

be prepared

We all want to see new recruits but are we equipped for what lies ahead?

Robert Baden-Powell's famous motto 'be prepared' is as sound today as it was in 1908 when he founded the Scouting movement. A valuable reminder to both the boys who joined, but also to the leaders whose job it was to care for and nurture those in their charge. The same is true of Pastors today faced with new believers, the only exception being their Christian recruits can be of any age and bring with them substantial amounts of 'baggage'.

We all share the desire to see people come to Christ, join a church and start to grow. Some of us pray for revival! But do we really know what we are asking God for, and therefore if we are even remotely prepared for the stresses, strains and inconveniences that would accompany such a move of God?

Just one new believer can bring so many problems with him or her into church - and if we are not ready for this we may *'fall down on the job.'* They may drift back into **the world.**

In my short books *'Caring for new Christians'* and *'Growing as a new Christian'* I seek to prepare both believers and new Christians for what might happen post mission and/or post conversion. It is said "revival is evangelist's heaven and pastor's hell". Having occupied both roles I have gained insights from both perspectives.

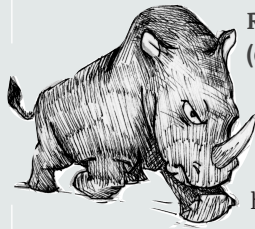
'Church' is an alien environment with its own unspoken culture, and even language. We do well to understand how

best to ease this transition, both for converts and existing church members.

The Orphan Spirit

Owing to our increasingly broken society, the fragmentation of the family unit and particularly the absence or abdication of fathers, new Christians arrive wounded into God's Kingdom. It's folly not to anticipate and plan for this. After all, don't we ourselves still have struggles, even though we have been in the 'sausage machine' for years? It can be helpful to use the vectors of sonship and the orphan spirit to illustrate these issues. So many discipleship and church issues really originate in these orphan and rejection issues.

We all need healing for rejection; this applies to all of us, not just to new Christians. Actually, new Christians sometimes locate the unhealed (orphan) parts of us, for they have fresh eyes. The caricatures below show three specific extreme rejection reactions which need cleansing and healing. Most people will have a combination of these. It's worth saying we are assuming here Christian leadership that is godly, albeit human and imperfect.



Rhinoceros (Outright rebellion)

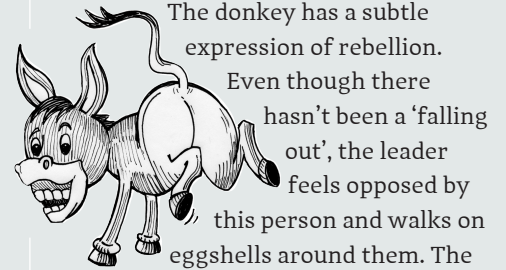
Every leader will relate to the 'rhino'. No matter how conciliatory and supportive we are with a 'rhino' he will turn and charge with lowered horn at the slightest correction or perceived slight. The rhino doesn't care who he goes on his way to the target and always assumes his aggression is completely justified. The rhino often has a following of people he has brought round to his view of things. If he smells a whiff of fear, he'll keep charging until he gets everything his own way. Some pastors have never recovered from a 'rhino' charge.

How do we overcome?

We must bind up the fear that is being projected towards us. The rhino may not

be as confident and bold as he or she seems and standing up to them will almost certainly expose this fact. Still, it is disconcerting when the horn is charging towards us. It is important to confront the rhino early; *'I will not be bullied. I obey God not man'*. What is tolerated, dominates! We are storing up trouble for ourselves if we let a rhino assert control in church, even if they are a new Christian.

The Donkey (Passive aggression)



The donkey has a subtle expression of rebellion.

Even though there hasn't been a 'falling out', the leader feels opposed by this person and walks on eggshells around them. The donkey is stubborn, they scream and dig their heels in about a matter of theology or admitting that it was their shoes that brought mud onto the new church carpet. They dislike and distrust authority of any kind.

Donkeys don't consider themselves awkward and will initially appear cooperative but then kick up a stink at the last moment. They are as disruptive as the rhino, subtly operating in the background. The donkey consumes a lot of the pastor's time, but it's always other people who are the problem! Other church members don't realise how much trouble the leader is having behind scenes with the donkey; they are shocked when the pastor snaps at them.

