

Lead or Get Out of the Way

By Bob Young

August 2009

Leadership is not easy to grasp. While one can identify general principles to help guide leaders, the shape and details of leadership vary from situation to situation. Especially is this true of spiritual leadership in a church where involvement and participation are voluntary. Much has been written; more will be written. This article does not explore new ground. This article makes a few specific observations about spiritual leadership. Because it is brief, it cannot cover everything. Read, pray, and heed.

Spiritual leaders must be present.

Spiritual leadership is not possible in absentia. While corporate leaders may seldom see those they lead, spiritual leaders must be in regular contact with those they lead. Leaders, how often are you in contact with every member of your spiritual flock? This may not be a face-to-face contact—it may be by phone, by card, or in today's electronic world, even by 'personal' email (one-on-one email).

Continuing contact is essential. Although one-way contacts (such as those just described) are good, continuing mutual contact is essential. Because spiritual leadership is not possible in absentia, leaders must be present when the church assembles. In one church where I ministered, I was blessed to work with an eldership that took so seriously the need to be present when the church assembled, that they tracked their attendance, held one another accountable, and over a 5-6 year period maintained over a 95% attendance as a group. (Yes, that means an average of only 2-3 absences per year). Some would consider such commitment above and beyond the call of duty, but such illustrates the seriousness of the task of spiritual leadership. Leaders, if you cannot be present consistently, either resign or ask for a temporary leave from your leadership responsibilities until the circumstances that are limiting your presence have passed.

Spiritual leaders must be examples.

The first and primary way spiritual leaders lead is by example. It is unlikely the church as a whole will do more than the leaders do. If the leaders are absent frequently, the church will not consider regular attendance essential. The followers will do as the leaders do. If the leaders do not attend Bible class, neither will the followers. If the leaders are late, so will be the followers. If the leaders cannot teach or refuse to teach, the church will have trouble getting teachers. I have observed that churches are seldom more evangelistic than the leaders. If the leaders are in constant contact and are searching for additional members, the church will catch on and imitate the leaders. Those involved in evangelism naturally become spiritual leaders to those converted. An eldership complained to me that the new converts were not following them but were following those who had taught and converted them.

Spiritual leaders are always looking for and interacting with the sheep, those they already know and those who can be added to the flock. This expansive view of spiritual leadership is essential to the health of the local church. The shepherds must care for those they already know, the shepherds must be sensitive to those sheep who visit the fold as potential followers.

Spiritual leaders must be mentors.

Spiritual leaders lead by mentoring. Many spiritual leadership teams are so obsessed with the obedience and submission of the members, and the responsibility of giving account for the flock, that they come to believe that meeting and analyzing and admonishing is their entire job.

Spiritual leaders exercise good leadership when they do what God calls all Christians to do, are personally involved in doing what God calls the church to do, when they lead in establishing proper priorities, and mentor others in those tasks. Leaders are those who speak the word. Leaders are those who are worthy of imitation.

Spiritual leaders must be willing to delegate.

Spiritual leaders lead by delegating. I am amazed at how many church leaders are unwilling to delegate responsibility and accountability. Many spiritual leaders want to maintain control. Too many spiritual leaders are gate-keepers rather than gate-openers. In too many churches, the bottleneck that is limiting the overflowing of the fountain of life is at the top. When I ask someone to do something while maintaining control, I am not delegating. I am merely assigning a task. Little hope for spiritual growth exists.

Spiritual leaders must learn the art of delegation and accountability, without rescuing, without co-dependency, and without controlling. The ability to delegate responsibility, control, and accountability will cause the church to grow and prosper through the active involvement of scores, yea hundreds, of Christians who are just waiting to do the many things they see to do.