

Equipping: Developing Spiritual Leaders for the Church

By Bob Young

Introduction

I have been blessed over the past fifteen years by the opportunity to counsel with and provide insights, guidance and direction to numerous church leaders and elderships. Many of those leaders and leadership groups were in churches that were “between preachers.”¹ Others were at crisis points in the life of the church and sought an objective observer to give direction and insight.² Coaching and mentoring church leaders provides both challenges and rewards. The rewards often come in the form of feedback and responses.

- “After so much suspicion and division, peace feels good. I think we are ready to grow again now that we aren’t so consumed by internal conflict.”
- An elder in a church where I helped them through a church and minister evaluation prior to hiring a minister said, “I can’t believe we found such a good minister that fits this church so well so quickly. It’s never been this easy before!”
- One lady remarked, “I am so glad we have gotten Jesus back at the center of this church.”
- An eldership, plagued with self-doubts after a difficult split, said, “Thank you for affirming us and confirming our desire to move forward confidently as we lead this church toward genuine discipleship.”

Along the way, I have developed a list of leadership themes and concepts which are helpful in addressing the problems church leaders face in today’s world. These are typical of the ideas presented and expanded in leadership consultations or workshops. A partial list of those themes includes:

- Exploring and Experiencing the Dynamics of Equipping
- From Control to Empowerment
- Shepherding: Evangelizing, Equipping, and Empowering
- What do Shepherds Do?
- Leadership Styles Analysis
- Transitioning from a Managing Board around a Table to Shepherds among the Flock
- Elders around a Table or a Flock around the Shepherds?
- Shepherd Circles: How One Church Leadership Team Oversees the Flock
- It’s Not About You—It’s Not About Now
- Encouraging Older Shepherds—Preparing and Training New Shepherds

¹ This terminology is used frequently in my religious heritage, referring to a church in an interim situation, that is, after the departure of the previous minister and prior to the coming of the next minister.

² This includes formal consultations with more 30 church leadership teams, interim ministries of various lengths, ten consultations which were part of training sessions or seminars for the local church, many informal or one-time consultations, continuing phone calls and emails (either as follow-up or one-time questions and answers), and presentations and classes at lectureships and in other venues.

The Need for Equipping

A great need in most church leadership teams is equipping—both to equip current leaders and to help them learn how to equip others. (Coincidentally, this week I am presenting a retreat session for a ministry team and have been asked to address the subject of equipping.) Not only do leadership teams need to be equipped, sensitive leadership teams want to know how they can equip the members of the local congregation. Elders are catching a renewed vision for leadership styles that move from management to shepherding.

Three Aspects of Empowering Others to Embrace God's Mission

The purpose of this article is to suggest how empowering others to embrace God's mission works in real life missions and congregational settings. In this article, I develop concepts and draw conclusions based on my mission experiences in Latin America as well as my ministry experience. Of course, I will also draw on the biblical text, primarily from the book of Ephesians.

Historically, most churches have cultivated and existed in a culture of learning. The primary focus has been on increasing knowledge. In this article we will distinguish this focus on facts or knowledge from a focus on practice by using the words learning and training. Training classes (notice the word 'classes') did exist—mostly focused on the need for those who would be involved in leading worship or teaching Bible classes. Ron Willingham developed leader training materials which focused on action as well as understanding. Even with such advances, many past training or equipping efforts were largely academic. This is consistent with the nature of Christianity. People of God claim to know something that has been revealed. This is especially reflected in the history of religion on the U.S. frontier where the preacher was a "master". Early evangelistic efforts focused in publishing periodicals and establishing seminaries. This focus on knowledge was consistent with the Enlightenment foundations which guided and informed religious thought.

