

INTRODUCTION

Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

Church vitality depends on the involvement of both clergy and laity in meaningful ministry. However, quality lay leadership in local churches seems to be vanishing. Many church members are finding themselves less and less engaged in the ministry of the local church. The attraction of being part of an entertained audience doesn't seem to be enough. Still others are overengaged, filling positions for the sake of keeping the institution afloat. They are busy but find themselves unfulfilled with little sense that they are the hands and feet of Jesus.

Little by little, across the country, seeds of new life are sprouting in a growing number of churches that have been essentially dormant. Pastors and members are beginning to find that focusing outward instead of inward is tremendously rewarding, more fitting of a gospel people, and not as difficult as they feared. Instead of being critical of churches that seem more successful, these churches are no longer wasting time on comparisons. They are finding their own unique ways to reach out as the body of Christ.

These signs of new life can transform the negativity that has been so damaging to some churches. One cynic observed the role of laity in the church to be that of “pew fodder” for the institution. Somebody has to sit in the pew and put money in the offering plate in order to make the operation work. If the laity will just come and

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sit and pay, clergy will have a paycheck and a lovely church building. Likewise, if the local church sends the money up the denominational ladder, church bureaucrats will have steady income. The signs of new life, however, are changing cynicism to hope. Once-stagnant churches are beginning to learn how to become “engaged” communities where clergy and laity minister together as the body of Christ.

Church life is impacted by three primary groups: the clergy who are the spiritual guides of the congregation; laity who are the members and visitors, some providing significant leadership within the congregation and some attending only occasionally; and an often overlooked group—the external faith leaders, the authors, speakers, denominational and seminary staff, and parachurch leaders who also inform the discussion on the role of the church and provide resources for local church leaders.

Generally, institutions don’t like being shaken up, but that’s exactly what happens when laity, pastors, or external faith leaders decide they want to be bona fide parts of the body of Christ. The boat begins to rock. The very nature of institutions requires that they maintain the status quo. Their leaders must do everything in their power to smooth the waters and keep the boat from rocking. The problem with the church today is that in addition to internal challenges, the external culture has slammed the church with a tsunami of change. For many, the boat has not only rocked violently, it has actually been torn apart. As a result, laity, pastors, and faith leaders find themselves floating next to each other, hanging on to broken pieces of the boat.

Another version of the story depicts faith leaders, pastors, and laity jumping ship when they realize their boat may come apart. In desperation, they find a supertanker (megachurch) that appears to offer safety in the midst of the turbulence. Inside the supertanker, the faith leader can quietly slip into anonymity. The pastor becomes all-important, and the laity—those paying pew sitters—have now simply morphed into movable chair sitters. When the

tsunamis of cultural change hit, there appears to be little damage to the supertanker. The problem is that the tsunamis *have* caused damage. Cracks of doubt and restlessness have begun to appear deep within the bulkhead. Often the all-powerful leader begins to falter. This ship is not going to last either. What's next?

Actually, the tsunamis just keep coming. Many mainline churches have survived the first few tidal waves by hanging tight in the backwaters. But there are fewer and fewer places to hide. The boat is probably doomed from either the corrosion inside or the tsunamis outside. Who wants a leadership role under these circumstances?

Hope flies in the face of every calamity, however. Some ships have not yet capsized. Some are recoverable. Is there a way to rebuild the damaged boat and sail once again? Can we fashion one that will ride the waves better—a boat that is more suited to its original purpose? Will the emerging signs of new life give us the courage to craft new vessels or repair the old so we can rechart the voyage? How do we find the courage after the trauma we have experienced?

One way is to reframe what full leadership in the body of Christ looks like—the kind of leadership that will know how to guide a small boat or a supertanker. It isn't the size of the vessel that makes the difference—it's the leadership. In chapter 1, "Is This All There Is?," we examine what attracts people to a particular church and some of the disappointments leaders experience. In chapter 2, "Where Did Jesus Learn to Lead?," we consider key components of Jesus' leadership style. Chapter 3, "Amazing Ingredients for Action," addresses ways to identify and cultivate leaders. Chapter 4, "Christian Leaders on the Job," takes a look at ministry in the daily lives of Christian lay leaders. Chapter 5, "Linked Leadership," examines strategies for developing leaders, including children and youth. Chapter 6, "How Do I Make It Fit?," reviews personal wholeness as an essential component of successful leader-

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ship. Chapter 7, “Burden-Lifted Leadership,” suggests steps for congregational wholeness that will lead to healthy, even joy-filled, leadership. Finally, chapter 8, “Practical Strategies for Engaging and Retaining Leaders,” offers specific ideas for increasing the number and quality of lay leaders in local churches.

If you have picked up this book, you are probably aboard one of these threatened vessels. You may be a disheartened layperson, a disillusioned pastor, or a discouraged external faith leader, but you know you are called to share God’s good news with others who inhabit your world. You’re yearning for new insights into finding wholeness in your congregation. You want to know how to encourage leadership. You want to see signs of new life.

When Noah and his family had endured the rough waters of the great flood, a dove flew back to the ark with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak (Genesis 8:11, NRSV). That leaf was the symbol of new life for those “sailors.” The waters had subsided at least enough for seeds to sprout and grow. That leaf heralded hope and possibility.

Regardless of where you find yourself in these turbulent days, something is growing that you may not yet see. The voyage to new life is not to be missed!