

Leadership Development

Re-enforcing Healthy Churches and Preparing for Exit

W. Mark Johnson

“Wherever there are churches, whether newly planted or long rooted, there is need for godly, effective leaders. Helping to provide and multiply them through training and mentoring has been, and undoubtedly will always be, a major focus of mission work.”¹

The training of leaders is an essential part of the missionary task. How it is best done depends upon several factors such as language, culture, and preferred learning styles. Each missionary context needs leadership training approaches deemed appropriate within each reality. Missiologist Arthur Glasser wisely observed: “No one methodology for follow-up ministry or leadership training is normative for all situations. Methods must change because situations change and because spiritual growth itself makes new demands.”²

Historically, leadership training takes three basic configurations:

¹ G.R. Corwin, G.B. McGee, and A.S. Moreau, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 253.

² A.F. Glasser, Charles Van Engen, D.S. Gilliland, and S.B. Redford, *Announcing the Kingdom: the Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 209.

1. formal, institutionally based theological training like a seminary or Bible college,
2. non-formal local church training like Theological Education by Extension (TEE),
3. some form of individual personal coaching and/or mentoring of potential leaders done by a local church pastor within the local church context.

Glasser's observation above continues to merit serious consideration regarding how leadership training can most effectively meet this generation's unique global training needs. Yet, no matter what form leadership training takes in any given context, the importance of having a well-defined strategy for leadership development remains essential to fulfill the missionary task. This point becomes evident when we remember the essential components of the missionary task.

Following the biblical model, the IMB emphasizes that the missionary task is composed of six essential components. These tasks can be understood as being logically sequential in their development and application, without being mechanical or linear in their actual implementation: Entry, Evangelism, Discipleship, Healthy Church Formation, Leadership Development, and Exit. In this sequence, the development and training of local church leadership is the penultimate step in the process before arriving at exit phase. Exit is defined in *Foundations* as being the completion of the missionary task: Our goal is to complete the missionary task in each people group or place and then to exit, with the new churches from that place or people as our partners in the ongoing task of global evangelism.³

For this closure to occur in the missionary cycle, effective leadership training within the recently planted churches must have previously occurred. This means biblically qualified leaders are receiving some form of leadership

³ International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2018), 107.

training “in an effective and biblically faithful way.”⁴ This point then leads to a couple of questions. What is effective leadership training? And, of what does it, or should it, consist?

Leadership training, at its most basic level, is teaching God’s people obedience to the Great Commission. It is teaching God’s people to obey all that Christ has taught. What does this mean in practice when considering the present global challenges of training leadership for local church ministry? Churches worldwide need a deep pool of trained leaders to effectively fulfill Christ’s mission for His church among all peoples in all places. Lesslie Newbigin speaks to the leadership preparation task:

The task of ministry is to lead the congregation as a whole in a mission to the community as a whole, to claim its whole public life, as well as the personal lives of all its people for God’s rule. It means equipping all the members of the congregation to understand and fulfill their several roles in this mission through their faithfulness in their daily work. It means training and equipping them to be active followers of Jesus in his assault on the principalities and powers which he has disarmed on his cross. And it means sustaining them in bearing the cost of that warfare.⁵

Three words come to the fore in Newbigin’s explanation of the importance of leadership training. Those words are train, equip, and sustain. Training and equipping imply preparation. Leadership training and equipping should consist of three levels of development. Church leaders in a missionary context, as well as church members, should receive the benefit of this three-tiered training and equipping. The three components of leadership development are training and equipping in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, theological and biblical knowledge (within the context of

⁴ International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 108.

⁵ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 238.

actual ministry application), and missionary/pastoral care (sustaining and caring for the local church workers who face the brunt and pay the personal toll for their engagement in the rigors of missionary ministry). Each of these three points merits further development.

Spiritual Disciplines

The first and primary call for all Christians is to be faithful, Christ-centered disciples. For this reason, Christian leaders must have a baseline knowledge and practice of the classic spiritual disciplines. This baseline consists of things like, but is not limited to, growth in the comprehension and application of the Word of God in daily life, consistent daily prayer (both personal and corporate), evangelism, fellowship, and service. One cannot assume that the spiritual formation of Christian leaders (missionaries, pastors, and church members) in these classic spiritual disciplines will occur on their own without intentional prioritization on the part of a leadership training strategy. Unfortunately, it can no longer be assumed that effective training in spiritual disciplines is occurring in many established evangelical churches worldwide. If this is the case in existing churches, the challenge and need to train leaders in the spiritual disciplines for churches being established in the global mission context are even more pressing.

Before a missionary can exit, missionary leaders must make certain the local leaders who will be leading and caring for the churches that have been planted are practicing the spiritual disciplines. Newbigin speaks directly to the importance of this practice of the spiritual disciplines on the part of local church leaders: “The minister’s leadership of the congregation in its mission to the world will be first and foremost in the area of his own discipleship, in that life of prayer and daily consecration which remains hidden from the world, but which is the place where the essential battles are either won or lost.”⁶

⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 240.

