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Leadership: The Persistent Problem, the Exciting Challenge

The issue of leadership is the most persistent problem and one of the most difficult challenges facing the church regarding youth ministry, if not other areas of ministry as well. In fact, it's often said that one of the problems we face in modern American society is a lack of "leadership." Careful listening to the discussion usually reveals that Americans have no widely accepted understanding of what leadership is or ought to be. A cursory look in a general bookstore also provides evidence of this confusion as indicated by the many books on leadership from varying perspectives, all of which seem to be selling well. This variety raises definitional questions: is leadership a certain piety, a certain moral character of one's personal life, a commitment to help the less fortunate, the ability to galvanize support from differing constituencies, an ability to bring forth compromise from various differing bodies, and so forth. Even from a biblical perspective there are different understandings of leadership, including wisdom-based, priestly, prophetic, kingly, disciple-making etc.

One task that a congregation must go through in developing youth ministry is to come to some agreement as to what qualities they are looking for in youth leaders. This task, though formidable, is also an exciting challenge that when met well yields one of the most important components of a successful program. In spite of the difficulty in coming to a consensus definition of *leadership*, we will attempt in this chapter to construct a framework for examining leadership in youth ministry. For this examination, we will identify and discuss the key issues of leadership education, recruitment from various leadership pools, best practices found, and the church's obligation to help young people become effective leaders.

Educating Youth Ministry Leaders

Challenge number one in church leadership is how the church educates the pastoral leadership of its congregations. How relevant is the education to the actual job? The congregation seeking a youth ministry leader cannot simply assume relevance and competence by the diploma that the candidate holds.

To Go or Not to Go to Seminary

At the risk of being overly simplistic, it would seem that there have been two generally accepted ways that people move into professional leadership in the church. One way is to respond to God's call by first getting what is now considered a master's degree from an accredited theological institution. The other is to respond to God's call by doing ministry and observing whether God provides in that ministry. For most of the last century, allowing people to move directly into ministry without receiving specialized education was not generally accepted by the so-called "mainline" churches. There were some manifestations of the non-educational route in varying degrees within the Methodist and Baptist denominations with lay preachers and local pastors. Even the Pentecostal movement has been slowly convinced that the majority of its pastors ought to have a

master's degree from an accredited institution, although many still do not go to an accredited seminary.

Some current churches who have been extremely successful in terms of congregational size and new church development have a number of professional church leaders who did not go to seminary. Examples are Calvary, Vineyard, and Hope Chapel and other mega churches such as Willow Creek and Saddlebrook. This success may challenge the prevailing ways mainline churches have educated its leadership. Donald E. Miller, Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California and a practicing Episcopalian, puts it this way in his authoritative book on Calvary, Vineyard, and Hope Chapel entitled Reinventing American Protestantism:¹

“The current method of clergy recruitment is not conducive to attracting people with exceptional leadership skills; seminaries may even dull the vision and passion of those who might lead the church in the twenty-first century...When it is time to hire a new staff member, for example, perhaps someone should be selected from the ranks of the laity. Why? Because that person has proven his or her leadership abilities and fully understands the vision and culture of the institution.”

All three of these new “denominations” have tended to raise up leadership from within their congregations. Those churches have the newly recruited or called leaders “shadow” or be a part of the church’s ministry for a period of time, and then release them into the world or their congregation to put into practice what they have learned. If these new leaders are able to continue fruitfully, then it is assumed that they have the gifts and graces and are responding to God’s call. If they fail, perhaps they are not ready or do not have the qualifications to do ministry.

The explosion of base communities in Latin America in the past several decades followed a similar pattern in which a group of people in the church asks a person to see if God has called him or her. If the person agrees, then he or she responds to the call by getting an education and returning to do ministry within the base community that made the call.²

In the current system used by most mainline American protestant churches, individuals respond to God’s call and then hope the church (the community) will endorse that call. Since many seminaries have become tuition driven (as opposed to being sustained by the church), they have increasingly “found” or “recruited” students and then hoped mainline churches would provide jobs if the students meet the educational requirements.

The Place of Field Education in Church Leadership Curricula

A major issue related to the education of church leaders is the educational program’s relevance to the ministries in which the leaders will serve. Tex Sample, in his books *Blue-Collar Ministry* and *US Lifestyles and Main line Churches*, asserts that seminaries often educate professional leaders in a way that raises them above the class of people

they are being sent to minister to.³ This class difference has created problems for the professional leadership and the churches they serve.

