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Reflections on Mentoring and Multi-generational Ministry

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INTERVIEW WITH GORDON MACDONALD **REFLECTIONS ON MENTORING AND MULTI-GENERATIONAL MINISTRY**

Gordon MacDonald, D.Div., is an author, speaker, and teacher, and was a pastor for more than 40 years. He was named Chancellor of Denver Seminary in 2011. Pastor MacDonald's academic background includes a B.A. from the University of Colorado (1962), and a M.Div. from Denver Seminary (1966). Denver Seminary awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 2011, and Barrington College (which later merged with Gordon College) awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1979.

He has written more than two dozen books and co-authored others with his wife, Gail. Perhaps his best known book has been *Ordering Your Private World*. Among his other books are *Secrets of a Generous Life*, *Renewing Your Spiritual Passion*, *Mid-Course Correction*, and *A Resilient Life*. His most recent books are *Going Deep: Becoming a Person of Influence* (2011) and *Building Below the Waterline: Shoring Up the Foundations of Leadership* (2011). He writes regularly for *Leadership Journal* and also writes a column which appears on the *LeadershipJournal.net* website.

MacDonald serves as editor-at-large with *Leadership Journal*, a publication of Christianity Today, Inc. Until September of 2007, he was the chairman of the board of World Relief Corporation, an NAE-associated relief and development organization committed to the alleviation of suffering and poverty in the areas of HIV/AIDS, micro-enterprise development, refugee resettlement, and disaster assistance.

Gordon and Gail MacDonald, married 55 years, live in Concord, New Hampshire. Their great satisfaction is in their two married children and five grandchildren. The MacDonalds are also hikers, bikers, kayakers, and voracious readers.

In July 2014, Gordon was a keynote presenter for the annual Leadership Conference on the Andrews University campus. While on campus he was interviewed by several *JACL* staff members.

JACL: In your book *Building Below the Waterline: Shoring Up the Foundations of Leadership* you mentioned one of the four attributes or characteristics of Christian leadership as a keen self-knowledge. How would you practically describe for a leader how to develop a keen self-knowledge?

Gordon MacDonald: I have often quoted Edward Farrell, “We cannot discover ourselves by ourselves.” We are victimized by the enlightenment age, which made us feel that we are totally contained in ourselves. Yet, a new generation is awakening to the fact that this [self-containment] is not biblical and there are better ways to discover ourselves. The first way of discovering myself would have to do with having intimate friends. Every one of us is capable of 15-17 deeply intimate relationships. Who are those 15 people? I begin with my spouse, some of my intimate family members, and then six or eight close friends. Who are the people in my group of friends that are going to give me the opportunity for self-discovery?

I also find self-discovery by reading biographies. Every third or fourth book that I read is a biography of some man or woman whose life has something to say from history. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a Christian one. I obviously want someone who is living in alignment with biblical principles. Biographies help me to see me.

I think a third way is journaling. I journal every day. I have journaled for about 45 years, and there are few days when I haven’t made at least a paragraph of entry. Hearing or seeing myself write about my feelings, my prayers, my disappointments, and my hopes is an enormous tool in helping me to discover myself. When I review my piles of journals, I can see how Gordon is growing or not growing all the way through the years.

I’ll just throw one more in. Self-discovery is a clean dialogue with my wife, Gail. As we’ve gotten older, the freedom to talk more clearly and openly just continues to grow and grow. We are constantly helping each other to see what the other might be blind to at that moment.

When I review my piles of journals, I can see how Gordon is growing or not growing all the way through the years.

JACL: Would you say self-knowledge is temperament specific?

MacDonald: Yes, to some extent. That is a good point. We who are intuitive are able to go inside of ourselves. We love the contemplative form of Christianity. Gail struggled with contemplative life because she was a woman of action. I was the person of reflection. Now, we’ve switched roles as we’ve gotten older. She has picked up a lot of my intuition, and I’ve picked up a lot of her actionable style of life. In a marriage, you meet somewhere in the upper third of life, and really have an effect upon each other. But, yes, I think it is temperament specific, and I’m glad you asked that.

JACL: When we are in ministry, we are serving God and the church. It's so easy to get caught up in busyness. Explain your point about taking time and having fun. You led into this point by saying, "Nobody is ever going to tell me to take time off. Nobody is going to tell me to have fun." How do we leaders help each other with that?

