**A STRATEGY FOR GROWING PEOPLE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

**(The Ministry of Jesus Gives Guidelines For Today)**

Success in leadership development is central to the church’s success in fulfilling its commission in evangelism and edification. An analysis of the leadership development success of the churches reveals that the Restoration Movement has more to learn about leadership development. For example, the centrist churches[[1]](#footnote-1) have developed and deployed about six thousandths (.00615) percent of the Christians to evangelize ninety-nine percent of the world’s lost population.[[2]](#footnote-2) One percent of the people are serving in a church or church agency dependent ministry.[[3]](#footnote-3) This record in developing church leaders is directly related to the present growth rate of the churches in the movement: a net of about one-sixth of a person per church per year.[[4]](#footnote-4) The current growth is therefore 14,343 percent slower than the movement is estimated to have experienced one century ago.[[5]](#footnote-5)

An analysis of the gospels and the churches uncovers some important principles of leadership development that the churches are neglecting in practice. Of course, there are many principles that churches usually implement correctly, e.g. teach true doctrine. But since improvement begins with examining oversights, the churches need to examine eight principles of developing leaders at all levels of church life.

INTENTIONALITY: Conduct training according to an international leadership development plan. Jesus operated according to a definite plan for leadership development. Jesus selected definite men for definite training for a definite period for a definite ministry. He selected three (Peter, John and James) for the highest level of leadership training, He selected twelve (the apostles) for somewhat less specialized training, and he selected seventy (LK 10) fore even more general training. Paul showed the same intentionality in his leadership development strategy. In Acts 20:4, Luke lists eight leaders-in-training, including himself, who were traveling with Paul.

Unlike Jesus, many church leaders show little intentionality in training leadership for the kingdom. Many present leaders believe that they need do little more than serve the church, keep the operation running and pray for equipped leaders, and God will provide. Little better is the “work harder” approach that is based on the belief that a larger quantity of overall input will of itself produce a larger output of trained leaders. Yet Jesus did far more than serve, pray and labor diligently. He also followed an intentional strategy to train His leaders-to-be.

Every church should have an intentional plan to develop its people to their maximum leadership achievement potential. This long range strategy should begin with the initial contact with the person in his unregenerated state and continue unbroken until he receives Jesus and becomes the leader God intends. The church that follows Jesus’ model in leadership will seek to develop a total discipling program that implements leadership development as seriously and as systematically as evangelism and edification.

PROPORTION: Devote a large proportion of time to leadership training. Jesus spent more time in leadership training activities than He spent in strictly non-leadership training activities. Because the disciples accompanied Jesus constantly, either directly or indirectly, Jesus was training the apostles as leaders almost all their waking hours. In addition, Jesus devoted entire segments of His life to special training events, such as retreats with the apostles alone (JO 3:22; 11:54). Often after a long day of teaching, Jesus would take the twelve aside for further specialized training (MK 4:10; MT 10:23-31). Jesus spent massive amounts of time in leadership development.

Unlike Jesus, the typical church leader today devotes only a small proportion of time to leadership training. One reason is that he is unaware of the time he has already available to devote to leadership development. Like Jesus, leaders can utilize the With Him principle (MK 3:14) and take trainees along on many regular ministry activities. Thus, the leader can increase the proportion of time devoted to leadership training without subtracting time from other activities. Another hindrance to giving a large proportion of time to leadership training pertains to the way the leader exhausts his time in remedial helping. He uses so much of his time in remediation (helping people solve immediate acute problems) that he has little time left for training others to be leaders. He is caught in a spiral of spending so much time directly in helping people solve their problems that he has little time to train leaders to help him help people. Still another reason that a leader invests only a small proportion of his time in leadership training relates to his desire to give everyone equal time. If he selectively invests large amounts of time in training the highly responsive minority, the leader feels guilty for neglecting the needy majority. At this point the leader needs to discover that only as a leader invests time in reproducing other people-helpers will the leader ever help the maximum number of people.

COMMITMENT: Require students to commit themselves to leadership training as highest priority. Jesus trained men who first committed themselves to be trained. Jesus did not invest much quality time with those who would not make this commitment – no matter how personally or religiously powerful the person (MK 10:17-28). For Jesus to have invested large amounts of time in training the marginally responsive would have been poor stewardship. Instead, Jesus selected men who were committed to the rule of Jehovah, to personal growth and to becoming God’s leader (MT 4:19). These men were “trainable,” viz. They were open to change and would adhere to the curriculum. They literally put kingdom leadership first (MT 6:33) and, as Peter explained, “left everything and followed” Jesus – left family, friends, financial security and social standing. But Jesus would settle for no less a commitment from His enrollees.