Again Dr. Miller, ‘Seminaries need to be radically restructured, allowing more theological education to be done in local churches. Let clergy who want a graduate education go to a major university and study philosophy, church history, or theology. Seminaries, in contrast, should be professional schools where people are mentored and taught while they serve within a local congregation.’⁴

Most, if not all, seminaries would argue that they have some sort of field education, but field education stands at the edges of the curriculum, not at its heart, as Miller suggests it ought. As the new, high-growth churches mentioned earlier have demonstrated, the ‘classic’ disciplines upon which seminary curricula are based are not needed to provide exceptional pastoral leadership. Indeed there seems to be no data that suggests a master’s degree from an accredited theological institution makes one a better pastor or allows one to be better able to provide leadership to the church.⁵

The Lack of Training for Specialized Youth Ministry

A seminary-educated leader is certainly more knowledgeable about many topics and subjects than a leader who hasn’t attended seminary, particularly church history, theology, and the academic study of the Bible. However—and this issue is most relevant to our discussion—youth ministry is probably *not* one of these topics.

There is a lack of theological training available for any form of specialized ministry, especially youth ministry, which many seminaries may not even recognize as a field of study. The accepted wisdom in mainline churches has been, ‘if you feel called to seminary, get a liberal arts education and then go to seminary. The Master of Divinity degree will prepare you in three or four years to do any form of ‘specialized’ ministry because it is all ministry.’⁶ Then if a congregation wants a youth minister, they simply hire an associate pastor who would do various forms of ministry and work with the youth.

This traditional method of staffing youth ministry has not worked for a variety of reasons but primarily because youth ministry is a ‘specialized’ calling, and most theological institutions have no idea how to prepare a person to live out that calling. This void in youth ministry education may be changing now that Princeton Theological Seminary (one of the flagship theological institutions in mainline Protestantism) has created a faculty position in youth and culture and the faculty at Princeton Seminary seem to have embraced this new position by granting tenure to its holder, Kenda Creasey Dean.

The Utilization of Laity in Church Ministry

In addition to the educational issues, challenge number two in church leadership is that we don’t allow lay volunteers to do very much ministry. In fact, the paid pastoral staff often does not want the lay leadership of a congregation running the ministry. Three reasons could be (1) if the laity does run the ministry of the congregation and things go

poorly, pastoral leadership may not be able to move up the institutional ladder, (2) if the ministry goes well, perhaps the laity will realize that one does not need paid professional and (3) sometimes the professionals do not know how to train and release the laity for service.

Dr. Miller asserts,

‘If the mainline churches are going to regain their leadership, they must do two things that the new paradigm churches already have mastered: first, they must give the ministry back to the people, which implies creating a much flatter organizational structure; and second, they must become vehicles for people to access the sacred in profound and life-changing ways...The fastest-growing and largest churches in the world are cell based, with all of the church ministry flowing out of small groupings of people who meet weekly, worshiping together, studying together, praying together, and often engaging in highly imaginative service to people in their neighborhoods. Pastoral care, evangelism, and cross-generational interaction all occur within these groups, which are led and organized by lay people.’⁷

Much of ministry and particularly “specialized” ministry, whether it be Christian education, youth ministry, pastoral care, worship, music, etc., remains in a phase where we have been training “professionals” to *do* the ministry. Unfortunately, one of the by products of this process has been professionals who want the laity in the church to leave this aspect of ministry to them, the professionals. In other words, the professionals do not want the help of the laity. Further the church has lay persons who have grown accustomed to “professionals” doing the ministry and who want the professionals to continue. The reasoning goes, “after all, that is what the professionals are educated to do and why we are paying them!”

Giving the ministry back to the people is not something professional leadership has done well, especially not in youth ministry. Often the part-time staff person in youth ministry understands that he or she is getting paid to do the ministry and not to facilitate or give the ministry back to the congregation. Of course, many of the laity agree with this assessment.

Most of the new paradigm churches employ professionals to do a variety of “specialized” ministries, whether it be running web sites, planning worship elaborately, creating a praise band, or leading youth ministries. According to Miller these professionals seem to think about ministry and engage in it in a different style than is currently being practiced in most churches. These professionals understand that the vast majority of their responsibility is to help the laity (the church) engage in ministry, *not* do the ministry for them.

Recruiting a Congregation's Youth Ministry Leadership

After teaching at two different theological institutions for more than sixteen years and being in youth ministry for over two-dozen years, I am convinced that youth ministry, like much of ministry, is personality driven. Recruiting the right person or persons can ensure skilled team building in youth ministry and enable a congregation to have a wonderfully effective congregational youth ministry. The wrong person, even with all the education, including a seminary degree, cannot “make” youth ministry team-based, faithful, and/or successful.