MacDonald: This is where your friends help. At 45, I really had no close friends. If you had asked me, "Who are your friends?" I would have said, "Well, Gail is my best friend." Well, my wife cannot be my best friend. She is my wife and that puts her on a totally different level. Best friends are generally people of the same gender and you've got to pick your friends carefully. So at 45, when I needed friends, I didn't have them. I set out over the next four to five years to develop friendships, and I made about six friendships. For example, one of those friends lives in Montreal. We get together two or three times every year. We meet in Newport, Vermont, about halfway between our homes, and we spend about eight hours together talking, praying, and discussing books. He is the guy that would say to me, "Gordon, I've been watching your schedule for the last two months. You're overdoing it, don't you think?" Between him and two or three other guys, they are constantly asking me about "What does the next month look like?" "When are you and Gail getting away?" and "What are you doing to break out of all of the intensity?"

Women have these kinds of friendships, but very few men do. When I talk to pastors, I'm constantly asking, "Who are your friends?" I'll add this. When you are 75, you really discover that you can take away my money or take away everything else, but don't touch my friends. I'm going to die with them. When we are younger, we think we don't need friends in the same way.

When I talk to pastors, I'm constantly asking, "Who are your friends?"

JACL: Another point is the seasons of leadership life. How do you speak to a multi-generational leadership? What would you point out in relationship to leadership seasons?

MacDonald: The first thing I would say is that God has given to everyone in this room an incredible gift of time. In 1890, life expectancy was 45 and now it is creeping toward 90. We don't know what to do with those extra 30-plus years. They are not years sitting in a rocking chair drooling. They are years of mental sharpness, physical acuity. Every decade of life presents questions that drive what we are thinking.

In my 20s, the question was, “What am I going to do with my life and with whom am I going to do it?”

My 30s: “How am I going to handle all of the pressures that have suddenly descended upon me? For example, house mortgage, keeping a job, or caring for a family as a mother or a father?”

My 40s: “Why am I not doing as well as some of my peers? What have I done wrong? Why are some of the rewards of life not as satisfying as I expected them to be?”

I would ask the young people to engage the older people and say, “Tell me your story.” I would say to the older people, “You need to listen to the young people because they will build enthusiasm into you. They will give you fresh ideas.

My 50s: “Who are these younger people that want to take my job away?”

My 60s: “How long can I keep doing the things that define me?”

My 70s: “Does anyone know who I once was?”

My 80s: “Will anybody remember me when I’m gone?”

These are the questions that people are bringing into church every week. They rarely hear anybody pray about them or preach to them. I would challenge the multi-generational leaders. I would ask the young people to engage the older people and say, “Tell me your story.” I would say to the older people, “You need to listen to the young people because they will build enthusiasm into you. They will give you fresh ideas. And tell them your story. Let them ask you questions. Don’t give them advice unless they ask for it, so we can bring this all together.”

JACL: Would you like to couple that response with your connection with Denver Seminary, which is so closely associated with mentoring? How does mentoring as a lifelong activity fit into those stages of life? How do you move into those years, and responsibly pass wisdom or apply your wisdom in the process of developing leaders?

MacDonald: From about the age of 35 on, part of our theology should have people recognize the value of investing deeply in the lives of the next generation. So by the age of 65 or 68, a huge perspective of your call and your priorities is investing backwards into the generations behind you.

For example, for the past 12 years, Gail and I have selected 15 younger people, and we give them a challenge: “We want you to come to our home

every Monday night for 40 weeks. If you will give us three hours every Monday night and you will not miss the high bar, we will pour our lives into you.” Every year we have dozens of women, couples, and singles that we walk through what we think are the rudiments of the Christian way of life. It’s been the most satisfying thing that we have ever done, and we’re wondering why we didn’t discover it before.

JACL: How does that connect with what you said a moment ago, that you don’t give advice unless that advice is requested?

You should be able to come from this experience knowing how to hear the voice of God as Eli helped Samuel hear the voice of God.

MacDonald: I wouldn’t classify what we do as advice giving. I would call it equipping. Every week, we read something together as a group, learn how to analyze it, and dialogue about it. We write our life stories. We talk about what it means to be called, to have spiritual gifts, and to have relationships. It is a teaching and disciplining activity.

