



Church Health Profile

Leadership Development Feature Article

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The healthy church identifies, trains and empowers persons called to and gifted for servant leadership.

While it is true that a moderate number of churches across the country report that they are growing, the vast majority of churches in America are in decline or on a plateau. The 2000 U.S. Census Long Form showed that not a single county in the United States reported an increase in the number of practicing Christians in their populations. Although there are many contributing factors to this general decline in church attendance nationally, we cannot overlook the problem of anemic leadership development among the laity on the local level. We must address our ineffective leadership development, lest we continue to obstruct the Church from fulfilling its goal. And what is the goal? To glorify God by reaching more and more people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and thereby turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ.

It is imperative that your local church intentionally develops a leadership team by identifying, training, and empowering people in your congregation. These leaders will have the potential to strengthen your ministry's outreach and congregational in-reach by providing intensive local, servant leadership. There's no question that the church needs spiritually passionate leaders, in addition to pastoral staff, who are working together with local church volunteers to be effective on the ground level of ministry.

This may require a paradigm shift in your thinking. Ask yourself this question: Are we developing trained and empowered lay leaders to supervise our ministries and their personnel? Be sure to emphasize in this question the idea of "trained and empowered lay leaders." Truth be told, many churches are so desperate for local leadership that the criteria for being a leader has more to do with having a pulse than being intensively trained and empowered for leadership. Real training and empowerment is often placed on the list of "things to do," but is frequently delayed and never really achieved. Ultimately, the absence of training and empowerment renders these leadership apprentices ineffective and unsatisfied, resulting in their inevitable resignation. Often, the untrained potential leader exits the leadership role with the promise of "never doing that again!"

Leadership Development is Biblical

The current gurus of leadership development have been discovering that the history of leadership, both ancient and recent, is loaded with outstanding examples of leaders developing leaders. Books focused on the leadership styles of Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, generals from the American Civil War and other outstanding leaders, have been

snapped up and voraciously read by senior leaders who are trying to take their business, corporation or church to the next level. Bible-reading Christians don't have to look far to find an outstanding manual on leadership development. In fact, a strong case can be made that leadership development has its oldest and deepest roots in the Bible

Old Testament Roots

The development of a leadership team can be traced all the way back to the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament. In Exodus 18:13-27, we find Moses struggling with the logistics and management of getting the twelve Tribes of Israel from "Point A to Point B." His father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite, assessed the "overload" of Moses' situation and concluded "this is not good." He suggested a leadership team solution in which the task is broken down into manageable units and worthy leaders are identified, trained and empowered to be extensions of Moses to the people. We are told that Moses immediately adopted Jethro's solution. He identified leaders and authorized them to manage designated units ranging from groups of 10 to 1,000. By taking this step, Moses was freed up to address other issues such as meeting with God on the Mountain and receiving the Ten Commandments. Without a leadership team to handle the local situation, Moses would have been hard pressed to squeeze this meeting with God into his schedule!

Leadership Development in the New Testament

It is intriguing to note that in the book of Acts (chapter 6), the apostles found themselves facing a scenario that parallels Moses' problem perfectly. The apostles found their schedules inundated with local leadership issues, such as food distribution and janitorial follow-up. Their solution was to empower seven deacons to handle local ministry logistics. The apostles' decision enabled them to focus on prayer, preaching and teaching.

Another New Testament principle that is applicable to leadership development is often called, "The Equipping Model" found in Ephesians 4:11-13. Apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors are given the mission of identifying, training and empowering the saints to do the work of ministry and build up the church. By equipping the saints for ministry, the church, also called the Body of Christ, becomes healthy and mature. Gifted people are recruited, trained and deployed in the areas of their strengths, and the net result is the ministries of the Body of Christ are optimized.

To carry this idea further, just as the human body has specialized organs and limbs for leadership roles in specific human activities, so it is with the church. Take for example the human heart. The heart is the master enabler and power source organ of the body. It makes life happen. Blood vessels are essential to the heart's mission. If an organ of the body has been cut off from the blood flow, it ceases to function and disease sets in. Leaders in the church are like the circulatory system of the Body of Christ. Without well-trained and authorized leaders, the church becomes too sick to function.

It is interesting to note, that the word "saints" is always found in the plural in the New Testament. The implication of this insight is that team ministry (the saints) is God's designated strategy for reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many church leaders and pastors have a "hired hand" mentality that

works against the idea of lay-leadership development. The idea is to hire a super saint, a well-trained pastor, to do the work of ministry. The problem with this approach to ministry leadership is that it ultimately leads the church to decline instead of growth. It also leads to leadership maintenance instead of leadership development. To return to the “heart analogy,” the heart can’t do it alone; it needs the circulatory system to do the job!

Current Challenges to Leadership Development in the Church

Unfortunately, leadership maintenance is a time-honored tradition in many churches. It might come as a shock to some, but in the world of church leadership, it is not unusual to find the pastor standing in resistance to leadership development. Why would the pastor be resistant to leadership development? The short answer is that pastors have insecurities, too. Like so many others in the work force, the pastor may be concerned about job security. He or she secretly wonders, “what if these lay leaders I’m developing turn out to be better leaders than me? I could be replaced.” On the other hand, healthy pastors rejoice in the idea of raising up better leaders with the potential of surpassing all previous achievements.

Some pastors have trouble letting go of the leadership reins. The expression “control junkie” comes to mind. They may possess a deep need to control even the minor activities of the church. Yet, for the church to be healthy, the pastor needs to follow the example of E. Stanley Jones and “resign as the General Manager of the Universe.”

To be effective as leadership developers, pastors must be willing to pass on leadership responsibility and fully endorse the leaders they are training and deploying. That means the biggest issue in local church leadership development is *trust*. Pastors, and other church leaders, can’t possibly cover all of the local leadership posts that healthy churches in the twenty-first century require. Without trust, the local ministry will be limited and unhealthy. For churches to become truly “life giving,” the senior leaders need to experience a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift calls for the circle of leadership trust be continuously enlarged. Through effective training and careful deployment, pastors can gain more confidence in their trainees and subsequently delegate more ministry responsibilities to the emerging leaders.

Once trust is established, what is the next step? Rick Warren, in his book, [The Purpose Driven Church](#), describes a course of action for evaluating church workers. He calls it “SHAPE,” which is an acronym that describes five elements: Spiritual gifts, Heart (passion), Abilities, Personality and Experience. These elements work together to determine what a person’s ministry should be. Pastor Warren recommends this assessment to help “make members into ministers.” One of the by-products of assessing the “SHAPE” of the members is that many of them will exhibit a shape suitable for leadership development. This approach to assessing the gifts and graces of our people is highly recommended, especially with the view of developing a pool of potential leaders for the church. Identifying, training and deploying leaders must become a central part of your church’s mission.