Unlike Jesus, the modern trainer requires only a minimum level of commitment – if any – from the trainees. In fact, he expends much time just attempting to enlist people to submit to training. Then he wastes much time attempting to train persons who do not see themselves becoming mature leaders in the kingdom. The leader spends this time with these “untrainables” because they are official church leaders and ought to be committed to being trained for kingdom leadership. The upshot is that the return from the trainer’s investment of effort and time is indeed meager.

The alternative involves the trainer searching out those persons who are in the process of committing themselves to being God’s servant . . . first scrutiny going to those already designated as church leaders. The trainer then gives special time and prayer to this receptive minority. Through his modeling and sharing, the trainer enhances the desire to serve and grow and lead others. Once the level of commitment is high enough, the trainer works with the trainees as a group with the understanding that they are being trained to be leaders for Christ.

CHARACTER: Place character development at the center of the curriculum. In selecting His trainees Jesus focused more on who the disciples were as persons than on how well they could perform. In training His enrollees Jesus focused more on who the apostles were to become than or either what the apostles knew or were able to do. This is not to say that performance and knowledge were unimportant. To the contrary, Jesus trained the twelve in both performance skills and necessary information. But Jesus knew that performance and information not issuing from Christ-like character lacks power to transform the ones receiving a leader’s ministry.

The entire new covenant scriptures stress character and spirit as the foundation to church leadership. In 2 Timothy 3, thirteen of the fifteen standards for elders relate directly to character and spirit. The same overbalance is true of elders in Titus 1:6-9, and deacons (2 Tim. 3:8-12) and all leaders (Acts 6:3).

Unlike Jesus, much modern leadership training gives more direct attention to outward performance than to internal character and spiritual change. The priority of character change in leadership development is simply overlooked. In addition, trainers incorrectly assume that they can rely on other church meetings to develop adequately the trainee’s spirit and character. Trainers expect the large group, universal meetings such as the Lord’s Supper assembly and Bible classes alone to shape sufficiently the inner man of each trainee.

But from a Biblical standpoint character and spiritual development should receive more direct attention in leadership training than any other aspect of the curriculum. A good example of the focus on character development in a leadership curriculum is the book The Measure of a Man. From his years of experience in training leaders, Dr. Gene Getz has designed a Bible study series that God has used to shape impressively the character and spirits of local church leadership trainees across the country.

INDIVIDUALIZATOIN: Individualize the training to meet the special leadership training needs of each trainee. Jesus provided both common and individualized training for he apostles. The most thorough reporting of Jesus’ individualized training applies to Peter. Early in the training Jesus gave Peter the name Cephus, Rock (JO 1:42). At this time Peter was far from being the stable, unmovable leader Jesus expected him to become at graduation. But Peter was challenged by Jesus’ expectation and encouraged to reach his full potential as a leader.

Further individualizing Peter’s training, Jesus place weighty responsibility on Peter (MT 16:19). Christ also allowed Peter to attempt special tasks (MT 14:28-31). Together with the sons of Zebedee, Jesus exposed Peter to special experiences and instruction (MT 17:1; MK 26:36-37; MK 13:3). Jesus rebuked Peter individually as necessary (MT 16:23; JO 18:10-11). Jesus prepared Peter for individual learning activities, later debriefing and encouraging Peter privately (LK 22:31-34; JO 21:18-19). Finally, Jesus provided special support when Peter felt defeated or doubted his ability to lead others through Christ (JO 21:15-17).

Contrarily, most church leadership training today is oriented to treating people almost exclusively in groups. For example, if a trainer can so arrange, all people training to be youth coaches will receive identical training in identical sequence for an identical period. This approach would certainly be valid if everyone were identical. However, everyone is unique in knowledge, attitudes, self-concept, lifestyle, personality, skills, learning style, learning pace and leadership potential. A common curriculum alone cannot meet these diverse needs.

A desirable leadership training program includes provision for individualized assignments and experiences. In addition, the training will facilitate the sharing of personal needs and the building of facilitating relationships among all persons involved. In this approach trainees receive the individualized help they need from both the trainer and fellow trainees.

APPRENTICESHIP: Develop leaders through apprenticeship training. Jesus dealt with the apostles as apprentices to His ministry. At first Jesus involved the disciples in His ministry primarily as observer apprentices. At this stage they performed only elementary, yet important, tasks such as immersing all the converts (JO 4:2). As time passed they became progressively involved at deeper levels. Eventually Jesus drew them into decision-making (JO 6:5-9). They even attempted ministry in Jesus’ absence (LK 9:40). Finally, Jesus engaged the apostles as advanced apprentices. In their third year Jesus sent out the apostles on their own as preaching/healing duos among the villages of Judea. The instructions in Matthew 10:16-23 reveal that through this apprentice activity Jesus was preparing the apostles for their own future ministries during the church age. The apostles learned to lead by actual practice in real life in leading others.