During those earlier times, learning focused mostly on factual knowledge and less on practice or abilities. Many religious groups continue cultivating a culture of learning. This overbalance toward facts more than actions is interesting given the qualifications for church leadership as set forth in the Pastorals—attitude, experience, reputation, character, ability. If past models suggested that stateside ministry in local churches depended on educational models focused on teaching and learning, those involved in mission work quickly discovered that the continuation of the cause depends on both teaching and training. Those who learn and accept the gospel need to know how to teach and train others. This dual focus is reflected in the model we have used at Baxter Institute³ and in much mission work over the past three decades. While there is a major emphasis on learning, those involved in mission work know that knowledge alone is insufficient. We must understand and incorporate dynamics of empowering that push

³ Baxter Institute is a ministry training school in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I serve as chairman of the board of the Association Amicus, a non-profit Honduran corporation which oversees Baxter Institute as well as a medical clinic. Baxter has a 30-year history in Honduras and seeks to train ministers through a university-level educational program similar to ministry training programs in universities and seminaries in the United States. For more information, see www.baxterinstitute.edu.

leadership and Christian action to the grassroots level. An evidence of this expanded focus is seen in recent board discussions about the need for and importance of leadership training in local churches.

Many of the same challenges exist in the U.S. Interestingly, in my religious group we do not call our ministers pastors, but they function as such. The result is often the non-involvement or under-involvement of the membership. Other churches call their ministers pastors, but they do not use a pastoral system and the result is that more members are actively involved in the work.

Ephesians 4 provides orientation for understanding the role, importance and result of effective, biblical equipping. Note the basic outline of Ephesians: Ephesians 1-3 tells of our calling; Ephesians 4-6 outlines the practical outworking of that calling. The first section tells who we are or what we believe; the second section tells how this changes our lives. This outline explains why the first part of chapter 4 explains how our calling and identity works out in our lives and in the life of the church.

The following diagram suggests how an integrated view of equipping works through every aspect of the body of Christ.⁴ The remainder of the article explains the significance and implications of the diagram.

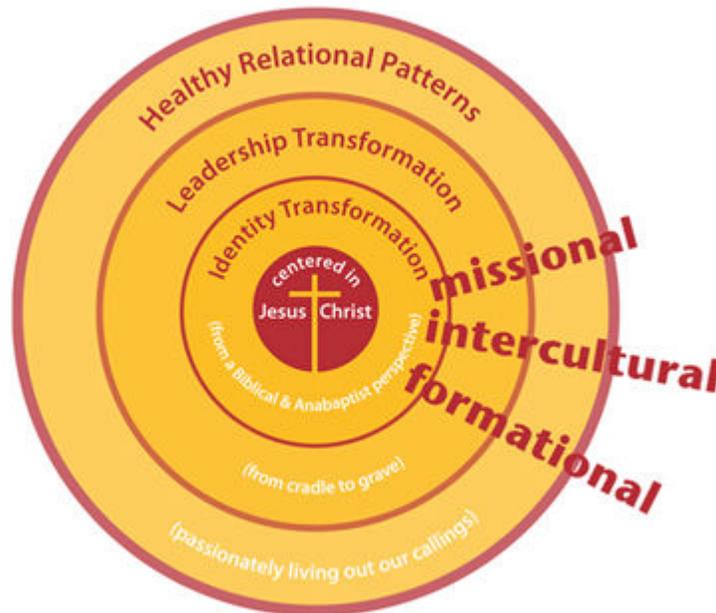


Diagram 1.
Transformation, formation, and relation

⁴ The original source of the diagram is unknown to me. I find the three aspects of identity transformation (spiritual formation, cultural formation, missional formation) helpful, as well as the sequence which moves from Jesus Christ as the center to establish identity, leadership dynamics and healthy relationships both within the body of Christ and with outsiders. Please ignore the reference to a “Biblical and Anabaptist” perspective and understand that the perspective we seek in this study is focused only in the Bible.

I find in this diagram several sequences that can be used to describe the spiritual growth of the Christian. Growth in Christ is a process, a journey by which we progress toward the goal.

- The diagram suggests that Jesus Christ as the center of the Christian life is the basis of our calling, capacity, and connections.
- Additionally, one can observe that the task is to develop Christians who are authentic Christ-followers, capable, and compassionate and caring.
- My favorite description, perhaps because I find it memorable, is that Christians who grow and mature in Christ experience encounter with Christ, are effectively equipped and empowered, so they can go forth encouraging and evangelizing. The alliteration is helpful: identity shaped by Encounter, leadership which Equips/Empowers, relationships which enable Encouragement/Evangelism.

