

DEVELOPING LEADERS IN THE CHURCH

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A significant weight that church leaders bear is the need for more leaders in the church. Some, perhaps many, who are reading this are feeling the burden to identify and deploy capable and trustworthy servants in your church to fulfill a necessary task. If only you had 2-3 more Community Group Leaders, or a point person to oversee the Children's Ministry, or that third "called and qualified" elder for a fuller plurality.

Our focus on developing leaders in the church can be dominated by the need to enlist workers for the various activities of the church. This process begins with a "slot to fill" followed by the hard recruiting work of finding people to fill those many slots. The anxious energy spent on discerning and developing "who" to do "what" can be overwhelming. And this doesn't even begin to address questions such as, *What exactly are we developing? Competencies? Character? "Soft skills" such as self-awareness or others-awareness?*

There is much to consider. Nevertheless, we understand the task of developing others as central to a spiritual leader's Christ-given job description.

He gave ... shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ
(Eph. 4:11-13).

Spiritual leaders are Jesus' gift to the church for the purpose of developing spiritual leaders in the church.

Spiritual Leadership

In the 1980's, John Piper gave an unpublished, unrecorded teaching on leadership.⁷⁵ He said, "I define spiritual leadership as knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God's methods to get them there in reliance on God's power." God-centered spiritual leadership, then,

⁷⁵ A version of this teaching can now be found in *The Marks of a Spiritual Leader*, by John Piper.

demands that the goal be not merely man's goal, but God's goal. And the methods for mustering a following be not merely man's methods, but God's methods. And that all the labor expended to get there must be expended in reliance not on man, but on God.

What if we were to consider God's method by which he takes the initiative for developing leaders who will accomplish his purpose? What would we learn that might inform and inspire our methods and goals for developing leaders in the church? According to the apostle Paul, "We are his [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Developing people for the work of ministry is what God is already doing. We are his workmanship created for works *he* has prepared, in advance, for us to walk in. He chose us and pre-planned tasks for each of us, according to his sovereign and saving grace. God is the ultimate leadership developer.

Salvation and service are joined together in the person and work of Jesus. Developing people in our church for the work of ministry is a practical implication of our gospel centrality. Therefore, developing leaders in the church starts with the gospel, is empowered by the gospel, and is fruitful on account of the gospel. The "heavy lifting" of developing leaders has already been done.

Then consider this. Every Christian has strengths and abilities with which they were born. Every Christian also has skills and competencies which they have learned, and in which they've been trained. Every aspect of who we are in Christ, including temperament, talents, affinities, aptitudes, interests, education, language, culture, family, ethnicity, limitations, are all an expression and fulfillment of God's sovereign workmanship.

But, perhaps, the most remarkable aspect of God's developmental process in our lives is our lives themselves. The Psalmist observes, "in [his] book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139:16).

Our entire lives are an epic story authored by God. Every relationship, every transition, every gain, every loss, all the sweetest experiences of our lives, and all the saddest experiences of our lives were written for us in God's book. He composed them all "beforehand" as developmental steps to prepare us for the works he planned for us "beforehand." God is not making it up as he goes along. He is the ultimate leadership developer.

So, what do we learn from God's developmental process in our lives that might inform our steps for developing leaders in the church?

Leaders Are Developed Biblically

If spiritual leadership begins (and ends) with knowing “where God wants people to be,” then the entirety of our development work must be governed and guided by all that God has communicated through the Bible. According to our Statement of Faith, God “has revealed himself through specific words, that we might come to a fuller knowledge of his character and will, learning what is necessary for salvation and life.”⁷⁶ Whatever else our development of leaders includes, equipping them for careful interpretation and right handling of God’s Word is foundational.

Leaders Are Developed Relationally

Reflecting even briefly on the most significant influences in our development as a leader will take us back to individuals whose example, or ideas, or vision, or teaching, or values we chose to follow. And often those who had the greatest impact were those who came alongside us, paid attention to us, asked meaningful questions, and sought to really know us.

Isn’t that essentially how God has shaped us—walking with us, communing with us, offering his time and attention to us in Christ Jesus? One writer suggests that the “language of telling people what to think and what to do dominates most leadership paradigms in the church.”⁷⁷ Whether that’s true or not—and I’m grateful it’s not been my experience in Sovereign Grace—I’m persuaded that our potential and emerging leaders need help in cultivating the crucial skills and practices of asking good questions, developing curiosity, understanding what it means to be fully present for others, and a growing awareness of what it’s like to be “on the other side of you.”

Leaders Are Developed in Community

When I consider the most transformative and fruitful learnings in my life, they have consistently happened in the context of a small and committed group of fellow believers. So, over and over, I have repeated the simple process of inviting 8-12 people to make a 9-10 month commitment to gather weekly, to know and hear one another’s joys and sorrows, cares and fears. I invite them to pray and worship together, to learn together, to eat together, and to recreate together. Ministry flows relationally. Ministry is unleashed relationally. Ministry leaders are shaped relationally. Isn’t this why our Sovereign Grace Pastors College leaves such an indelible impact on those who participate in this cohort-style of learning? They not only grow theologically—they grow relationally.

⁷⁶ *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, “The Scriptures.”

⁷⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Deep Mentoring* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 8.

Leaders are Developed in the “School of Affliction”

An essential aspect of God’s development process in the life of spiritual leaders is the work he gets done by walking us through hard things. It is in those deep valleys where we learn to engage his kingship. We get better acquainted with the man of sorrows and experience the kind of comfort and resilience only the Spirit of Jesus can supply. The apostle Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God

(2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Of course, we do not build disorienting or disheartening experiences into our developmental plans. But it is crucial to train our potential and emerging leaders with the capacity to frame their setbacks and sufferings as “transformational windows” through which God makes them deeper, wiser, and more tender-hearted. Gospel-shaped meekness is a trait that opens the door to significant influence.

Andrew Fuller once preached,

Perhaps the best instruction, the most useful learning, that any Christian minister can attain, without any disparagement of other kinds of learning, is that which is attained in the school of affliction. It is by this he becomes able to feel, to sympathize, and to speak a word in season to them that are weary.⁷⁸

Leaders are Developed Over Time

When it comes to developing leaders, we tend to be in a hurry. The needs are urgent, and the clock is ticking. But God develops leaders through a lifetime of lessons.⁷⁹ His best practice is not to be hasty in their deployment. Dr. Harv Powers writes,

We navigate a lifelong formation process as leaders. At each stage we gain new competencies, glean new meaning, face the crisis points in our lives, and discover (often painfully) the ways in which we still need to grow. Counterintuitively, God uses these very events to unleash our redemptive influence.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Andrew Fuller, “All Things Working Together for Good” *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller, vol. 1* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 391.

⁷⁹ Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 1988), 27.

⁸⁰ Harv Powers, *Redemptive Leadership* (Illumify Media Global, 2018), 15.

So, be patient with your potential and emerging leaders. God is not done developing them yet. Even in the process of sanctification the Lord is refining them to be workers for his glory. In his sovereign plan, God is taking his time developing each leader to conform them to his will.