

Developing Lay Leaders in the Church

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

William T. McConnell

Ministry Associate with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 513.367.4316, E-mail: BMcConnell@TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Every church I have been called to serve has come already equipped with lay leadership. In some cases the pre-existing leadership was really quite good. In other cases the lay leadership proved to be weak and ineffective. Often lay leadership has been problematic and a central issue to address in helping churches reverse their trend of dwindling numbers and lessening community impact, and to help it become healthy and growing.

The reason for such differing experiences is that most churches fail to develop lay leaders. Instead they fill positions dictated by the governing rules of the congregation. It is less about giftedness, spirituality, the call of God on one's life and leadership development, and more about filling slots so a full slate of candidates can be presented at the congregation's annual meeting. When it is more about filling positions and less about spiritual discernment and growth, the church suffers from a leadership gap.

The Necessity of Developing Lay Ministry and Lay Leaders for a Church to Transform and Grow

Pastors of churches are almost always looking for ideas, ministries, plans, programs, books and articles; just about anything we can find that might help us grow our church. Some want to grow the church out of a theological understanding of the scriptural mandate for sharing the gospel with a lost and dying world. Others seek to grow their church from a desire to be seen as successful.

Let's face it; you have probably never attended a conference that featured as the keynote speaker a pastor of a tiny and struggling church. As much as we try to deny it, we often see bigger as better. Still others have a sense of urgency to grow the church because of a sense of impending doom; a sense that the church will soon die from a lack of growth.

Whatever it is that drives us, a vast majority of pastors are seeking to grow their churches. But, a small minority of us who are serving growing churches. Though we may be working hard at finding and implementing evangelism and church growth programs, it is a fair generalization that what we are doing is not working. The lack of results suggests we need to try something else. Business as usual is not a good idea.

Invest Time and Energy in Lay Leader Development

For several decades those in the church growth business have been telling us that a church will not grow beyond a certain size with only a pastor providing leadership. For the church to grow, more people need to be included in ministry and leadership.

Developing lay ministers and lay leaders is easy to desire, but very difficult to produce. The difficulty lies in the truth that we pastors are already completely swamped just trying to maintain the status quo. We are busy working to keep the ship afloat. The idea of adding leadership development to an already full schedule is ridiculous. Most of us would tell you that, "I am doing more than I can do already."

This dilemma exposes one of the great challenges of doing church transformation. To do what needs to be done to grow a healthy church means we must make some difficult choices about what we will do and what we will not do. Before we can choose to invest time and energy in lay leader development we must choose to no longer do some things. These are difficult choices because we may enjoy doing what we are presently doing and may be very good at it. There are excellent chances that if we stop doing these,

some church members may become very unhappy with us and will feel free to share their concerns with us and anyone else who will listen. (I am being nice here.)

Qualities to Look for in Church Lay Leaders

There is no way to list all of the qualities needed in a leader. Some qualities are just a part of who they are, and some leadership skills can be learned. When looking for lay leaders in the church I suggest that the last filter you apply is education; what they know. Just as when we hire paid staff, the last thing we look at is education.

Unfortunately many churches make the mistake of asking that all applicants for a position possess a certain degree. Education is good. Degrees are great. I have one; from several different schools. But when it comes to what we are looking for in a paid or lay leader, education is one of the few things we can provide after the hire. The others are what I call “tangible intangibles.” If you have the qualities we are looking for, we can teach you the skills to do the job. Some of the “unteachable” things we are looking for in leaders are:

- A deep abiding love for God
- An unquenchable desire for people to come to know and love God
- A love for people
- Willingness to give much while receiving little in return
- To be spiritually growing
- A pleasant personality (Plays well with others)
- Willingness to take chances (Will run with scissors)
- Is a self starter and doesn't need a lot of supervision
- Mature social skills
- Fully supports the mission and vision of the church
- Biblically literate
- Seminary education – gee, that would be nice

Mentoring and Coaching in the Process

Having found a person or some persons with the qualities of leadership listed above, the pastor begins the process of leadership development. The pastor must evaluate the strengths and weakness of the potential leader and begin a process of moving them forward. This process will almost always include mentoring and coaching. To develop a leader in the life of a church, the present leader(s) must pour their lives into those they are developing.

Because most of us pastor-types have spent many years in the formal educational system, we tend to attempt to provide lay leadership development in a classroom situation. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having some leadership classes for potential leaders. But, for the process to be as successful as possible, other forms of educating leaders must be provided. Among those I would highly recommend are mentoring and coaching. The mentoring/coaching process is less like a classroom experience and more like a friendship. You must spend time together. You will come to know, understand, accept and trust each other. You will have many teaching moments as you share life and share ministry together. This process provides opportunities for hands on learning and on-the-job training.

Allow Lay Leaders to Minister and Lead

The final difficulty that must be addressed if lay leaders and ministers are going to be developed is launching people into ministry. The launch phase is difficult because of a fear of not being prepared to lead and do ministry. This fear is often shared by both the “launcher” and the “launchee.” It is not unusual for the pastor and the layperson to fear that the layperson doing ministry or taking on a position of leadership will not do it as well as the pastor would. The stark reality is that doing ministry is not rocket science and lay people are usually quite capable in caring for others. The lay minister or leader may do

the work a little differently than the pastor, but most of the time different does not equal wrong; just different.

In the context of the ongoing relationship, the work of the lay leader can be reviewed, any needed corrections can be made, and any new skills that need to be developed can be addressed. Not doing something perfectly or even doing something poorly is not enough to keep us from developing leader in the church. It is a process. It is sometimes a long-term process. But, if we are going to grow our churches, it is a process that we must begin.

Important Things to Know

Bill McConnell is a Ministry Associate with The Columbia Partnership. He is pastor of Legacy Christian Church I Harrison, OH, a church leadership coach and church transformation consultant. He is available for speaking and coaching with church leaders and congregations.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a leadership development emphasis of The Columbia Partnership. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.