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Untapped Potential

Latent Leaders

Ken had come to God through an old fashioned altar call, complete with “Just As I Am” and a face wet with tears. He liked Revelation and wanted to teach people about the beasts. As a missional thinker, trying to update our outreach practices for a new generation, I was unsure what to do with Ken.

I did not object to the book of Revelation. It holds a high place in my heart. I did not doubt his revival experience. I prize similar moments in my own walk. And I certainly did not dislike his enthusiasm. My problem with Ken was that his vision did not fit my strategic plan.

I had devised a strategy to connect with the community through small groups, teach a regular public class on the gospel of John, and provide worldview-focused Bible studies for those who wanted to go deeper and join the church. The plan was working. Ken wanted to do something more traditional. What could I do with him?

John presented another challenge. He and his wife walked into church one week, introduced themselves, and said they had studied the teachings of our church to the point that they wished to join. As I got to know John, I soon saw that he had leadership skills beyond mine. Everything about him was ideal for leadership but our traditional church thought he was too new to lead out.

I invited John to help with outreach efforts and to preach a couple of sermons for worship service. I included him where I could but he was clearly made for more. I did not know what else to do except wait for the church to feel comfortable with his leadership. But, waiting, I knew, would leave him to invest in other things and we would lose out on his potential. What could I do?

And, then there was Jennifer. She had been divorced in the church many years before, and it had taken her every one of those years to outlive

the stigma. She was also a woman in a congregation that doubted whether women should lead.

I invited her to get involved in small ways but the weight of those years when others had diminished her fostered hesitance. I needed some way to empower Jennifer, to strengthen her confidence in what she could do for God. How could I help her?

A Simple Solution

I am happy to report that the stories of Ken, John, and Jennifer did not end in a quandary. Each had the same passion to participate in Christ's salvation work, each faced a unique challenge, but each needed the same things.

For Ken to follow his God-inspired vision for outreach, he needed to be equipped and empowered. When he was, he created a class on Revelation that led five people to baptism. And, his story continues.

For John to move beyond the perception that he was an amateur, he needed to be equipped and empowered. When he was, he became a volunteer pastor for a struggling church plant and saw the size of the group double in less than a year. And, his story continues.

For Jennifer to rise above the stigma of divorce and gender prejudice, she needed to be equipped and empowered. When she was, she became the first successful young adult leader her church had known for decades. And, her story continues.

These three, along with some forty others, graduated from a simple one-year lay ministry training course. The choice to equip and empower them for ministry transformed their lives and the lives of those they continue to reach.

Below, I would like to share with you both my experience with training others for ministry and the biblical significance of doing so. My hope is that you will see both how valuable and how doable this kind of ministry training is.

The Story

The vision began to develop long before I got involved. There was a mounting belief across the Pennsylvania Conference of Seventh-day Adventists that God calls all believers to ministry. Statistics that showed the slowness of church growth added to the sense that we needed a new approach to mission.

In 2000, the conference had three fewer churches than it had thirty years prior.¹ This meant that it would impact fewer communities. In the same span of time, its membership had grown less than 0.8% annually, compared to more than 1.7% in the Adventist Church across North Amer-

ica. Pastor to member responsibility had increased 37%. In the most recent decade, the frequency of baptisms had also declined.

Conference President Mike Cauley had the foresight to initiate change. Cauley and Executive Secretary, Ray Hartwell, demonstrated courageous leadership as they cast a vision for broader lay ministry. They started an open conversation about the stagnation and called for lay pastors to remedy the situation. When Hartwell became President in 2003, he continued to cast a similar vision for lay ministry.

The Adventist Church came to own the vision but this created new challenges, chief of which was the need for an effective ministry training system. Many members wanted to serve but were without learning opportunities. This reality was what threatened the mission potential of Ken, John, Jennifer, and their fellow graduates.

There were success stories. Conference pastors and administrators made good efforts. Several pastors fashioned training programs for their churches. Conference administrator, Will Peterson, Assistant to the President for Mission, developed a good correspondence-based educational program. Russell Burrill also trained several good lay leaders.

Such endeavors made training available to some but others still lacked the opportunity to be equipped and empowered effectively. In consultation with Pennsylvania Conference administrators, I developed a streamlined lay ministry curriculum for the Philadelphia region where I pastored.

I wanted to build a course that would give students everything they needed to lay a strong foundation for ministry. I wanted to give the course all the muscle it needed and no extra fat. Since I was working with busy people, I felt responsible for making their time investment pay off and not asking them to invest more than was necessary.

A careful review of Scripture and relevant literature revealed that an effective curriculum would have one purpose, include three learning components, and teach five competencies. First, its purpose must be missional. Second, it must include the learning components of theory combined with practice, spiritual transformation, and mentoring relationships. Third, it must teach the competencies of people skills, biblical preaching, spiritual vitality, spiritual leadership, and team building. I built the training course around these elements.

