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SCOTT M. DOUGLAS

DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY

Churches and denominations survive by the capable and continued leadership of their pastors, who have learned from those who came before them. Polycarp and Ignatius learned from the Apostle John, Melancthon from Luther, Beza from Calvin, and Rick Warren from Spurgeon (through the availability of Spurgeon's writings). This article explores how five senior pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention establish mentoring relationships with their associate pastors.

Mentoring provides an opportunity to bring the younger and older ministers on a church staff together in a relationship designed to produce a mature disciple who can then replicate the process, thus creating a cycle of leadership development (McDonald, 2004). Mentoring and leadership development are linked together for a deep work, creating a lasting legacy beyond the immediate tenure of the lead pastor (Reese & Loane, 2012).

Mentoring in the Bible

There are several biblical examples of leadership development, perhaps the best of which are Paul's development of Timothy and Titus, and Jesus' ministry with the Twelve. Paul takes a young man named Timothy and commends him to other churches as an authority, names him as a co-author of biblical epistles, and implores him to carry on the tasks of planting and leading churches (Williams, 2005). The relationship Paul has with Timothy, assuming the role of spiritual father (1 Tim. 1:2), is viewed as the primary motivator in Timothy's leadership development (Lawless, 2012).

The Gospels, especially Mark, offer a brief view of Jesus' leadership development of His disciples. He calls them to follow after Him in Mark

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1, He teaches them and closely supervises them as they grow in Mark 4, and ultimately the Great Commission functions as a “graduation” of the disciples, who have been officially tasked with carrying on the mission of Jesus (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003). Moon (2009) describes the leadership development of Jesus with the 12 disciples as an apprentice-master relationship in which the disciples learned from their master while they experienced life with Him. Jesus succinctly describes this development of future leaders: “But everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40, ESV). In that short statement, Jesus makes it clear for those who would come after Him that raising up leaders is about replicating oneself in the protégé, and developing the whole person rather than simply fulfilling a curricula.

Ephesians 4:11-16 calls for pastors and church leaders to not do the work of ministry on their own, but to equip the congregation for the work of ministry. This idea of equipping is how the mentoring relationship works: the mentor works to release the protégé to a point of independence from the mentor (Thompson, 2001). Butler and Herman (1999) found that pastors who were effective displayed a high level of shepherding and change-agent ability; rather than having a short-sighted focus on the individual they were mentoring in isolation, they were developing a leadership cycle.

Living in a Mentoring Relationship

As I interviewed five pastoral teams as part of a larger study (Douglas, 2013), seven major themes emerged. Together, these themes provide a powerful profile for how these high-performing churches were able to identify, train, and retain effective associate pastors and how the senior pastors could invest in them for their transition into senior leadership roles in churches. The themes are clustered into three categories: personal, professional, and legacy.

In the personal category, the themes that emerged were the emphasis on character, the priority of family, and the very real friendship between the lead pastors and their associates.

Emphasis on Character

The phrase “above reproach” surfaced in many of the interviews. This demonstrated who they wanted their pastors to be. It showed up in the policies and practices they wanted the churches to have in place to protect their integrity. For example, they talked about monitoring software on their computers, policies that prohibited youth pastors from being

alone with a teenage girl, and counseling protocols to ensure that no pastor would meet alone with a woman. They also regularly practiced spiritual disciplines together. One pastor remarked, “I have years of case studies I bring up with my associate to show him the dangers of ministry if your character fails.”

Priority of the Family

With 80% of pastors believing ministry has negatively affected their family, and 94% of ministry families sharing the stress of the pastor’s work (Pastoral Care, Inc., 2013), these high-performing churches made sure family was a priority for their ministry team. The pastor of a large church remarked on his church’s philosophy: “family is not to be sacrificed on the altar of ministry.” To make sure family is truly prioritized, four of the lead pastors interviewed said they are committed to modeling this. A pastor of a smaller church asked, “How can I expect him to make his family a priority if I’m not making mine a priority?” Two churches included family health in their performance appraisals, tying job performance to the pastor’s care of his family.

Real Friendship

It was very obvious in the interviews that the friendship between the senior and associate pastor extended beyond the office. One older pastor went as far to say, “I see him a lot of ways more like a son than anything else.” This personal investment both in and out of the office setting was credited with the associate’s response to the senior pastor’s leadership.

The next cluster of themes focuses on the professional aspects of the mentoring relationship. In this category, the emerging themes were pre-emptive hiring practices, freedom and flexibility for the associate pastor, and a non-formal pattern of leadership development.

Pre-emptive Hiring Practices

One church used stringent hiring practices to make sure they identified the right candidate. “We do such a thorough job to make sure we have the right guy, so we don’t have to worry about mistakes in character later,” said one pastor. “We know he’s teachable and has great potential, and we already trust him.”

