

Developing Church Leaders in the African Context

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My wife and I have served as missionaries Assemblies of God (AG) missionaries in Zimbabwe and Zambia since 1988, with the purpose of training church leaders. During this time, the Assemblies of God in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased eight-fold—from about two million believers and adherents to over sixteen million today. A major challenge facing the African church is training leaders to care for these believers, disciple them, plant new churches, and reach even more people with the gospel.

Initially, I believed the primary method of doing this should be through formal education but soon realized that that was not enough. Many of the necessary ingredients that shape a church leader can be supplied more effectively in the context of the local church. Over the years, my understanding of the processes involved in shaping and developing leaders for the church has changed dramatically.

In theory, the church in Zambia relies heavily on formal education to train its leaders. People look down on pastors who do not have a certificate or diploma, but many problems are associated with a reliance on this approach alone. Formal education excels at sharing information with leaders and potential leaders; however, it has difficulty in the two domains—spiritual formation and ministerial skills. Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter summarize this when they write:

Teaching for transformation of character and ministry is the most difficult of all teaching challenges. Seminaries, colleges and secondary schools excel in the transmission of information, but few take responsibility for the character and performance of their graduates. Most recognize the critical need for character and spiritual formation, but few have found effective ways to achieve these objectives.¹

The answer to an over-reliance on formal education may lie in the understanding that relationships provide the natural vehicle through which one can transfer spiritual formation and ministerial skills. The Early Church understood this and used various relationships to promote the informal development of its leaders. Leaders in Africa today would do well to seek ways to emulate the practices of the Early Church—rather than only copying the formal educational approaches brought in from the West. A number of complementary approaches, both formal and informal, are needed in order to meet the current leadership development needs of Africa today; I recommend three: (1) adjust formal programs to include informal training in order to produce better leaders, (2) recognize and make better use of informal training in the local church, and (3) search for new, innovative leadership training methods.

First, one must adjust the programs to the circumstances and needs of the people being

trained. Formal residential training programs tend to attract young people fresh out of secondary education, but many of these students do not become effective church leaders. After my first term in Zimbabwe, I realized that I had to train ten young people in order to acquire one or two pastors. The best people to train are men and women who have a call of God on their lives and have already proven this call by effectively serving in a local church. However, most of these people are older, married, and have a job. Therefore, they cannot drop everything for three or four years of formal education. The way to train people already involved in proven ministry is to provide short block courses in their immediate location. This requires decentralizing traditional educational programs and taking the education to regional centers within easy reach of church leaders. Presently, twenty regional centers provide ministerial education through block courses in Zambia.

Another adjustment involves finding ways to ensure that spiritual formation and ministry skills receive recognition alongside academic classes. The primary focus on the cognitive domain needs to incorporate the development of relationships between teachers and students outside the classroom. In the African context, however, the wall of respect and deference impedes this process and needs to be torn down. Furthermore, peer accountability for spiritual growth would be beneficial.

In *Renewal in Theological Education: Strategies for Change*, Robert W. Ferris describes how several schools recognized the need for such adjustments and brought about the renewal of theological education in their institutions. He was struck by how rigorously all the schools stressed spiritual values and ministry skills.² Though incorporating spiritual formation and

ministerial skills development in residential and non-residential programs is difficult, it is not impossible. This union of the three educational objective domains describes the original goals of the Bible school movement. Unfortunately, with modern society's focus on academic respectability, most theological training institutions, over time, tend to drift to a focus on the cognitive domain at the expense of ministerial skills and spiritual formation. Institutions involved in training church leaders would do well to remember their historical roots.

Second, while, in theory, formal education provides the "real" training that African church leaders desire, in fact, the only training many church leaders receive is informal—through imitation modeling. J. Robert Clinton describes this kind of training as self-training, in which a leader-to-be "gets self-directed on-the-job training by using the role models in the church as the source of learning. Usually the learning is highly informal and does not involve a recognized apprenticeship or internship."³ Present church leaders model behaviors which are observed by the congregation, including future church leaders. When these future leaders have a chance to perform as a leader, they imitate the examples they previously observed. Imitation of modeled behavior is such an ordinary, expected part of life that many times its importance as a method of training leaders goes unrecognized.

