

Finishing Well: A Reflection on Leadership Transition

Ian and Judith Payne
Theologians Without Borders

Not all leaders get to choose the time at which they will away step from their responsibilities, and not all transitions at South Asian Institute for Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) in Bangalore, India, have gone well. However, after twenty-four years of involvement at SAIACS, the last ten years with Ian as Principal, we have left India and returned to New Zealand. In April 2018, we handed over the Principalship to Dr. Prabhu Singh. The following reflects on some of the leadership lessons we have learned in ministry and through the season of transition.

First, some background. SAIACS is one of the premier evangelical theological educational institutions in South Asia. It awards Master's and Doctoral degrees to a unique group of Christian leaders. We arrived in 1994 for Ian to study at the Master's level. With our three daughters, we stayed for another four years on the faculty team. After completing more research in theology, Ian worked as Principal of Pathways College in New Zealand for five years. He then handed the baton to Craig Barrow. All that time, he visited SAIACS to teach for a month each year. Studying at SAIACS revolutionized our perspective on what God is doing around the world and on how ordinary Kiwis like us can play a part in that work.

One of the most important lessons we have learned about leadership in theological education: finishing well begins by beginning well!

For us, beginning well meant first of all *respecting our colleagues*. It was scary to arrive at these institutions without all the answers, but that was better appreciated than arriving with them! In every work setting our colleagues have much to offer. Good leaders look to draw from the team's experience. For us this was vital to success.

Second, beginning well meant leading by *forming consensus*. In a land known for unchallengeable rajas and gurus, pursuing leadership through consensus is pretty counter-cultural. Just after we arrived, the whole team brainstormed for several days on what our vision and goals were. Not all the good ideas came from us! For

instance, a stakeholder consultation had already been planned before our arrival. Linking with a nearby government-recognized university was another suggestion. Management by objectives was suggested by an external consultant at the time, but we discovered it worked well because collective objective-setting built the team's confidence. We were committed to transparency, not overruling faculty council decisions afterwards. Respect for colleagues meant taking delegation seriously. We were not micro-managing every task. This meant letting a team shape a leadership summit or team retreat. Heads of departments had responsibility for their course planning and communication with visiting teachers. Giving responsibility is a huge encouragement to team members.

Finishing well also depends on *keeping relationships sweet* – as far as it depends on us. At times, we had to decide consciously that keeping friendships was more important than achieving targets. Loyalty to family or tribe is a deep value in Indian culture. On the other hand, failure to deliver something expected can lead to personal enmities. We had to avoid being seen as favoring “our own tribe.” Facing someone with their disappointing performance in a private annual performance review so that they could grow could not be allowed to bring shame on their value as a team player. When the SAIACS Press Manager reported a profit for the first time, his achievement was praised; on the other hand, when the academic office omitted to consult a Head of Department before arranging a student meeting to clarify course options (which included options in his department), the failing belonged to us all and ultimately to the Principal. An early apology avoided deeper holes being dug! A brief daily communication and prayer built a sense of belonging in the team. We found that socializing with our co-workers was important, just as much as praying with them. A monthly prayer friendship with a local Indian leader helped Ian keep perspective. It is true that no matter how you try to build relationships, some people aim to criticize – even attack. However, we learned that God is well able to vindicate and that defensive maneuvers are best left to others.

Finishing well begins by *foreseeing our replacement*. As outsiders, it was important for us to say that we were privileged to be leaders among the local leaders but that our long-term goal was to replace ourselves with Indian leaders. For example, after stepping in during an emergency, Judith became SAIACS's Chief Administrative Officer. Ten months later, she handed the role to a new recruit, Jonathan, who executes the role incredibly well. Judith also took responsibility for managing hospitality, especially for the forty or so international visitors we had each year. Eighteen months before we left, she identified a local faculty member's wife as having the potential to take over. First, Sheela worked with Judith, and then Judith worked alongside Sheela. By the time we left, Sheela was confident being the Campus Hostess.

Finishing well depends on *recognizing who owns the ministry*. It is Jesus who owns the harvest, not us. Our identity did not come from our ministry; we are known to God. His smile on what we are doing is more important than doing it. When God led us to consider stepping down from SAIACS, that decision would have been much more difficult if by stepping down Ian felt he would lose his identity. Leaving the task is easier when we know that it is ultimately in God's hands.