Always keeping personality in mind, what direction should your congregation take in recruiting youth ministry leaders? Should you hire an associate pastor? Should you go for a seminary or college intern or a part-time worker? Should you hire a college graduate in youth ministry who is from a more “evangelical” denomination than yours because of the greater availability there of trained youth ministers? Should you ask Young Life or Tentmakers to provide you with a youth worker? Should you strictly go with volunteers, and if you do so, what is good education for them: Sonlife, Princeton's Youth Ministry Institute, Perkins School of Youth Ministry, Youth Specialties, Group? The answer is complex and depends greatly on the way your congregation and leadership, both ordained and lay, view youth ministry (see chapter one). Those searching for youth ministry leaders need to be aware of the particular advantages and disadvantages to each option.

Recruiting an Associate Pastor

To hire an associate pastor is typically not to get someone who specializes in youth ministry. Often associate pastors view this position as a stepping-stone in their career. There are a few exceptions to this concept but not many. After all, most pastors did not go to seminary and get ordained “just” to do youth ministry, but rather to be the pastor **in charge** of a congregation. If a congregation hires an associate pastor, advantages may be that the church usually gets someone who wants to preach, who can help the pastor out with pastoral duties, and probably has a better denominational identification (especially in theology and denominational structure) than other folks in youth ministry. However in performing the gamut of pastoral roles, an associate (or junior pastor) pastor is taken away from concentrating solely upon youth ministry. And he or she can even become at odds with the “senior” pastor over common responsibilities.

Recruiting a Youth-Ministry Major

If you hire a college graduate who has majored in youth ministry, he or she will likely be from an evangelical background. A major reason is that few of the mainline church-affiliated colleges offer a youth ministry major. And the few that do offer it get the some of their youth-ministry majors from other denominations. So the youth ministry major may not understand the church's brand of theology and ecclesiology. So Mainline

denominations are in somewhat of a dilemma in that although few of their church-affiliated colleges offer a major in youth ministry, many of their churches are seeking youth ministers.

Additionally, while a church that hires a youth ministry major gains someone who, they hope, understands youth ministry and is committed to it, that church is less likely to get the maturity of a person with a graduate degree.

Recruiting from a Para-Church Group

If you go to a para-church group such as Young Life or Tentmakers to find your youth ministry leadership, you will usually find a person very committed to youth ministry. But you may give up some leadership maturity and denominational identity and knowledge. Most of those available from these groups are under the age of twenty-five. Interestingly, both of these organizations recognize these shortcomings and would rather train someone your church sends to them, letting your church educate the individual in denominational issues. While this makes good sense conceptually, most mainline churches today are not used to educating people about what makes them distinctively Presbyterian or United Methodist, etc. (Try to find a book on Calvinist youth ministry or the implications of Wesleyan theology on youth ministry.) If that denominational training occurs at all, it occurs at the seminary or in the process of serving as a pastor in the denomination for a few years. However, many churches have gone the para-church route, in part because finding someone committed to youth ministry has been difficult in mainline denominations and because many pastors do not want to share pastoral responsibilities such as preaching and decision making with associate (youth) pastors.

Recruiting a Seminary Student

In my opinion, seminary students in particular are a poor hire. Generally they are only staying for a year or two, and most of them have little investment in becoming a youth ministry professional. Their investment is in becoming a pastor. *If*, however, you want the seminary student to step into a ministry that is already going well and simply help what is already in place, you can both aid in their education and have another helpful adult in your youth ministry.

Recruiting a Lay Volunteer Leadership Team

If you come from a smaller church, under four hundred members, you are probably best served by recruiting a team of adults from your church who want to lead your youth ministry. Eight to ten people might do. Then the church needs to spend the time and energy getting the adults educated about youth ministry.

Unfortunately several problems usually arise from this scenario. One problem revolves around team building. The adults who volunteer will not necessarily spend time building a team approach. And often there is not a real team concept fostered by the pastor, who may want to maintain control and may not know how to create a team atmosphere. Thus

the team may not really become a team, and the few doing the “ministry” burn out. The mobility of our society does not help this problem, as many recruited adults are suddenly transferred.

Another recurring problem in utilizing laity arises because youth ministry takes up a great deal of time, yet the church wants immediate results. This disconnect means that the adult volunteers may not have the time to become educated before they assume the leadership roles. The church, underestimating the scope of training youth leaders, may fail to commit either the financial resources or the time needed to provide adequate training.