And at the end of the year, we say to them, “You should be able to come from this experience knowing how to hear the voice of God as Eli helped Samuel hear the voice of God. You should know what kind of a leader you are, and where you want to invest yourself.” We have about 150 people out there now about whom we would say, “These are our sons and daughters in the faith.” I’ve written about that in a book called *Going Deep*, which is my attempt to lay out what I think genuine discipleship is all about.

Circling back, we have to teach people in churches to strategize their lives.

JACL: The need for scalability is huge. Writing a book is a really good start, but how do we get some of this institutionalized or at least embedded in our ways of being?

MacDonald: If we don’t build this into the core values of our institution, we’re going to be in a deep mess in about 10 years. We have now raised at least two generations that come out of total family brokenness.

They are disillusioned about marriage. Every bit of logic suggests that maybe it is a good idea to live together for two or three years and figure out whether this is going to make it. Everything is up for grabs.

This generation is desperate for a surrogate parental experience with some wise male, female or couple who will build into their lives in their 20s what

they didn't get in their pre-teen years. The new gospel is going to be built first upon the Trinity, and the community of the Godhead, because these young people are looking for relationships.

So if leaders of an institution like Andrews University don't face some new changing realities, which are psychological, emotional, theological, and spiritual, and build some new values into the school, then 10 years from now you're going to be in real trouble.

That's why the whole mentoring program came into Denver Seminary. We suddenly discovered a huge number of men and women coming into the seminary as recent believers. They were bringing in their addictions, their blind spots, and many unhappy marriages. These are people who are expected to go out and pastor churches. They are good people, but they are coming out of all this cultural brokenness. So the mentoring program is designed to expose them to a steady experience of people who have their act together. If schools don't do something like that, it's just going to be bad. Gail and I meet with the mentoring team all the time at Denver Seminary. We hear tragic stories of what's happened in the lives of people.

JACL: I think that maybe the sum or substance of what we are talking about is that people do need a new experience. Our responsibility in leadership is to figure out how we provide the kind of experience that is actually going to shape people and help them to be something different. Christian leaders will need to decide to invest in others' lives.

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MacDonald: My parents were a broken family. My parents divorced when I was in my early twenties, but they were domestic roommates for many years.

What God did for me is provide a strong man or a strong couple in my life up until four years ago. Dr. Vernon Grounds was my surrogate father for 30 years. I loved this man; he was the father I never had. God gave me a whole slew of men. Without those men, I wouldn't be here. There was always someone there to give me what I needed at that stage of my life, the wisdom that I needed. One of the reasons Gail and I were able to pull off a quick marriage is because we had my mentor's blessing.

JACL: Yes, I think that the notion of mentoring is really a huge thing that we all have to do better.

MacDonald: Wherever I go, I have young men asking, “You know, Dr. MacDonald, would you be willing to be my mentor?” I’ll say, mentoring only works when I can see the whites of your eyes. I want to see how you treat your girlfriend or your wife. I want to see whether you are keeping your financial disciplines. Churches have got to begin to train their middle-aged people as to how they are going to be mentors as they move up to their late 50s and 60s. It’s a whole new way of looking at church.

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JACL: There is a lot of leadership literature out there now related to what is called “destructive leadership behaviors.” What are some of the behaviors that you have seen that lead to some of the “below the waterline” relationships?

MacDonald: Henry Nouwen said something like this: “Many Christian leaders are unable to give or receive love, and have opted for power and control instead.” In my travels, I have seen a lot of young men building these mega-churches, these big box churches. They can do it very fast, and they can gather a crowd. It’s almost a ministry of sensation. They’re using these churches to satisfy a deep void in their lives, a void of “I need more love like an actress needs more crowds and applause.” I see a lot of very immature, unbalanced people in leadership today. I see that power and control all the time. It means that people are moving through the machinery of the church. They are there for two, maybe two and a half years. They’ve been hired, then they’re fired.

It’s all done on the basis of programs. Most modern mega-churches are not demanding of their pastors that they be theologically trained. We are seeing a diminution in enrollment in all the seminaries across the country. Young people don’t feel the need to do theological training. They are joining the staffs of mega-churches, and the churches are buying what I call turn-key programs, where you do programs in 28 days or in 90 days. We just hire bright young men and women to run these programs. They have no theological training. They do not know their Bibles. They have no sense of a deeper spiritual discipline.