Finishing well involved *consulting widely*. About two years before our visas were due to expire in May 2018, we began asking if God wanted us to continue beyond May 2018 or not. We were enjoying what we were doing, but circumstances were changing. The news that grandchildren (twins!) were arriving pulled our heartstrings. More soberingly, a religious nationalist party came to power in India, and this was beginning to stress the Indian Church. Having foreigners in charge of a place like SAIACS was increasingly provocative. (In fact, in November 2017, the internal affairs department investigated Ian, and our deportation was a real possibility.) We spent six months praying about the decision. Seeking to obey God's voice involved also consulting with our family and our (three) supporting churches. They all could see we were increasingly needed in New Zealand.

As the SAIACS leader, Ian was accountable to the SAIACS Trust. Therefore, we needed to give them advance notice if we decided to leave. In September 2016, he signaled to the Trustees that we were looking to conclude. Their first response was to request that he stay for another five years. In April 2017, we communicated a definite decision to step down. That decision gave the Trust time to set up a search committee and appoint a Principal designate, Dr. Prabhu Singh. The Trust had enough time to make their appointment and allow Ian six months to work with Dr. Singh before he formally assumed his role.

Finishing well involves *leaving room for other decision-makers*. It was tempting to nominate a successor, but Ian did not. Rather, Ian suggested to the Trustees that three colleagues were suitable for the role. They eventually picked one of those three. We felt content with their decision (and said so). But having created space for others to work minimized all sorts of power games. Being open-handed was important to finishing well. All three colleagues were open-handed too, none clamoring for the role. They were each ready to work with whomever was chosen. SAIACS's smooth transition has contrasted somewhat with the recent public turmoil at another Indian seminary when leadership changed. Dr. Singh agreed with us that the lack of competing rivals was important. He only confirmed his availability when the Trust's decision became clear.

Finishing well *involves decreasing while others increase*. John the Baptist had it right! Dr. Singh's appointment as Principal Designate was announced in

September 2017. As Ian worked with Dr. Singh, Dr. Singh increasingly made the major decisions. Ian had to reckon with increasing powerlessness as Dr. Singh shaped policy affecting the future. In such a situation, it is easy to be misunderstood as ideas and ownership of the ministry diminishes, but Ian found that it was important to be content with what God allows.

Finishing well means *giving space for farewells*. Indian culture values formal welcomes and farewells. Kiwi aversion for “tall poppies” makes us uncomfortable in such situations! After ten years, our departure signaled big changes, and we had farewell conversations with many friends. They were generous – Ian ended up being given a bespoke suit! Though not always needed, such expressions of love are culturally impossible to refuse. A formal occasion of thanksgiving was a splendid campus occasion, though for us rather hard to endure! Eighteen months later, the SAIACS team proudly presented an astounded Ian with a festschrift in his honor! (The festschrift is *Theological Formation for Christian Missions, A Festschrift for Ian Walter Payne*, edited by Roji Thomas George and Aruthuckal Varughese John (SAIACS Press, 2019). The foreword is by Dr. Singh.)

Finishing well means *being ready to be no one*. Being significant in mission changes on return to the home country. New Zealand is a world away from India, and Christians here don’t appreciate mission priorities in quite the same depth – and that’s not necessarily a criticism but a statement of fact. In our home context, we were reminded of the need for humility and of our smallness in light of God’s whole Kingdom. Apart from a ten-minute report to the elders, no one asked for more than a one-line response about how we felt about our ten years in ministry in India. That’s hardly surprising given all the Kingdom happenings here. We really appreciated, however, a week-long debriefing opportunity our supporting churches sponsored for us. Of course, being unconcerned about your reputation is an important quality of Christian leadership. Peter advises, “Humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up.” Finishing well means looking forward the Lord’s “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount.”

Finishing well means *waiting for another call*. We heard recently of a Christian policeman, who had served with International Justice Mission in India, returning with a passion for promoting justice system development in New Zealand. He already has a sense of the next door opening for him. Perhaps we too will be given another task. Jesus continued his encouragement to the faithful servant saying, “...so now I will give you many more responsibilities” (Matthew 25:21).

Are you keen to hear God’s “Well done”? Are you keen to take up the next task? That is finishing well.



Dr. Ian and Judith Payne

After leaving SAIACS, Ian and Judith Payne have resettled in Auckland, New Zealand. Ian is Executive Director of Theologians Without Borders.