Additionally most of the adults who are recruited to this type of ministry think they all will be doing the main event of youth ministry (for example, the youth group) rather than exploring the various side shows of youth ministry. Yet, as was discussed in chapter three, effective side shows are an essential part of good youth ministry programs.

But let’s say the church is willing to give these adults a year of not “doing youth ministry” while they become educated about what they are going to do. Where should they go to be educated about youth ministry? Again the options are a lot more complicated than many realize. Some of the mainline seminaries have created continuing education events for people in youth ministry. Many of these serve the person well who has some basic understanding of youth ministry. However, the person who has no understanding of youth ministry, theology, or denominational identity may be overwhelmed. Other youth ministry agencies, such as Sonlife, Tentmakers, Group Magazine, and Youth Specialties, have excellent education available. But in them, you will miss a denominational understanding especially in theology and ecclesiology. So perhaps a combination of events would be the most beneficial, for example, a Youth Specialties four-day seminar combined with a denominational event or even a course at a local college or seminary. I have regularly taught an introduction to youth ministry over three weekends that most people find extremely beneficial in conceiving and carrying out their congregation’s youth ministry.

Recruiting Full-Time Versus Part-Time Staff

If a church has over four hundred members, it is best to hire full-time staff whose major, not minor, responsibility is in youth ministry. If the person’s major responsibility is in youth ministry, he or she can grow to become a professional in the field and make personal choices about continuing education. But the church needs to be supportive of this effort.

I am a little skeptical of part-time youth pastors. Sometimes the church hires a full-time person for part-time money and no benefits, which raises issues of justice. Other times the church gets a person far too busy to have the time commitment needed to be with young people and to grow in an understanding of youth ministry. *And most critically, part-time individuals usually do not see their role as educating and training the congregation to do the youth ministry. Rather they believe they are to do the ministry*

themselves with as little interference as possible from the laity or pastors of the congregation. Sometimes a congregation is able to find a person who only wants to work part-time and thus actually becomes a part-time employee available like a full-time employee. This usually makes the best part-time youth minister BUT again issues of justice are raised by this employment method.

Best Practices of Churches Concerning Youth Ministry Leadership

In our study we found several leadership-related characteristics of those churches doing exceptional youth ministry. First, the congregation and those doing youth ministry took professional development seriously. The church allowed sufficient money and time away from the congregation for the leaders to do continuing education.

Second, those doing the youth ministry met regularly with either a support group or some kind of mentor in youth ministry. This ongoing support, fellowship and learning group (or mentor) was of both an educational and supportive model. The meeting took place regularly, not whenever people could work it into their schedules. Usually this meeting took place once a month, and in some places it happened as often as once a week. This was one of the strongest and most helpful components of Young Life's church model.

The senior pastor did not and ought not to fill this role! The youth pastor needs the opportunity to vent about the congregation and sometimes about the pastoral leadership. Additionally many senior pastors (who once did youth ministry) have not kept up in the changing world of the adolescent.

Third, the congregation understood that the church hired the part-time or full-time youth ministry leader to help the congregation live out its commitment to youth. The congregation understood that it did not hire a staff person *to do* the ministry for them. The staff person was to assist those in the congregation in using their own gifts and graces.

And lastly, churches that were generally healthy in all forms of their ministry had healthy youth ministries and fine leadership. Often churches that are themselves dysfunctional hire a part-time or full-time staff person in youth ministry (or other forms of ministry) hoping that this new staff person can somehow solve the basic, underlying dysfunction in the church as a whole. Normally an unhealthy youth ministry points to an unhealthy congregation. If your church has serious leadership problems, those problems need to be "solved" first before it tries to fix the "youth ministry" problem.

Youth as Leaders

A seemingly overlooked, but crucial area of youth ministry is developing youth as leaders. This oversight occurs partly because we are not sure what type of leadership we want to develop in youth. Historically we developed youth leaders by teaching them Roberts rules of order. We had them lead meetings and promoted the youth through denominational structures and meetings until they had opportunities to represent young

people at the highest levels of church government. This concept of leadership is not in favor any more although some youth still take this path and develop into very competent church people.

Much of youth ministry has focused on the inward journey of young people in trying to develop their leadership. In those instances, youth are experiencing and being taught highly individualistic forms of piety in an attempt to make them into leaders. While this approach may help youth grow closer to God (though perhaps not with God's creation), it does not seem to have produced youth leaders either. However, it may be too early to tell.

