



Developing Lay Leaders

By Dan Entwistle

A few years back a pastor approached me with a complaint about his ministry. He was facing a significant challenge of finding leaders. “My church just doesn’t do a good job of developing leaders,” he shared. He went on to say that whenever he tried to move the ministry forward he couldn’t; the church wasn’t giving him enough leaders to accomplish his goals. There were plenty of volunteers, but not enough leaders. After reflecting on his dilemma, I returned to him with a question, “Whose job is it to develop your leaders?”

The truth is: no one has more responsibility for the development of leaders than you do. The discipleship and worship systems in your church are fundamentally important, but life-on-life ministry always carries the day in leadership development. Your church has no better development tool in its arsenal than putting people into hands-on Christian service in a healthy ministry. The church has a stake in developing people, not because we want something *from* them, but because we want the best *for* them. Your equipping efforts will provide the essential support they need to take additional steps forward in their spiritual journey.

There are four keys to *equipping* volunteers to become real leaders in the life of the church:

1. *Apprenticing your Volunteers*

In the Middle Ages, specialized artisans raised up future generations through an intentional apprenticeship process. Young apprentices served as understudies alongside a mentor

who provided careful instruction and patient guidance.

We can look to Jesus as the preeminent mentor—he turned a ragged group of social and spiritual misfits into world-changers. In fact, we are the legacy of this mentoring relationship. How did this happen? It took time with the master. He invested diligently in the lives of folks who just couldn’t quite seem to get their acts together. In fact, they bumbled the message and missed the point as they followed him. But they watched and observed the master teacher. And there was an atmosphere of trust and risk-taking. When they were sent on their first mission assignment, they were in way over their heads. But they had seen what Jesus did, and they had clear instructions. They gathered themselves together and the world hasn’t been the same since.

Think investment. Mentoring is a risky, costly business. It requires time, effort, and disciplined focus. As ministry leaders, we are tempted to deliver results quickly and efficiently. But remember, deep-impact ministry is found in *developing people, not acquiring them*. Leaders with lasting impact—the ones who truly change the world—know their greatest impact in life is reproducing other people who have caught their vision and will carry it forward like a virus. If you want to radically change the world, invest in your volunteers.

2. *Utilizing a Team Structure*

You are being stretched thin by the demands of ministry. If you have personal responsibility for too many details, programs,

and people you have a “span-of-care” issue. All leaders have limits that cannot be ignored. At The Church of the Resurrection, for instance, we try to limit the number of people supervised by any one manager to six. If supervision is stretched further than this, there begins to be a breakdown in development and communication. When your ministry expands, you’ll have to establish a team structure that grows with you.

When we launched a satellite campus twenty minutes away, we subdivided our overall ministry into five key smaller work areas (worship logistics, missions, children’s ministry, youth ministry, and music ministry) and we invited a leader to serve as the point person for each area. Now we had six leaders, including the campus pastor. But the work was far too great to accomplish with six people. In order for the effort to reach its full potential, each of these five volunteer ministry leaders would build a team to come alongside him or her particularly focused on an area of the program. With each member of each team contributing, we had multiplied the involvement to more than thirty people and had avoided the error of placing too much work at the feet of a few volunteers.

This is a model of reproducible teamwork. The pattern works at all levels up and down your church, from the highest level of leaders surrounding the senior pastor to the smallest tasks completed by occasional volunteers. And regardless of the size of your church, the principle of team will multiply the vision of the leader and ensure that more persons are meaningfully involved in fulfilling the church’s mission.

3. Training for the Work

In the past, training tended to come in two flavors: on-the-job and speaker on the stage. Get creative! Consider a few of these options:

Attend a conference together. Churches across the country are now offering ministry conferences at reasonable prices. Some conferences are held in your ministry area. Other, like The Church of the Resurrection’s Leadership Institute, offer general sessions on leadership principles and practical breakout sessions on topics for every ministry area. If you travel to a conference, consider driving rather than flying. Not only will it reduce expenses but also the car time provides a perfect opportunity to prepare beforehand and debrief afterwards.

Show training videos. Many conferences and training events now offer videos of their sessions for purchase. Your entire team can experience great training at a fraction of the cost of traveling.

Start a group blog or an online forum. Engage volunteers with content throughout the year by posting content on the web. You can link to trusted websites in your ministry area so they can research on their own and develop their expertise in your ministry.

Visit a local organization. Take your volunteers to a place where they’ll catch another angle. Use the opportunity to observe and interview other leaders and do some white-board thinking about your ministry area. For example, if you want your program to become more welcoming to visitors, go to a restaurant known for outstanding hospitality. If you’d like to help your team to become more innovative, visit an advertising firm. If your ministry is in decline, visit a business that was once in decline and turned itself around. If you would like to sharpen your focus on intentional discipleship, visit a local fitness center.

4. Developing Leaders

Your ministry has an opportunity to grow volunteer helpers into ministry leaders. Most people underestimate what God is capable of doing through them. Your volunteers have the potential to become more useful to God than they have imagined and to continually develop in their understanding of God’s mission. As servant-leaders, they will grow in faith as they give themselves away in the pattern of Jesus’ ministry. They will discover strengths and gifts that they didn’t know they had.

To aid this process of development, you will want to be intentional about creating a pathway for their development. Some ministries offer a leadership course or a series of courses to develop leaders. Other ministries opt for a less formal and more relational strategy. You may even choose to offer a churchwide leadership program, or band together with your colleagues from other local churches to collectively develop leaders for your specific ministry focus.

No matter what direction you choose, your design should foster growth in three areas: the *head*, the *heart*, and the *hands*.

The head represents our thinking. As we pursue growth in our minds we are expanding in our theological understanding of the Christian worldview. We are constant learners, studying from the pages of scripture and theological works. The goal is to move toward a sound understanding of faith—a Christian worldview. Bible study is the key component, balanced with other sources of sound teachings. By exploring the theology of ministry, you will help your volunteers understand the nature and importance of the ministry to which God has called them.

The heart represents our relationships. We experience relationships in two directions—in our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with other people. The heart is the center of transformation. Heady knowledge by itself falls short. Notice Jesus’ statement that even the demons call him Lord—they had right knowledge, but wrong hearts. Volunteers are generous with their time, but they should also be growing in their spiritual disciplines (such as worship, prayer, and devotion) and in their relationships with other people.

The hands represent Christian service. Your volunteers are already serving. They know how to translate knowledge (head) and transformation (heart) into a lifestyle of service to God and others. Your role is to stimulate their continued development as servant leaders who have an others-focused life. It is countercultural to have a life that places a higher priority on others rather than ourselves. By developing laypersons into servant-leaders, you not only fulfill practical needs within your congregation, but advance God’s mission to serve a hurting world. □



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