Unlike Jesus, the church today places extreme confidence in the formal classroom alone to train leaders. For example, Bible colleges seriously expect to train men to be personal evangelists by exposing them to classroom instruction apart from practice in life concurrent with their formal instruction. As James Kennedy explained at the 1971 North American Christian Convention, not until he used Jesus’ model and moved from classroom primarily to apprenticeship primarily did he become effective in training church members to be leaders in personal work.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Valid church leadership apprenticeship programs will vary widely with the area of leadership, the level of leadership and the individual situation. But these programs should provide supervised real life experiences in leading others. Such guided, appropriate experiences hasten the development of church leaders.

INTENSITY: Provide training at such intensity that each trainee can develop at his maximum rate. Jesus’ training course consisted of a continuing, cumulative set of activities and instruction producing increasing intensity. Each experience built on previous experience. Each teaching reinforced other teachings. Jesus did not let the apostles break the cumulative effect of the course by permitting extended vacations apart from the group. Moreover, Jesus refused to train the twelve according to the elective format, viz. take what appeals and leave the rest. Instead, Jesus offered relatively little optional curricula. As a result of this intensity, Jesus accelerated the development rate of each trainee to his optimum potential.

In contrast to the apostles, church leaders-in-training today tend to develop very slowly. First, most leadership training is haphazard. For a weekend or a few weeks intensive training is offered. The trainee participates and develops a pace. Then there is a long period with little direct teaching or supervision provided for the trainee, so he tends to level off and even regress. After several weeks or months the next training event occurs and the speed up-coast cycle is repeated in the life of the trainee.

A second contributor to the rather slow development of local church leadership is the optional nature of the training curriculum. Virtually all training is regarded by the trainees as optional. Following the model of the adult extension system, the church offers all training as electives, which it hopes the leaders-in-training will take. However, the trainees usually approach the curriculum quite selectively and avoid certain critical training that is essential to proper maturation as a Christian leader.

A preferable alternative in current practice is the discipleship group strategy for intensifying leadership training. Like Jesus, the trainer enlists persons to commit themselves long term to Jesus, to personal spiritual growth and to becoming God’s leader. The trainees agree to meet weekly for one to three years, to do the work, and upon graduation to train others in the same or similar way. A certain common high demand curriculum is required of all enrollees. The church still offers outside elective courses as enrichment opportunities and as training for persons not interested in intensive training. But now the church has a format for systematically and rapidly developing the leaders who will stimulate and set the pace for the other leaders.

PERPETUITY: Train persons in such a way that they will perpetuate that training in others. Jesus trained men to be leaders. But more than that, Jesus trained men who trained men to be leaders. But more than that, Jesus trained men who trained men who trained men to be leaders. In other words, Jesus trained in such a way as to perpetuate on-going leadership training generation after generation. In 2 Timothy 2:2 the Bible lists five generations of Jesus’ perpetual leadership training: Jesus, Paul, Timothy, faithful men, others. The perpetual cycle of Matthew 28:19-20, reveals that Jesus focused not just on the first line of leadership, but long range on leadership training in all generations.

In contrast to the long range focus, church leaders today focus primarily on training the first line of leaders. In their desire to get persons into service immediately, these leaders underestimate the importance of selecting persons who can train others, of motivating trainees to train others, and of teaching trainees how to train others. These leaders misread 2 Timothy 2:2 this way, “And the things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men.” As a result, the original trainer becomes the permanent trainer of all trainees year after year.

Bible colleges have led the way in violating the principle of perpetuity in leadership training. In their rush to get faithful evangelists onto the field earlier in this century, the colleges placed their entire focus on training evangelists to serve rather than on training evangelists also to train elders and others to serve and to perpetuate training. As a result, the evangelist (whether in America or beyond) must do most of the work for an inadequately trained eldership. However, today churches are rediscovering the principle of perpetuity and are experiencing new gains as leaders train their trainees to be trainers in turn.

The above principles can be implemented together with the Biblical leadership development principles already being practiced in a church. But the church cannot select to implement only some of the principles. The leadership development approach of Jesus is a total system and must be utilized as a consistent whole. Now is the time to re-examine Jesus’ call and practice in training leaders for the kingdom. Now is the time to move forward rapidly in evangelism and edification.

1. Churches listed in the 1978 Directory of the Ministry (Springfield, IL: Specialized Christian Services, 1978) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1,050,387 Christians, most of whom are adults, have deployed as overseas missionaries 647 adults. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are 11,066 “positions” held in churches, colleges and missions, but included are people who are counted more than once. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 5538 churches had 8,294 net membership increase for 1972-78, for a 1044 increase per year or .1885 net membership increase per church per year. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 1875 membership was estimated at 400,000 and by 1900, at 1,120,000, for 14.2 percent growth per year. Garrison and DeGroot, The Disciples of Christ: A History (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1948), p. 394. Today 1,050,387 Christians net 1044 new members per year for a .099 percentage increase. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E. Russell Chandler, The Kennedy Explosion, (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, Publishing, Co. 1971), pp.47-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)