A key to enabling youth to become effective leaders seems to be in having a well developed understanding of what being a leader is all about and then working on producing that result in youth. In other words, the congregation's youth ministry must have clear intentions and objectives that will enable young people to develop leadership skills. Such opportunities are often missing in today's high schools, where consolidation and larger schools continue to be the trend, so fewer and fewer youth have the opportunity to be in leadership roles. One consolidated school means there's only one school newspaper, student government, and particular athletic team where before there was one in each high school and thus more opportunities for youth to be involved and to assume leadership roles.

In several of the youth ministries that we observed where there were youth-led small groups, we continued to be amazed at the quality of conversation and the ability of youth to led their peers. All of us can be challenged to have youth fill some of the current leadership voids in local congregations in youth ministry. This certainly means more than having youth teach the younger Sunday School classes because they don't like their own Sunday School class or because the church cannot find an adult to teach the class.

Both the Scouting organizations and 4-H have had much better success at preparing youth as leaders than most of us in mainline congregational youth ministry. The National 4-H council has been involved in a research initiative that produced two publications helpful in looking at the issue of youth leadership. They are entitled *At the Table: Making the Case for Youth Decision Making* and *Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations*. Both publications chronicle the positive influences of taking youth seriously as leaders and challenging them to be effective leaders.

While some youth may not be ready or prepared to be leaders, most of the time in congregational youth ministry the problem(s) are that adults don't expect youth to be leaders, nor do we prepare them to be leaders. High School has frequently asked youth to simply show up, be attentive, and be sufficiently satisfied to come back for more. If students don't do this, the system believes something is wrong with the student rather than with the high school. This pattern in high school has created students who are docile, compliant, and without initiative.⁸ Too often this is exactly what has happened in congregational youth ministry. We want youth to show up and be enthusiastic about

whatever we are doing. We do not want them to question, to show initiative, or to challenge our basic religious assumptions. If they do, the church often chases these youth out of the congregation's youth ministry. So these youth head for organizations that give them a voice and a meaningful role, whether another nonprofit organization or even a gang!

Conclusion

So what does a church do in terms of congregational youth ministry? As we have just seen, the options are great, the choices varied, and the results may have lasting effects, both positive and negative, on the youth of the congregation and the congregation's youth ministry. Since the stakes are so high, it is essential to choose carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. Churches must recognize that who they choose and how those leaders are educated will depend greatly upon the church's own preferences and beliefs about ministry and about how pastoral leadership should be educated. They must also recognize the importance of developing leadership skills among the young people themselves. No one answer is absolutely right or wrong. Ministry is ultimately dependent upon God and the individual.

My Bias

I left theological education after sixteen years (including being the Acting Academic Dean) several years ago, in part, because the seminaries were not able to focus on specialized forms of ministry outside of traditional academic PH. D. work. (education, youth, church music, camping, gerontology, religious communication, missions etc.) I believe church-related schools can help prepare men and women who feel call into specialized forms of ministry and that they need to do much more than simply giving these young adults a good education and sending them off to seminary. Thus, I believe part of the answer to the question raised by this chapter, is to send men and women who feel call into ministry to those few church related⁹ that focus on specialized forms of ministry, such as youth ministry. Additionally, these men and women who graduate with a youth ministry degree, esp. if they graduate from a denominational school sponsored by your church, should be in the best place to provide youth ministry leadership for your congregation.

Notes

¹p. 188 Donald E. Miller, Reinventing American Protestantism, University of California Press, 1997.

²Conversations with Miguel Bonino.

³Tex Sample, U.S. lifestyles and mainline churches, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990
Blue-collar ministry, Judson Press, 1984

⁴ Miller, p. 188.

⁵There is some data that suggests youth ministers with a Masters “feel better” about the ministry they are engaged in. See Youth Ministry That Transforms, Merton Strommen, Karen E. Jones and Dave Rahn, Zondervan, 2001.

⁶These ideas were expressed in many formats including a letter to me by Rev. Dr. Talmage B. Skinner Jr., Perkins-Protho Chaplain of Wofford College (recently retired).

⁷Miller, ps 187 and 189.

⁸ see The Shopping Mall High School, Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar and David K. Cohen, Houghton Mifflin Company 1985 and Lyle Schaller, The Evolution of the American public high school, Abingdon Press, 2000.

⁹ I am drawing a distinction between Christian colleges and Church related Colleges. Christian colleges being those where statements of faith are usually required of faculty and students and church related schools being those that historically relate to a Christian tradition but statements of faith are not required of either faculty or students. Christian colleges have had many of these specialized forms of ministry degrees, youth ministry in particular, for a number of years (many started in the 1970's). Very few church related schools have developed this type of curriculum or even seem interested.