They don’t have an ethical, moral or spiritual foundation with what they are doing, and it’s just a matter of time until they are broken. It’s really a very

dangerous day we're in. I don't want to spread gloom and doom, because I have spent my whole life contributing to the church, but there are some trend lines that really worry me.

JACL: I think this ties into the question of what it means to be a Christian leader and how we develop Christian leaders. What is the theology? What do we need to be doing in our programs in our D.Min. and our Ph.D. in Leadership? Even in the field, when we are working with church leaders, how do we help each other to know what it means to be a Christian leader?

MacDonald: I would only suggest that we need modifiers to help us understand what kind of a leader, because there are organizational leaders and there are thought leaders. The kind of leadership I'm trying to talk to is spiritual leadership, which is the underlying quality that ought to be true of us all.

When you look at the landscape of an institution or church, it is a healthy moment for the senior leaders to discern who the men and women are in the church who have the word from God, who put legs under our vision and build us up, and who can mentor people. We ought to have these people recognized, knowing how to free them up to do what they do best.

JACL: In your second segment this morning, you presented a distinct difference between competency and character, or the being and the doing aspect of ministry. What do you see as the godly competency or character in the development of pastors?

I see a lot of very immature, unbalanced people in leadership today. I see that power and control all the time.

MacDonald: I don't know that I can give you a satisfactory answer. Right off the top of my head, my thought is that everybody is responsible to develop an understanding of biblical character. That's the foundation of every life.

In my work I often ask, "What are the distinguishing characteristics of a Denver graduate? Give me four or five marks that every time you approach a person, you can say 'That person must have been touched by Denver.'"

Then on top of those marks are the individual skills. For example, "You are a really good organizing guy; we're going to come to you every time we need to put legs under a dream." But "You are a thought leader, so we are going to ask you to think through the philosophical and theological aspects of what it is we need to be doing five years from now." Or "You are a person who under-

stands how to bring people into the spiritual disciplines.”

We should have five to nine categories that we give people a chance to review. “Which one, two, or three of these categories do you think fits most for you?” Let people begin to see that they have strengths. I’m a pastor. I do my best work in small groups or in encountering one-on-ones and one-on-twos.

Yet as Grace Chapel grew, I did less pastoring and more CEOing. In my final years all my week was spent with the top lay leaders, the heavy donors, the top staff people, and talking about long-range planning. I enjoyed it, but I didn’t miss it when I left. I knew that I really enjoyed pastoring in small groups.

Everybody is responsible to develop an understanding of biblical character. That’s the foundation of every life.

JACL: I’ve seen in the literature that there are schools of leadership that are being developed in secular universities by bringing faculty together from the various components of those universities to develop a collaborative leadership program. Are you seeing anything like that in the landscape of Christian education and Christian universities?

MacDonald: Not that I know of. I don’t know of any school that is specializing in a kind of leadership. I don’t know what it would do for us.

JACL: The reason I’m asking is because the business schools look at it strictly from a business model. The school of psychology will look at it through the eyes of psychology. The schools of political science would look at it through the eyes of political science. You don’t have all of that together in a way that is continually feeding multiple generations over the course of time to create and address the different components of who the self is. I’m wondering if that is part of the challenge that we have in addressing the whole leader. Have we “siload” certain portions of leadership and not addressed the whole leader? How do we overcome that?

MacDonald: The first thing I thought of was money. If I’m reading your question correctly, it may be more possible by technology where you don’t have to bring everybody to a central place anymore. You can create a technologically driven network, where people are visiting all across the world, trading ideas, and doing technological seminars online. That might happen.

The challenge of this is that the paradigm is just in constant shift and that

nothing is nailed down anymore. I just don't know how you freeze a leadership model and teach it. It's amazing how complex it's become.

JACL: Hence our lack of a unifying theory of leadership. The recognition is there that it doesn't exist.

MacDonald: Well, James Burns in his earliest book on leadership said leadership cannot be defined. You just know it when you use it. I'm kind of tired of the word myself because it almost always drifts toward organizational leadership of one type or another.

If you go to the end of Matthew 23, when Jesus stomps out of the temple, the disciples go to Jesus privately, and He says, "I tell you, not one stone will be left on another." The old paradigm is going to be destroyed completely. He goes through these two chapters, and describes chaos and society coming apart. If you look closely through the whole thing, He gives about five admonitions as to how you live in chaos. Don't ever be deceived. In other words, you have to be wise and discerning. Always know that history is coming to an end. Be faithful stewards of the gifts God has given to you. Make the poor your number one priority. You have this whole menu as to how people live as biblical people in chaos.

