theological terms, NewFrontiers believes in delegated authority (though they may not use the term). While individual leaders may feel a personal sense of accountability to their flock, theologically they are accountable only to those "over them" and not to those they serve. Ultimately they consider churches should be administered as those with anointing see fit.

I suggest that any doubt on this point can be resolved by asking a leader whether, other things being equal, he would feel more accountable to Terry or to the congregation.

Cognitive dissonance

I am using this to mean simultaneously having two opposing discourses. This is most evident in the field of relationships.

Friendships:

Much is made of relationships based on friendship, friendly confrontation and sharing. The atmosphere is often relaxed, informal and friendly but this is at odds with (and often conceals) the understanding of authority outlined above. In fact these relationships are not equal but always superior-subordinate. Accountability and sharing are not mutual but upward and confrontation is only downward. Anyone who tries to turn this round will soon be in trouble for their "rebellious attitude" or "problem with authority". Some leaders are skilled at imparting what appears to be a confidence which prompts a much more serious one in return. Friendship amongst leaders will have a strongly utilitarian angle and in 99% of cases commitment to NewFrontiers will take prevalence over any notion of friendship however deep this may seem while things are going well.

Teamwork:

Much is made of working in teams and coming to joint decisions. But in the words of one of Terry's consultants, Terry's idea of a team is that when he says "jump", your response should be "how high"? Those who survive in teams and rise to prominence are not team players but those who have a flair for saying what pleases the leader and not stepping out of line. Young people are promoted at dizzying speed, partly to make them feel insecure and thus become more dependent on the leader.

Informality:

Formal procedure of all kinds is mocked and/or frowned upon in the name of genuine relationships, but in fact its absence serves to remove principles and practices to the minds of the leaders and thus any hope of calling them to account. However, NewFrontiers is extremely careful about what it puts in writing and where (for example, whether coincidentally or not, the link to their accounts has been removed from their own site since I flagged the issues above though it is still available on the Charity Commission website as required by law; they also monitor and favourably edit Wikipedia's entries on NewFrontiers and Terry Virgo).

Discussion:

NewFrontiers sometimes gives the impression of opening a forum in which issues are up for discussion. However there is no real sense for dialogue at the level of senior leadership: such arenas are to advance NewFrontiers doctrine. If they look like losing ground, they soon take steps to curtail the debate (for instance, Adrian Warnock's blog <http://www.adrian.warnock.info/> was 'discussing' the role of women until some faced with some serious theological challenges, at which point responses to the blog became moderated. Other non-NFI posts display rejected contributions whose only fault is to be in disagreement with the line presented).

Development:

Development plans like those found in management practices do not provide fresh perspectives or practical ways to improve, but serve as an excuse to expose "character failings" and re-assert the supremacy of leadership and the need to submit to it to improve – though the key to this is never communicated.

Mentoring

In addition to issues arising from the above, the biggest danger in mentoring is making husbands more committed to their mentors and "the church" than to their wives. Male headship is promoted doctrinally. Men are encouraged not to share everything with their wives but to do so with their "disciplers". The end result of this can be that the discipler knows something damaging about the "disciplee" which their wife does not know. This may not be used explicitly as a means of pressure but it reinforces commitment to the institution over commitment to the marriage and pretty much guarantees explosive results should something emerge. For a non-christian, fictional look at this and other issues raised here, John Grisham's book *The Firm* and the accompanying film are instructive. (It should be added that leaders generally have absolutely no concept of professional secrecy in counselling situations, or at best consider this waived in the presence of a higher spiritual authority).