How do we overcome?

We must not come under the control of the donkey. Even if we bend to every demand, we will never satisfy them, but we must keep loving and extending grace to them. They must be welcome to join in with our activities on the understanding they will submit to leadership. The donkey is welcome but manipulative behaviour is not.



The Ghost (Withdrawal / avoidance)

An enthusiastic convert who seemed to be making great strides, suddenly and without warning,

disappears under the radar. Phone messages are ignored, text messages unanswered, commitments broken. They scurry away when greeted by a church member on the High Street. The unspoken message is 'leave me alone'.

I have been down this road. Being so eager to follow up a decision for Christ I was in danger of becoming a stalker to a man who clearly didn't want to be followed up. Endless phone messages, texts all ignored and the door unanswered when I called. Eventually I realised I should pour all my energy into prayers.

Often a ghost waits until they are no longer being 'pursued' and re-emerge when least expected. They are astonished if any reference is made to their completely disappearing for months, even years, and deny any knowledge of all the attempts at contact. They may imply they were the one that was dropped.

How do we overcome?

Welcome the ghost back with open arms, but gently refuse to accept their narrative. At the Spirit's leading there may eventually be a moment to probe into what was really going on, and if there's a way to help. Often an orphan finds community so threatening, they withdraw for a while. They have experienced rejection before and have learnt to reject first! They need to be loved consistently but challenged graciously about withdrawal, which is a form of rebellion!

We mustn't give ultimatums, and a good dose of patience may be needed to track through seasons when they disappear again. If we keep loving the Ghost, we are breaking down the lie that God and the church will reject them. Deep down part of them 'wants' to be rejected so

that their personal narrative of rejection is unchallenged.

Finding healing in community

Most, if not all, emotional and psychological wounds come through broken relationships and communities. God in His infinite wisdom has ordained that healing should flow through the same channel. We are designed for community, and healthy relationships provide the environment for us to grow and transform, discovering our Christ given identity and purpose. The new Christian needs this like oxygen.

For the new Christian to consolidate any healing they receive long-term, they must stay in community, even when it's messy. If they isolate themselves, as often happens with Christians, it is doubtful whether they can maintain their healing (or their faith for that matter) over time. For instance, if God heals them of social anxiety and then they withdraw from church, they are not giving God the opportunity to renew their mind and transform their behaviour around people who they can trust with their struggles, those who will pray for them.

A spirit of sonship (boundaries and blessings)

We all need healthy boundaries in our lives; they make us feel safe and protected. They give life to us, and the people God surrounds us with. Even the 'rhino' and 'donkey' who kick against them secretly desire them deep down. Consider how many young men and women from dysfunctional homes gravitate to the ascetic discipline of the army. This draconian discipline gives them a sense of security that they crave.

By our example we teach the new Christian what healthy and sustainable relationships are. They may have had bad or non-existent role models. This isn't their fault, but we must not allow them to trample over our boundaries

because that is not good for anyone. In taking such precautions we are, in any case, reflecting current secular 'best practice' in what is now generally known as safeguarding. Many new Christians will understand, and even expect this.

When I was a pastor, I tried to avoid any scenario where I might be alone with a woman. I still do now, especially with a younger woman and particularly if there is any prayer or counselling involved. I enlist another trusted person, preferably a woman, to support. Some might view this as excessive, but it benefits everyone. Mostly it isn't essential, but the boundary protects me from the potential one time where there is another agenda. It is easy to uphold because there is a precedent, which avoids giving the message, 'I don't trust YOU!'

Consider how our media sitcoms and reality shows regularly involve house shares with teenage girls and boys, even room sharing. The polar-opposite of fleeing youthful lusts! The temptation and confusion this causes is utterly avoidable. As we understand the submission of our wills to God's will, we relate to healthy boundaries as a blessing and not a hindrance in our lives. Their purpose is to keep us free and blessed as sons!

An excerpt from 'Caring for new Christians' by Dan Holland, which together with 'Growing as a new Christian' for the new believer, are available from April 1st from: www.christian-publications-int.com

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