Don't ever be deceived. In other words, you have to be wise and discerning.

JACL: How can we be confident that we are sending out people who are spiritual leaders, and that they are capable of establishing a place where God's Spirit can be present?

MacDonald: My word for what you call spiritual leaders is "deep people." I borrowed that from Richard Foster, who at one point says in *Celebration of Discipline* that what the church needs today is not more bright or active people, but what we need is a few deep people. So I ask myself the question: What does a deep person look like? Have you ever met a deep person? One of my favorite questions to ask people is, "Have you ever met a truly holy woman or man?"

No one rushes to answer that. People think. They finally look up, apologize and say, "I don't think I know any holy people."

Well, that's an indictment. So I took Foster's phrase, deep people, and I asked the question, "What does a deep person look like?" I came up with 16 or 17 bullets, which on another day I would probably review with a crowd like

this. Maybe, you can sit with a small group and ask, “What does a spiritual leader look like?” My bet is that most people are using the term but have never been challenged to define a real meaning of the term. It’s just one of those throw away terms that you say at the right moment. Give them 15 bullet points out of Scripture and through the history of the Christian movement. What do holy people look like?

One of my favorite questions to ask people is, “Have you ever met a truly holy woman or man?”

JACL: It is a very clear part of God’s promise that we would become holy people. God’s promise is very clear in that His expectation is that we become holy people.

MacDonald: Well, why isn’t it happening? I would venture a guess. There is something deeply flawed in the model of the church that we are all trying to build. There is something deeply flawed in our theology that is giving wrong conclusions. How does a man or a woman become a genuine follower of Jesus? Why don’t faculty come together and combine their minds to come up with a new definition of the gospel that fits the 21st century?

JACL: I would like to close off by reflecting on a question that you had on the screen today: “Are people better off because they have been with you?” I thank you because I think that is the finest litmus test of godly leadership. People are actually generated and grown as a result of our contribution to leadership in their lives.

MacDonald: I love Greenleaf, who brought us back to the notion of servant leadership. Is there any better passage in the Bible than John 13, where Jesus washes all the muck, the bacteria off the feet of His disciples. He gives us this incredible new view of what influence looks like.

We need to ask ourselves, “Can you really run the modern church on a servant leadership basis?” My answer is “no” because the modern church is built on the model of a business or of an army. It requires people who wield authority and who hire and fire and give pay raises. That’s not servant leadership. That’s running a company. That’s playing to the business core of the church.

Let’s go back and remove the contemporary church, and cluster a group of people together on a servanthood leadership basis. What would that cluster look like? Would they even have a building? How would they manage their money? How would decisions get made? Maybe you would discover that ser-

vant leadership is impossible to do in a group that is larger than 40 people. That smells like house church to me.

JACL: It is the kind of church that my children and my grandchildren wish for. They are not interested in the corporate church.

MacDonald: I've been a churchman all my life. But there is a little battle that goes on in our home every week. Are we going to go to church this weekend? Because we know what is going to happen. We're thinking to ourselves about dying, and losing people. We're thinking about, "Do we have enough financial security to the age of 103." We're worried about our grandchildren who may be drifting in one way or the other in ways that we're concerned about. Does anybody have a word for us? We speak to the young people most of the time, but every once in a while, please recognize that we're sitting here paying the bills.

And so it would be much easier—Gail and I are thinking about inviting five or six couples, and we would just meet occasionally, once every four or five weeks on a convenient date. We would just spent an evening worshipping together. We'd discuss something out of Scripture that would bless us all. Just kind of a surrogate church experience for a few of us.

There is something deeply flawed in the model of the church that we are all trying to build. There is something deeply flawed in our theology that is giving wrong conclusions.

JACL: I thought I was the only person who thought about those things.

MacDonald: I suspect a lot of people think about it. I think that we are going to see a total change over in the next years in the model of the church as new generations come online.

JACL: And then we will all be amazed at the extent to which God's Spirit moves among us.

MacDonald: I agree with that.

JACL: Isn't that we are all craving for?

MacDonald: Yes, I think so.

JACL: God bless you! Thank you!