However, imitation modeling has several limitations. For instance, the primary goal of leadership behavior is ministry, not the instruction of future leaders. Most leaders do not even think about the example they provide for other people to emulate. Future leaders can just as readily learn poor leadership skills as positive leadership skills. Another limitation is that modeling is

essentially a one-way relationship; leaders rarely receive any feedback on how their behavior is received. Still another drawback is that imitation modeling only focuses on observable behaviors while one rarely observes the preparation necessary for the public display of ministry. This preparation may include years of experience and study—both formal and personal. A leader-to-be may be able to observe and mimic a preacher's style, but cannot see the hours of study and prayer that went into the creation of the sermon. Imitation of a sermon may result in the same intonation, phrases, and mannerisms, but may lack content, spiritual fervor, and power.

The Gospels clearly indicate that Jesus did not simply model behaviors for His disciples from a safe distance and then expect them to lead His Church. He called His disciples to follow Him and chose the Twelve for an extra close personal relationship. The Early Church followed the example Jesus set as a pattern for training leaders, but the Western church has largely abandoned this approach in favor of formal education in a classroom setting. Missionaries to African countries, like Zambia, brought with the gospel this emphasis on formal training for church leaders.

Church leaders need to follow the example of Jesus and turn the one-way modeling relationships between present leaders and future leaders into two-way mentoring relationships. Mentoring addresses many of the shortcomings of imitation modeling and provides a setting in which one can more easily address spiritual formation and ministry skills, thus providing a necessary counterpart to the formal training in a classroom setting. Mentoring, in this context, refers to any relationship in which a senior partner seeks to share with a junior partner some of the resources he or she has

gained through his or her life experiences. The relationship may be formal or very informal, with the sharing arising naturally out of life situations. The mentoring relationship may be a one-time event, or it may develop into a relationship that lasts many years.

While recognition of the importance of mentoring and coaching has swept Western society, including the church world, it has yet to make a significant impact on the church in Zambia. The Western ideal of egalitarianism is foreign to traditional African culture, which highly values relationships governed by cultural traditions. Everyone has his or her place in the extended family and the kin group based on age, sex, and family relationship. People respect those above them in the hierarchy. In the pattern of imitation modeling, the less-respected person must sit quietly and watch his or her elders without asking questions. While African cultural traditions support the concept of imitation modeling as a method for training church workers, they work against the concept of mentoring. Young people feel uncomfortable approaching church leaders and would rarely dream of asking a leader a question. On the other hand, leaders feel threatened by the better educated younger generation. Many older church leaders fear that a younger leader is only interested in taking away church members or even stealing the church.

To date, teaching regarding the biblical approach to training leaders through mentoring has made little observable impact. A few well-respected national leaders have served as good mentoring models, but traditional attitudes have generally changed very little. If implemented, turning the one-way pattern of imitation modeling into two-way leader training at the local church level

will have a tremendous impact on the quality of church leadership.

Third, many western scholars have been rethinking the entire subject in an attempt to develop more effective methods for training modern church leaders for the twenty-first century. Robert Bank believes that the current debate has floundered because scholars focus on the modification of the present concept of theological education rather than making a fresh attempt based on the biblical evidence and oriented around the mission of the church. Banks writes, “Is there not a more distinctively Christian approach than the proposals we have been considering?”⁴ Only as theological education maintains its “close links with mission will it remain relevant to changing

circumstances, and hold true to the missionary impulse that gave rise to the church and theology.”⁵

As a new and vibrant part of the Church at large, the African Church needs to enter into this quest by establishing new and creative strategies for equipping people called by God to lead His church. New approaches will require considerable thought and experimentation, but Africa needs its own leadership development methods that fit the African context rather than merely applying an approach borrowed from Europe and North America. Who knows? Perhaps the next innovative approach for training church leaders may arise on what was once known as the “Dark Continent.”

¹Judith E. and Sherwood G. Lingefelter *Teaching Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Learning and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 96.

²Robert W. Ferris, *Renewal in Theological Education: Strategies for Change* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, 1990), 130.

³J. Robert Clinton, *Leadership Training Models* (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Publishers, 1984), 201.

⁴Robert Banks, *Re-envisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 129.

⁵Ibid., 132.