

Pioneering Mission and Authoritative Dissent

It's always great to get in conversation with stimulating people who understand the dynamics of mission in the church and all that's in play and at stake when pioneering is needed. One of the things that happens is that words and phrases get used that state a concept or an experience that you've always been aware of but have struggled to describe. With new words comes an opportunity for reflection.



Recently we had cause to reflect on the concept of “dissenter.” It's in two parts, **“pathfinding dissenter”** and **“authority dissenter.”**

They're not terms we've coined. You'll find reference to it books such as Arbuckle's *Refounding the Church: Dissent for Leadership*, which I haven't read but plan to. It's in a whole bunch of pioneering ministry material, which you can google for, but which I also haven't read. All that I say below are my thoughts, capturing our experience through in these terms.

The concept of **“pathfinding dissenter”** is readily grasped. Everyone understands that for something new to happen there needs to be a form of leadership that is constructively *discontent* with the status quo and simply refuses to agree that the way things are always done is the best way forward. This form of leadership, when done well, pokes and prods, questioning assumptions and the cultural “givens.” The discontent is entered into and wrestled with, preferably in a gathering community of the like-hearted, and a pathway forward is discovered and

followed.

To others, it may not look like a path. Indeed, it is sometimes the task of the dissenting explorers to “toss their caps” over an impossibly high wall so they can find their way.

But this is why *dissent* is a good word to use. It’s a disagreement with the presumed impossible, it blazes a trail, it gets new things done.

Gill and I have had the joy of walking with pathfinding dissenters. For us, the phrase was “damn the torpedoes” and for an all-too-brief season it was the way of new things.

It’s the term “**authority dissenter**” that has intrigued me.

But, of course, it makes sense also. The authority dissenter is the one who interfaces between the pathfinder and organisational structures. *They have authority, and they recognise, release, cover and connect with the constructive pathfinding dissenters.*

They have institutional authority but a pioneering spirit.

They also share the same constructive discontent. They also dissent from the cultural presumptions of the status quo.

They also understand viscerally that new paths ahead need to be found and forged. And they champion and support the pathfinders, without getting in their way. They take their hands off, create the space, and protect where needed.

An ineffective nerdy analogy perhaps: It’s the wisdom of Gandalf, and then Aragorn, who allow the ringbearer and his friends to forge their own path, while they get on with the jobs that need doing and the wars that need waging, all the while watching, believing, and drawing away the enemy fire.

Without the authority dissenter, the pathfinders will still go ahead – the pioneering spirit cannot easily be quenched – but they will do so disconnected. Their task will be harder and the pathfinders will struggle. But most importantly, the organisation will also be disconnected, without a way to

follow along the new ways forward, and with a diminished sense of “blessing and being blessed in return.”

The authority dissenter is a permission giver, but of a particular sort. Many effective leaders will hear proposals and the creative ones will give permission to make it happen.

But the authority dissenter doesn't just give permission to what can be known (“Go and do what you have said you will do.”), they give permission to the *unknown* (“Go, and may the Lord show you your path.”)

Authority dissenters can cover the pathfinders in all manner of ways, from providing resources, to dealing with and removing bureaucratic overheads, to bringing people into community with one another. They are the champions that justify the pioneers to whoever sticks their nose in, so that the pioneers are released from the ever-present weariness of having to justify every step (and mis-step) to eagle-eyed naysayers.

And here is an important dynamic: the authority dissenter does not demand primary loyalty. The relationship with pioneers is not that of patron-client. It is a parental-release dynamic.

The analogy is this: I expect a certain high degree of loyalty from my children. But as they forge their own path, those loyalties will rightly and appropriately shift, most clearly towards the formation of their own family.

In pioneering it is the same: as pathfinders scale their walls and go through fire together there will be a mutual loyalty which should not be tampered with. As a pioneer leader passes through trials and moves in the charism that necessarily follows, their chief loyalty will be towards those they serve and serve alongside.

At this point, without an authority dissenter, the organisation will try and claim it's prize, or like a clinging mother-in-law, try to put it in its place and demand its dues.

But the authority dissenter is there to make more room – the space given to the pioneer at the beginning of the journey is now extended to those who have been found at the end and along the way. Because it is clear: the new thing will expand in God's grace, and the old will either move and embrace it, reject and abandon it, or be cracked and broken by it.

The authority dissenter is there to be the point of embrace, taking upon themselves the points where it rubs and wears, mending the cracks, and helping the blessings flow both ways.

Gill and I have had "authority dissenters," whose authority was episcopal. It was a foundational blessing. In other ways, though, we've had to cover ourselves: arching our backs against church machinery that would squash the fragile new things that were growing. It's wearisome and wrong to run up and down the path, pushing with the pathfinders at one point, pushing back at the machinery at another.

My reflection concludes: The authority dissenter, the cover of the apostolically hearted, is not just important, it is essential. We look for innovative pioneers to push us outwards. But that's not enough. We must also incorporate into ourselves, and give authority to, those who can recognise, release, cover and connect with those who will do what we need to do next.