

## Leadership Skills to Empower Churches

One of the important qualities that healthy, growing Christian churches need and have in common is empowering leadership. "Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry. They do not use lay workers as helpers in attaining their own goals and fulfilling their own visions. Rather, they invert the pyramid of authority so that the leader assists Christians to attain the spiritual potential God has for them. These pastors equip, support, motivate and mentor individuals, enabling them to become all that God wants them to be."<sup>1</sup>

Church leadership begins with an understanding that making disciples is the center of all church activities. The approach of Jesus and Paul was spiritual multiplication and reproduction of believers, not just adding members to the church. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples . . . teaching them to do everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Paul wrote, "The gifts he gave were . . . to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must . . . grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, *joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love*" (Ephesians 4:11-16).

At the root of the church becoming the body of Christ is a belief in the potential of people and a conviction that each person brings special gifts that are to be used in the community of faith. In Leadership is an Art, Max DePree envisions a community with a great deal of trust: "We need to be able to count on the other person's special competence . . . we can see that without each individual, we are not going to go very far as a group. By ourselves we suffer serious limitations. Together we can be something wonderful."<sup>2</sup> The challenge is to risk ourselves to others: "to be abandoned to the talents and skills of others, and therefore to be vulnerable. The same risks as one has when falling in love."<sup>3</sup>

The nature of our church community tells us something about the skills required of our leaders. Churches need to redefine the leadership focus from "How much have you done?" to "How many others have you involved?" As leaders, we need to help to develop each person for effective ministry. We also need to help foster healthy relationships between our members. This means building trust, not just management structures. And we need to support diversity and inclusiveness by helping all members to appreciate and encourage the great variety of gifts that people bring to the church. DePree writes, "It is more difficult, but far more important, to be committed to a corporate concept of persons, the diversity of human gifts, covenantal relationships, lavish communications, including everyone, and believing that leadership is a condition of indebtedness."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christian A. Schwarz, Natural Church Development (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996) at 22.

<sup>2</sup> (New York:Dell, 1989) at 50.

<sup>3</sup> DePree at 38.

<sup>4</sup> DePree at 72.

As leaders, we must create an environment where people can be empowered for ministry. Leaders need to proclaim a mission that is inspiring and worth achieving, set goals that stretch people's abilities, create expectations that the goals can be met, build a spirit of teamwork, and help create a sense of urgency for the mission of the church. A leader must call forth and support the vision of the church without micromanaging strategies, and must be able to prevent the weaker links (dependent or recalcitrant members) from undercutting the church's vision and strategies.

Within this larger framework, helping people develop their gifts and talents and use them in ministry is primarily a one to one function. Empowering leaders are good at preparing others to take over the tasks of ministry – through encouragement, training, spiritual direction and practical supervision. Empowering leaders ask, "What is this person's unique contribution?" and then help equip the individual according to his or her gifts and desires (not just according to what the church seems to need at the time).

This takes time and energy because empowering leaders need to: Build close, open relationships. Actively listen. Provide help, support and the necessary resources. Involve the person in deciding on and setting goals and targets. Show enthusiasm and belief in the person. Acknowledge the person's successes. Reflect back to the skills and talents the person has already demonstrated. And be honest about the person's worries and concerns, openly discussing fears and considering the worst possible outcomes.

Some ministry discernment can and ought to be done within the church community, not just with a leader. Moreover, several people may learn a particular skill at the same time in training sessions. But leaders also need to individually focus on helping a person grow into a particular ministry, tackling his or her particular issues and concerns. There is no substitute for quality time spent with the individual, just as Jesus spent time with his disciples.

In Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness,<sup>5</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf points out that leadership is not everybody's gift and that to be a good follower is as important as being a good leader. Some people do not want to be leaders, do not have the gift of leadership, and should not be forced or talked into it. However, each of us needs to support the gifts of others, to be careful not to protect our own turf in the church community. We will all thrive if we broaden the opportunities for people to get involved in the church according to their gifts and desires.

Churches need to consider the qualities of their leaders, both lay and clergy, when calling them to ministry. More important to a healthy Christian church than any natural leadership ability, however, is this approach of empowering leadership. The greatest advice for empowering leadership is DePree's statement that "Joy is an essential ingredient of leadership. Leaders are obligated to provide it."<sup>6</sup> People find great joy in being empowered to fulfill the ministries to which they are called.

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<sup>5</sup> With Larry C. Spears (Editor) and Stephen R. Covey (Paulist Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> DePree at 146.