The monthly class sessions were approximately two hours long and were followed by in-ministry assignments. The in-ministry assignments required students to apply the concepts discussed in class by doing specific types of ministry. This was perhaps the most important part of the process.

When the start date arrived, I was nervous. My main fear was that,

having invited these fine people to invest their time, I would not have enough to give them. My nerves began to ease after the flood of questions and insightful comments that came from the students. I slowly began to see that they knew much of what they needed to know. What they required most was a forum to test their ideas, structure their thoughts, and gain confidence. Success did not depend on my knowledge or skill, just my choice to create the forum and coach them through a natural learning process.

For the subjects that I felt less capable of teaching, I invited guest speakers. This, too, made me hesitant. I asked timidly, afraid of imposing on them. I quickly found that professionals, like my friend who was a trained counselor, felt it an honor to share their expertise. They were eager to talk about their life passion, and to know that they had helped equip others for ministry.

We finally had a training program designed to equip and empower, but the crucial question was whether it would increase lay involvement in ministry.

I launched the eleven-month course with eighteen students. Over the following year, the conference placed five graduates in pastoral positions, several led lay evangelism, and all of them increased their ministry involvement.

At the end of the course, I asked graduates to evaluate their growth in each of the five competency areas since starting the course. They estimated a 26% average increase in each competency. After a year in ministry, I asked the same questions again and found that their perceptions of growth had increased. The estimated average increase in each competency climbed to 43%.

In the same survey, graduates estimated that their overall ability to do ministry had increased 66% and that their ministry involvement had increased 60% since enrolling in the course. Surveys of the congregations where lay pastors were placed, and of their mentors, produced similarly positive evaluations. On average, congregants rated their overall satisfaction with the lay pastors at 8.9 out of 10 and pastoral mentors rated their satisfaction at 8 out of 10.

Besides these measurable indicators, the joy I felt in seeing students bloom into effective ministers and the obvious satisfaction they felt in working for God made the effort worthwhile.

Although much work remains to do before lay training is as available and effective as the Pennsylvania Conference needs it to be, the simple application of this curriculum was a major step forward. It demonstrates that equipping and empowering lay people holds considerable mission potential. It also shows how simple it can be to do so.

A Good Theology

In addition to its missional value, the practice of empowering and equipping believers for ministry carries a biblical mandate. The Bible teaches that participation in ministry shapes the believer after God's heart. It is also God's expressed means for accomplishing his salvation work throughout the world.

The Redemptive God: To Seek and to Save

Robert Coleman's classic work *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (1996) has brought Christ's redemptive strategy into focus among Christian leaders. A careful look at this strategy shows why God calls people to minister—to shape them.

Jesus stated his mission plainly, saying, "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10 NAS). A brief look at his mission strategy shows that God calls people to ministry for their own redemption. Mark's gospel provides a picture of this strategy.

Jesus began with a basic message that encapsulates his mission. He "came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). These three statements give the backdrop, the stakes, and the appeal of Christ's mission. The backdrop is the messianic promise, stated as "the time is fulfilled." The stakes are a place in God's kingdom, stated as "the kingdom of God is at hand." The appeal has two elements, stated as "repent and believe in the gospel."

The Greek for repent is *metanoete*, which means a change of direction. The Greek for believe is *pisteuete*, which describes a trusting relationship. Because there is a kingdom to gain, Jesus called the people to change the foundations of their lives; their direction, and what they trust. He called them to a trust relationship with him that required them to live out his character.

He then built on the call in a specific way. This is where insight into lay ministry emerges. Those he wished to redeem, he called to service. "He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men'" (Mark 1:16-17). He did not tell them to follow him so they could learn repentance and belief (the elements of his message). Instead, he called them to minister (to "become fishers of men"). Jesus used this strategy persistently. He shaped people through service. By living his passion, they came to know his heart.

"He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons" (Mark 3:14-15). Later, "He summoned the twelve and began to send them

out in pairs" (Mark 6:7), instructing them to serve sacrificially (vv. 8-11). He universalized this practice with the words, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34); and he immortalized it with the Gospel Commission (Mark 16:14-16). The call to service is an act of redemption; the means to learn the repentance and trust Jesus preached.

The case of the rich young ruler illustrates this. He asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). Jesus answered, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (v. 21). He called him to serve the poor and join his ministry team. For salvation to work, it must address the basis of sin: selfishness (Jas 1:14-15). Jesus' persistent strategy reveals that God calls humans to ministry, in part, to save them. Selfless service is the best antidote for selfish sin.

This strikes at the core of equipping and empowering believers for ministry. Since God's call to service is part of redemption, one impetus for lay ministry training is opening the way for people to participate in that redemptive shaping of their hearts.

