

The Problem of Church Growth: Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

by Bob Young

The church in many places—especially in rural areas—is in or is on the verge of a leadership crisis. There are too few leaders available in many smaller churches—too few future elders and a limited numbers of potential deacons. There are several reasons for the problem. One is a simple decrease in numbers. Rural churches are emptying as smaller communities fail to retain the young people who are moving to the cities. Many rural churches are feeder churches—feeding larger urban churches that are often swelling more than growing. The leadership problem is also due to the changing makeup of our families. More of our young people are marrying those who are not Christians and establishing families that are unlikely to provide church leaders. Divorce and remarriage are more prevalent—often raising questions about the qualifications of potential leaders. The leadership crisis may also be attributed to the fact that a large percentage of our young people are walking away from active involvement in the faith.

Not only is there a crisis in local church leadership, there is also an impending shortage of full-time church workers to work in ministry and preaching and missions. In many parts of the U.S., the shortage is already apparent and nearing crisis proportions. This problem became apparent to me about 15 years ago when I maintained a “churches looking” list while serving at Ohio Valley College. Churches seeking preachers eventually gave up after months or years of unsuccessful searching. I have been writing about this impending shortage for almost 15 years.

This article asks how we can develop more effective church leaders: how changed foci in ministerial training and development could help, and how the church can do a better job in developing elders, deacons, and other church leaders.

God develops leaders; members must help with the process. God is the one who develops leaders. The role of the local church and the Christians in local churches is to participate and cooperate with God in the process. That means Christians must be aware of the problem and spend time in thoughtful efforts to identify and encourage future leaders—elders, deacons, teachers, and preachers. Local churches must spend more time praying about this need.

The church needs many different kinds of leaders. The church must recognize that it needs leaders of various types with different skills, abilities and aptitudes. As the church seeks missional outreach to an unchurched world, future church leaders will come in a variety of shapes and sizes, likes and dislikes. Some who will be effective church leaders do not look a lot like the traditional church leaders we have known in the past.

The church must expand its understanding of what leaders do. The church fails to develop leaders when it has a too narrow view of leadership and thinks only of developing formal leaders. The leadership model employed in the typical church does not encourage today’s young people to consider church leadership as a worthy pursuit. Church leadership is too often formal and too seldom informal. This attitude develops an official church leadership more than a practical leadership. In too many places, church leadership is not determined by spiritual

values and dynamics. Church leaders often isolate themselves from meaningful involvement in the church “where the rubber meets the road”. Aging church leaders often become ineffective in providing examples of meaningful involvement in those works that can advance the local church—teaching, evangelizing, preaching, serving, and personal contact.

Churches must insist that its spiritual leaders walk among the flock. Leadership in the church walks a fine line between leadership “from among” and professionalism which leads to leadership “from above”. It seems the small church would provide an environment where leadership “from among” would be common, but often the opposite occurs. When leaders in small and rural churches are not among the flock, they fail to be culturally sensitive and lead in the way the community expects. Leaders must be among the people, spending significant amounts of time with the flock, teaching and mentoring, modeling and equipping. That is the Ephesians 4 model, and such equipping and encouraging is a clear responsibility of the pastor-teachers. Leadership “from among” focuses on transformed lives more than accomplished transactions which are directed and controlled “from above.”

Leadership development must emphasis spirituality. Developing effective leadership requires that one determine what a spiritual leader does, and makes certain the training provides competence. Having spent a dozen years or more in Christian higher education with a focus on training ministers, I can personally testify that there is too little focus on spiritual development for ministry students. We teach the Bible, Bible study tools, languages, theology, and practical ministry or missions, but we often neglect the inner soul. When we established a general education elective in “Personal Spiritual Development” at Ohio Valley College in the mid-1990s, one person who had the opportunity to visit numerous Christian college campuses told me that we were one of very few colleges or universities with such an offering for the general student. I regret that the course was not required for Bible majors.

Church leadership requires common sense. I remember reading about a person who couldn’t get the shampoo out of the bottle—until he learned that he had to unscrew the cap. In growing churches, leadership must struggle with challenges that turn normal thinking upside down. For example, many churches face the challenge of “growing smaller as you grow larger.”

Church leadership development will depend on the smaller churches. Historically, small churches have produced 80% of our church leaders. The solution to the leadership crisis will ultimately come because we encourage the members of small churches to help address the dilemma. Members, including young people, are more likely to find meaningful places of involvement in smaller churches. One survey found that in churches with an attendance of less than 200, research suggests that only about 30% of the members use their gifts. In churches of 1000, less than 17% use their gifts. (Incidentally, the most frequently cited reason for this decline is that larger churches hire too much help.) Another survey suggests that larger churches are providing increased opportunity for the development and use of spiritual gifts. Regardless, local churches must be involved in leadership development at all levels.

These seven truths are reflected in three principles that can help the church move forward with leadership training.

THE CHURCH MUST RETURN TO EVERY MEMBER MINISTRY—EQUIPPING AND EMPOWERING GOD’S PEOPLE FOR SERVICE.

This statement reflects Ephesians 4:11-16. God develops leaders from within the body, and the leaders God develops often come from unusual places and in unexpected persons. When the members of the body are encouraged and allowed to use the talents God has given them, the local church will be able to discover, develop, and deploy talented servants for all kinds of ministries. Perhaps we have been so focused on the “best” that we have failed to have any plan for member ministry development. Further, our focus on the “best” often loses our children—we must reconnect with our kids.

THE CHURCH MUST COMMUNICATE THEIR LOVE FOR KIDS IN A FOCUS ON EFFECTIVE MINISTRY TO YOUTH.

God develops leaders from many different places. God certainly develops leaders from among our youth. Youth leadership training programs demonstrate this truth. Local churches should creatively seek places for leadership development and growth. Home groups can use kids. Power point presentations can use youth. Young people can start songs, read Scripture in class, and learn how to pray. This is a real “back to basics” appeal: train up a child, train kids for success.

THE CHURCH MUST ACCEPT THE TRUTH THAT ONLY GOD FIXES PEOPLE

We have said that God develops leaders from unlikely sources. God does some of his great work through the messy and the broken, and he makes such people leaders who can reach out and help others. Church leaders ultimately come forth because they genuinely believe the gospel—they believe Jesus will do what he promised to do. They have been changed, and they seek to change others. Therefore, they are people of prayer, and people of action. They depend on God’s power more than human power. They are “people people”, spending tremendous amounts of time ministering to people. This is seen in their commitment to sharing the good news and shepherding God’s children.

God give us church leaders who will serve as examples, equipping, mentoring, and shepherding the flock. God give us church leaders who love others and will help them grow. God give us church leaders who know that God’s power in the life of a potential leader is more important than all of the humanly-honored characteristics.