Establishing the Center

At the center of the diagram is Jesus Christ. While I mention a sequence of growth, our individual lives and the life of the church are centered in Jesus. We must return to this center again and again to find our identity, to reaffirm our gifts and skills, and to find the strength for healthy relationships. One should picture a life that oscillates constantly through the circles—encountering Christ daily as the source of spiritual formation, leadership, and relationships.

-I- Calling: Developing Authentic Christ-Followers

The inner ring reminds us that the first thing our connection with Christ does in our lives is that it provides transformation—first of our identity, then of our thinking and actions.

ENCOUNTER...so that individuals are fully connected with Christ. Our calling is to transformation of our identity so that we are spiritually Christ-formed, culturally aware, and missionally committed.

Spiritual identity transformation: integrated learning, vocational Christians. Every Christian is bi-vocational. Every minister is bi-vocational. What we often hear called bi-vocational are really tri-vocational.

- Personal transformation is the result of our spiritual formation, and develops a discipleship which nurtures a faith that exhibits itself not only in accepted beliefs but in action.
- Intimacy with the Lord which leads to shared intimacy with one another and unity. This is obviously a “one another” passage.
- Stature of Christ, identity transformation, changing who we are, formational.

Illustration/Application

Principle. Church is a “learning organization”—but learning must include both knowledge and action. Seen in two similar Hebrew words—haggadah and halachah. The word 'halachah' means 'law', that is the laws that are part of Jewish tradition. The word 'halachah' comes from

'to walk'. 'Halachah' literally means 'something to walk or go by'. While the word 'haggadah' comes from the word 'to tell'. My point is that Christianity involves both—knowledge and the walk. This we need to learn both facts and abilities in the spiritual disciplines or daily walk of some kind.

Ministry. But Christianity is more viral than pedagogical. Need “learning model” here, but must redefine learning to include mentoring, coaching, training, assimilation into structures. Not how much you know but who you are becoming (nature, character, actions, beliefs, values, etc.)

Missions. This is something we have missed at Baxter and in much mission work, both in the individual formation and the share formation of unity as our graduates go forth.

Again, we are learning this at Baxter. We are dealing with intimacy with Christ, spiritual formation, walk, lifestyle issues.

Summary. It is true that the church is a learning organization, but learning has knowledge and lifestyle implications. We must strive to develop a biblical kind of Christians. **Not only how much you know, but how you live**. This aspect of our model is somewhat inwardly turned and personal.

-II- Capacity: Developing Capable Christians

The intermediate ring suggests that leadership transformation occurs after we know who we are in Christ. Every Christian is a leader of someone. Every Christian can lead someone, and should seek to lead more people than he or she is currently leading.

Recall that the oscillation within our lives connects us continually with Christ, reminding us who we are, so that we are able to lead effectively. We are not defensive, and can equip and empower others according to their spiritual gifts.

EQUIP...so that every individual Christian can function. Our challenge is to help the body of Christ, the church, develop the capacity to function at its maximum level, with the involvement of every member.

Leadership Transformation: Here is the bridge between my personal transformation and walk with Christ, and missionally living out my calling. This is formation—personal, cultural, contextual.

- God gifted the body through individuals.
- Equipping God’s saints for works of service. Leaders are equippers, repairers, menders, fixers. This is individual.
- Equipping is by its very nature individualized. We equip individuals, not groups. You cannot very effectively train a group—perhaps a small group. Why? Because each person must know only know what to do and how to do it, but must actually do it, experience it, grow in it.

Illustration/Application

Principles. One of my favorite leadership sayings notes that leadership is not getting things done through people, but developing people so that things get done. Biblical leadership is “from among” (Acts 20:28). Biblical leadership is not top-down, but is bottom-up (Luke 22:24-29). The transformation of the leadership in a local church is an essential step toward a fully functioning church. The church can mature and be protected only by the equipping of every member, which Paul describes as a function of leadership (Eph. 4:11-13).