Christian leaders cannot lead in an area in which they are not practitioners. Leaders cannot practice that which they have never been taught. Therefore, training in, preparation for, and practice of the spiritual disciplines are urgent necessities and essential components of the training of Christian leadership worldwide.

Upon assuring that leadership training is in place for teaching spiritual disciplines to global Christian leaders, global Christian leadership (both missionary and national) must prioritize the spiritual formation of those with whom they regularly work: the local church membership and/or church planting team of which they are a part. Historically, Christians have always recognized the need to have their lives grounded in the basics of biblical spirituality. This has been the case throughout the whole of church history. However, the rigor of post-modern life and ministry makes this spiritual preparation ever more important and necessary, particularly at the local church level. The devil is not more devilish in the world's global cities and "hard places" than he is in other places of established Christian presence; yet, the stresses, strains, and temptations of many missionary contexts bring more readily to the surface the full display of the human heart's depravity. A grounding in the spiritual disciplines is the first line of spiritual defense for local church leaders and church members. This makes spiritual preparation a top tier priority in leadership preparation worldwide.

Theological and Biblical Training

Globally, church leaders and church members need a strong biblical and theological foundation upon which their beliefs can rest, and from which their ministries can be directed. Traditional seminary preparation continues to be a viable and efficient option in many missionary contexts worldwide for training future shepherds of local churches. However, this is often not the case for missionary engagements in contexts hostile to the Christian faith or without access to certain technological advantages. In those cases, other appropriate methods need to be considered, such as the use of advanced

technology to deliver the best content, or the use of oral methodologies contextualized for the learning needs of those with an oral learning preference. Remembering Glasser's words, missionary context is determinative in the question of methodologies. Whatever the preferred methodology might be, the training and discipling of new converts and church members in theology and Scripture's foundational truths are paramount in preparing leaders. The growing strength and pervasiveness of the secular worldview along with newly invigorated religious alternatives to the Christian faith require that Christians have a firm convictional grasp of the biblical narrative and implications of the biblical worldview. If they do not, the aggressive secular and religious alternatives might prove a significant impediment to effective global ministry.

This training must be done with the highest levels of intentionality. This intentionality might be a classroom or small group setting where a missionary will be communicating and inculcating theological and biblical content. Whether in a literate or an oral preference setting, varieties of technological means are now available as resources for those engaged in leadership training. Yet, training focused on content must always be within the context of actual local church ministry and practice. The global ministry practitioner needs to be trained by word, deed, and godly example. This holistic approach to training is important, because ministry is spiritual warfare.

The godly example of the missionary and/or pastor living out the very truths proclaimed in the pulpit, taught in the classroom or modeled and storied in a small group (word and deed) continues to be the strongest of all apologetics offered in defense of the truthfulness of the biblical message. Gospel faithfulness often comes at a high price for those involved in the white-hot fires of global mission ministry. For this reason, sustaining nurture and care must be given to those who bear the brunt of the most intense spiritual conflict.

Missionary/Pastoral Care

Those who take the blows of global mission ministry often find themselves depleted and drained; they need pastoral care. In a denominational mission context, this is normally provided for the global missionary by those who work in Member Care. However, the bulk of pastoral care must take place, when possible and often by necessity, within the local church context. For this reason, planting healthy churches pastored by trained and equipped leaders is essential in the development of a pastoral care feedback loop needed for the well-being and care of all those involved in Christian ministry. True Christian fellowship is what missionaries, pastors, and church members need to survive and thrive in the rigors of global Christian ministry. The place of preeminence where much needed fellowship and accountability are to be found is the local church, no matter where the ministry context might be.

Perhaps most importantly, the global Christian worker needs a true friend with whom he or she can have genuine heart to heart fellowship. True friendship is the under-appreciated key to Christian sanctification in any context, missionary or otherwise. J. I. Packer speaks to the importance of this:

Christians today must seek fellowship. Lonely and isolated Christians, spiritually starved and discouraged Christians, and with them members of prosperous churches and busy Christian workers—all need fellowship, and all should make a point of endeavoring to get it. The Puritans used to ask God for one ‘bosom friend’, with whom they could share absolutely everything and maintain a full-scale prayer-partner relationship; and with that they craved, and regularly set up, group conversations about divine things. We should be wise to follow their example at both points.⁷

⁷ J. I. Packer, *18 Words, The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), chap. 18, “Fellowship,” Logos Library System.

A global Christian leader who has a “bosom friend” will find the strength to persevere and prosper amid the rigors of ministry. Missionary exit is not the abandoning of the recently planted church; missionary exit is the doorway by which Christians can and should develop a deeper level of partnership for mutual spiritual edification.

Missionaries play an important role in developing national leaders in their missionary context and in the leadership training process worldwide. When national partners become the primary persons responsible for training other nationals, preparing them for Christian service in their culture and among the nations, we missionaries are close to being able to declare, “mission accomplished.” In conclusion, why is it important that global leaders be trained? The answer is simple. The world is full of sheep without shepherds. In the words of Tom Houston, “Leadership development is clearly the greatest need if we would see the sheep with good shepherds.”⁸

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⁸ W.H. Fuller, *Global Crossroads: Focusing on the Strength of Local Churches* (World Evangelical Fellowship, 2000), 231.