The New Incarnation of Christ: The Body of Christ

Added to the impact on the believer is God's intended impact on the unbelieving world. An understanding of this intensifies my passion for seeing every member of every church minister in the capacities God has called them to.

Jesus initiated salvation as "God with us" (Matt 1:23) and God promises the end of salvation in similar terms. He predicts a future time when "the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them" (Rev 21:3). What remains of the redemption sequence is the present, and it embodies a unique incarnation, a unique example of "God with us."

The church is this divine incarnation, commissioned to live out God's nature. After casting the vision for all believers to minister, Paul says, "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27). This statement defines the church as the new incarnation of Christ, God's character in the flesh. It suggests that a call to ministry is not only part of redeeming the called but also the means of revealing God. It suggests that the church should embody Christ's nature. Specifics aside, it is a divine mandate that all church members must fulfill (1 Cor 12:15-22), a mandate to invest in people. Helping all members do their part honors the mandate. Only when every part of this new incarnation is present and active, is the picture of God complete—truly the "body of Christ" on earth.

Other metaphors collaborate the ministry of all believers. Jesus offered

two such metaphors in the Sermon on the Mount. After citing the persecution of ancient prophets, he said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty *again*? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Matt 5:12-13). In other words, Jesus expects his followers to impact others for God, as did the ancient prophets; faith is useless, like bland salt, if God’s people do not impact the world.

He followed the metaphor of salt with that of light, saying, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do *men* light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:14-16). As Jesus outlined the Christian life at the start of his ministry, the message was unmistakable: a call to Christ is a call to minister.

Paul added the metaphor of Creation to the same message. After noting that Christ “died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor 5:15), he described living for Christ as becoming “a new creature” (v. 17). Finally, he depicted this new creation as participation in “the ministry of reconciliation” (v. 18) and concluded that converts are “ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through” them (v. 20). This is incarnational language. Paul viewed conversion as a call to minister, with God working in and through the believer.

Peter and John revived priesthood as a metaphor to endorse the same doctrine. The implication may be basic; priests link people with God. This metaphor first described believers at the Exodus. Instead of a limited priesthood, God envisioned a whole “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6). This, however, relied on their obedience (v. 5) so it failed. Peter taught that Christ had restored this vision of “a royal priesthood” for the expressed purpose that they “may proclaim the excellencies of Him who . . . called” them (1 Pet 2:9). Though John did not explain the metaphor, he also used it in Revelation, calling believers “priests and kings” (Rev 1:5), and quoting the same words on the lips of the heavenly chorus (5:10).

Each of these metaphors vividly contends that God calls all believers to minister his grace. Further evidence came when Jesus portrayed the judgment in relational terms. The backdrop was the parable of ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), which stressed preparation for the Advent, and the parable of the talents (25:14-30), which stressed service as preparation. To these Jesus added the climactic image, the Advent itself, saying, “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him;

and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt 25:31-32). At this defining moment, the deciding factor in salvation is how people treated "the least of" fellow humanity (25:40, 45). Paul may have had this parable in mind when he wrote, "the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14). This makes sense in light of the new incarnation. It is a matter of accurately presenting God.

God in humanity is the new incarnation, whether seen explicitly in the body of Christ metaphor or implicitly in the metaphors of salt, light, Creation, and priesthood. The new incarnation should do what the first one did: by human contact, connect people with God. Ministry is God making contact through humans. This endorses the ministry of all who meet with God.

Conclusion

My experience has shown that it is not hard to equip and empower people for ministry. A simple lay ministry class with simple assignments has dramatically changed lives, nurturing those attending to be agents of God's grace. This experience has also helped me glimpse the amazing mission potential in those who worship at my church each week.

When I realize that a call to ministry is a part of how God shapes and saves those he calls, I am gripped by a deeper urgency. When I see that God has designed his church to be a composite of who he is (the body of Christ), I am convinced that equipping and empowering *every* member is one of the best ways I can help the world see God.

A pastor does many things. In my first decade of ministry, I spent 60-70 hours each week doing ministry. I preached roughly 730 times. I led approximately 500 studies. I attended about a 150 meetings, managed countless crises, smoothed over hurt feelings. I conducted weddings, funerals, dedications, and baptisms. I networked in the community, drafted plans for the future; the list continues.

I have sometimes wallowed in a bit of pastoral narcissism as I relish having sweat blood for the cause. At such moments, one fact sobers me: The most *tangible* result of all that busyness (people I have trained for ministry) is the work I have given the least attention to. Those that God has used me to equip and empower comprise the ultimate good of my life. The glowing faces of Ken, John, Jennifer, and the others make ministry worthwhile. I am convinced that the centerpiece of mission must always be developing people.

Notes

¹All statistics are taken from or calculated from data available at www.adventiststatistics.org



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