Ministry. Often in ministry, negative motivations operate against training others. For example, in Latin America, preachers do not find it in their own best interests to equip the local church leaders. I wonder if we have parallel situations in the U.S.

Developing effective leaders is also a learning process (mentor, coach, train), but the goal is to develop a “leadership model” of church or ministry which seeks the full maturity of every Christian.

Missions. This is a new area of emphasis and focus at Baxter—and in much Latin American mission work. We attempt to place more focus on local church leadership—administration, development, training, and mentoring. This is problematic, because it requires someone to walk along side those being developed.

Summary. Church is a “Leadership organization”—**not how much you know but how many you touch, influence, and lead.** A church’s understanding of self is not a question which is focused inward, is personal, and is limited in scope, working primarily within the local congregational context. A church must be concerned about how it alters every aspect of the world around it.

A helpful resource in this area is Anderson’s book, *Transforming Leadership*. The older leadership model was task oriented (transactional) while the developing leadership model, which is actually more biblical, is transformational.

-III- Connections: Developing Compassionate and Caring Christians

Once (1) we know who we are and have a clearly established identity, and (2) we have experienced the spiritual leadership of those who have been transformed and are thus willing to equip and empower us so that we might equip and empower others, then (3) we are prepared for healthy relationships, both with other Christians and with those outside of Christ.

ENCOURAGE/EVANGELIZE....The circle which is labeled healthy relations has two aspects, depending on whether one is looking inward or outward. Looking inward, the Christian connects with other Christians, deriving strength and encouragement for the “mission.” Looking outward, the Christian sees the world with compassion and seeks to bring the “good news” of Jesus Christ to heal the brokenness.

Relational Transformation—Healthy Relational Patterns: Here is the ultimate reason for the church—the ability to bring the presence of Christ into the world. My personal transformation begins in understanding my calling, my nature and identity. It progresses under the direction of

leaders who develop and mature God's people, developing the capacity of the church to reflect Jesus. It is lived out in the connections of life.

- Healthy relationships occur when Christians experience "lifestyle transformation" and are able to EXEMPLIFY the beauty of the Christian life.
- The church exists for this reason—the maturity of Christians and the functioning of the body according to its purpose.
- Missional describes a church that is functioning to accomplish its God-given purpose in all of its activities.

Illustration/Application

Principles. Christianity that does not equip God's people for missional relationships can hardly be the Christianity that is described in the New Testament. The church completes its task as it oscillates back and forth according to the needs of the body—learning model, leadership model, lifestyle model. The lifestyle model demands that Christians become missionally relational, which is only possible through healthy relationships within the body of Christ. Healthy relationships within the body of Christ enable Christians to reach out in healthy ways to those outside the body.

Ministry. Effective ministry demands a "lifestyle" model. Careful thought in this area shows that we must define body function beyond eating, sleeping, drinking, and breathing. It is true that those are things my body does, but those are not the real purpose of my body. The church has too long been content to perform basic bodily functions which keep it alive and has not gone about doing what God intended the spiritual body of Christ to do.

Missions. Here is what we need in Latin America missions and in the church in other parts of the world as well. We must refocus on the ability and responsibility of the local church to act. The church acts not only through the ministry staff, but through every member. This need is seen especially in the effective cell churches and successful small group models in contemporary Christianity. The development of relationships makes clear that this is an "every member" activity. Missional churches do not come as a result of missional ministers, but from missional members.

Summary. Missional is an attitude or way of thinking; missional is a point of view. One can do "missional" things in small groups and not be missional. One can have a missional group that does a variety of "non-missional" things along the way, but is at its heart missional, not because of what it does but because of what it is—the way it thinks and acts.

The church is a lifestyle organization. Missional describes the church in action, not only individual Christians. It is true that the church acts through its individual members, but we are saying something significant when we claim that the whole body acts.

As Jesus touched people, he was embracing the missional purposes of God. **It is not how often you come (to church), but how you go (into the world).**