

Developing Healthy Churches and Healthy Leaders in Missions Churches

By Bob Young

Across forty years in preaching and full-time local church ministry, intertwined with a dozen years of teaching and administration in Christian higher education, I spent a lot of time with church leaders. My graduate studies focused on leadership. I spent time with elders as we worked hand in hand in ministry. I spent time with elders as a consultant to those interested in church and leadership development.

Three and a half years ago I embarked on a new phase of ministry and mission work. Growing up in Kansas, I often heard about the struggles of small congregations in Kansas and Nebraska. My home church in Kansas was heavily involved mission work in Nebraska. During more than a dozen years of preaching in Michigan, I experienced firsthand the struggle of numerous small mission congregations. At Ohio Valley University, I became aware of the struggle of countless small churches across the northern and northeastern U.S. In visits to various international mission points, especially in Latin America, I saw the same struggle. In these visits and through firsthand experience with churches on the mission field, first on the domestic mission field in the northern U.S. and later in various parts of Latin America, I saw the need to help develop effective, healthy leadership in small, struggling mission congregations. The task has proven challenging. It has been harder than I first thought for at least two reasons.

First, in many foreign mission areas we have had an emphasis on church planting more than church development. Success has been measured in the number of churches planted. The result is that we have planted numerous churches but many of the churches have failed to develop in healthy ways. (Churches that do not develop in healthy, biblical ways usually develop in unhealthy, unbiblical ways.) As a result, we have numerous small, underdeveloped, struggling congregations, many of which are minimally functional. (We must restudy 1 Corinthians 3 and focus on the entire process of church planting and the development of healthy churches.)

Second, in mission efforts we have often emphasized the number of baptisms. This has at times replaced a healthy approach to church planting. The result has been baptisms rather than strong churches; but without strong churches, much of the fruit withers and is lost. We must restudy the process Paul used to edify churches and assist with leadership development (Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1).

What is needed?

In short, the task is to develop churches that understand the nature of the church and “every-member ministry,” churches that will seek and appoint biblical leaders. The church needs spiritual leaders. How can churches learn to develop and appoint leaders who have no desire to run things or exercise power or authority? We must rethink biblical descriptions of leadership and seek to understand afresh the characteristics or qualities of leaders. This involves several things.

First, members must understand the nature of the church, the nature of Christianity and the role of every member. Churches need sound, solid, and plain teaching on what it means to be a Christian, a part of the body of Christ. Christians must understand that all are called to service and that the body is mutually edified when all are involved according to their own gifts

and activities. If we are trying to be biblical, we cannot think of the elders as a board or as managers who make sure the church functions to please the members. The minister's role must be also be defined biblically, according to talents and gifts and the needs of the congregation. Ephesians 4 is a good beginning point.

Second, members and potential leaders must understand the nature of biblical leadership—servant-shepherd leadership rather than a business secular leadership model. This is an essential part of preparing leader candidates. This implies a return to teaching elders and shepherding elders with less emphasis on a hierarchical structure, a focus on function rather than position. In Luke 22, Matt 20, and Mark 10 Jesus taught that the leadership model of the kingdom would not involve hierarchy, control, and power, but would rather involve service.

Third, we must train and prepare leaders who understand biblical leadership, spiritual leadership, servant leadership, and transformational leadership. God give us leaders that meet regularly and specifically for prayer—for one another, workers, families, and those they are shepherding. I was blessed to work with such a group of elders early in my ministry and have been blessed since by other praying elderships who were not interested in doing the work that Scripture says belongs to members, deacons or evangelists. In each case, the elders I am describing excluded themselves from the budget and monetary concerns. Those areas were handled by members qualified to handle financial matters. Effective ministries which involve every member as a minister means that the elders are not weighed down with such things but are instead freed for prayer and pastoral matters. A good text to begin to develop a biblical understanding of leadership is 1 Samuel 8. Study again the teachings of Jesus in Luke 22, Matt 20, Mark 10 and look at the principle set forth in Acts 6.

Finally, leaders (elders, deacons, and ministers) must understand and appreciate what it means to function as a team. We need ministers who are committed to doing what ministers do (I Timothy) and are not threatened by other leaders. We need to help leaders learn to work together.