Freedom and Flexibility

Freedom and flexibility to do the job were connected to the avoidance of micro-managing in these churches. The pastor of the largest church in

this study said, “I don’t feel like I have to look over his shoulder all the time. He needs to be able to do his work without me checking on him all the time. That’s why we do performance assessments.” Another senior pastor used the words “empower,” “enable,” and “encourage” to describe his supervision of his associate pastor. This combination of freedom and non-micromanagement allowed for a true team to form; the associate pastors were valued as integral parts of the team rather than merely cogs in the wheel. It also allowed the senior pastors more time to cast vision and give strategic leadership.

Non-formal Pattern of Leadership Development

It was interesting to see that only one of the churches studied had an established and formal pattern with specific targets/goals. While the lack of formal goals and objective measurements was surprising, the emphasis on the connection between personal and professional outcomes demonstrated that the churches that were successful in developing younger leaders recognized the necessity of work-life balance. This was only possible because there was a definite intentionality at work in these churches. The lead pastors saw this in the life of Jesus; as one pointed out, “He never operated with a formal development of the 12 disciples, but took advantage of opportunities to teach and develop them.” In four of the churches, this informal pattern included an open-door policy in which the lead pastor was accessible by his associate and was able to have, as one said, “a comprehensive understanding of what he’s doing and how it fits in the ministry of the church.”

Legacy

The last category, legacy, involves the work of the senior pastor to develop the associate beyond the associate’s tenure at the current church or even the lifetime of the senior pastor. The one observation that fit into this category was the lead pastor’s willingness to share leadership responsibilities within the church, even if it was outside the associate’s particular ministry emphasis or job title. This was unique because, unlike the survey results, which showed that a majority of associates did not have a clear career trajectory, all five associates interviewed had a desire to become a lead pastor one day. One large church’s pastor said, “I want him involved in the long-range planning of a new campus we’re hoping to launch soon, and I want him in there because eventually he’s going to be the one to lead that campus.” This kind of trust, empowerment, and delegation depends on the previous six observations.

The combination of an associate with the mix of character and competency, a healthy organizational climate, and a willingness to make the investment, led to the establishment of a leadership legacy. The reason for this was clear; the pastor of the smallest church interviewed said, “He wants to sit in my chair someday; he needs to be as prepared as possible to lead a church. Those are God’s people.” To help prepare the younger associates, senior pastors gave them ample opportunity in the pulpit, delegated administrative aspects, called on the associate to do pastoral care visits, and asked the associate to coordinate the direction of a contemporary worship service geared for young adults. All of the lead pastors interviewed happily gave their associate opportunities to shine, and took joy in elevating the associate’s platform in the church. Speaking of his senior pastor, one associate said, “He’s comfortable in his skin, and he truly does have a desire to lead with humility.”

Application

Jesus said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. (Matt. 20:25-27, ESV)

For Jesus, the mark of true leadership is humility. Both the lead pastor and the associate pastor must come to the table with a humble attitude, recognizing that there are likely generational differences but that these must not cause division or jealousy among those whom God has called to serve. Lead pastors must humbly recognize their associate pastor’s gifts, abilities, and potential and seek to elevate them with the next generation in mind. In the same vein, the younger associate pastor must be careful to not assume that because his older pastor does not have a Twitter account that he should be dismissed—he has served faithfully for decades and has much to teach.

A second point of application is that there needs to be a plan to develop the younger associate pastor as an effective minister. How this will be done is up to the individual context, but a few things need to be considered. One area of consideration is the skill set necessary for effective ministry. Just as a baseball player needs to be able to hit, throw, run, and catch, a pastor needs to have a base level of competence in several areas. The lead pastor and associate pastor should come up with a list of areas important for pastoral ministry. The associate pastor needs to honestly assess his ability in those areas, shaping the course of his leader-

ship development under the lead pastor while they are together. This plan is also important because associate pastors tend to have a much shorter tenure at each church than a lead pastor. Time should not be wasted, because a promising and high-performing associate pastor will be in demand and will be recruited by other churches.

Along with the necessary skill set, there needs to be a regular plan of communication, feedback, accountability, and expectations. Each ministry team needs to know exactly what will be expected of them, and the lead pastor needs to initiate communication with his associate to ensure that a healthy and open team dynamic takes place. Associate pastors need to be given opportunities to grow; they need to be put in positions where they perform the functions of a lead pastor, just as in a teaching hospital residents are given the opportunity to practice medicine under the supervision of an attending physician.

Finally, a Jesus-centered mindset needs to permeate every aspect of the ministry team. This is not about personal success, ego-boosting, or launching another job opportunity. Ministry is about connecting people to Jesus as Savior and to one another as Christian community. Skill growth, job expectations, and growth opportunity matter very little if Jesus is not the focus.

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