

How to Identify and Empower

Church Leaders





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Innovation is key to Faithlife's growth. In the last few years, we've expanded from our flagship software product, Logos Bible Software, to a variety of tools to complement your faith and Bible study experience. In June of 2011, we launched Faithlife Ebooks, a Christian ebook store and ereader app. In 2012, we released Faithlife Proclaim Church Presentation Software along with the Faithlife Study Bible and Faithlife.com, a social network that allows Christians from all over the world to connect and share ideas online.

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95Network is a national non-profit organization that exists to resource the 95% of churches in the United States with attendance averaging 500 or less through practical content, conferences, and grant funds for coaching and consulting. Since its inception, 95Network has helped hundreds of churches focus on creating a long-lasting and healthy ministry. Learn more at 95network.org.

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Introduction

Leadership does not begin with a title or position. It begins the moment you are concerned more about others' flourishing than you are about your own.¹

– Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak*

Leadership is always a risk.

It should feel risky and jarring when Jesus tells his disciples, future leaders of the New Testament church, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24–25). Our calling as pastors and church leaders is to live and serve first and foremost for God’s approval, not respect or acclaim from others (Galatians 1:10).

When our ministry is focused on pleasing God, we can risk our comfort, safety, and well-being for someone else’s comfort, safety, and well-being. We can set aside our preferred way of doing things so others can join in the work. And we can learn to shepherd our churches by following Jesus’ example as the Good Shepherd and modeling his sacrificial, pursuing love for his people (1 Peter 5:2–5).

Shepherding looks different in every church context, but it always includes sharing ministry responsibility with faithful and able leaders. Yet for small churches, hiring strong leaders is rarely an option. So how can churches with small budgets do the work of ministry without adding paid staff?

In this guide, we’ll answer this important question by walking you through the whys and hows of church leadership development, offering tips you can start using today no matter your church’s size.

¹ Crouch, Andy. *Strong and Weak*. Downers Grove, 2016, p. 112.

Why churches need to develop leaders

There are at least three reasons churches must be developing leaders.

1. The need is too great for one or a few people

Statistics show 95% of churches in the United States have fewer than 500 people, and 57% have under 100 regular attenders each week.² In addition, 44% of churches have one or fewer full-time staff members.³

It makes sense, then, that many pastors of average-sized churches handle the majority of ministry needs themselves. There's so much ministry to do and so few people to do it.

But by building a plan for leadership development from within your church, you can create a system where more people can hear the gospel and receive individual care from qualified, empowered leaders in your community. You don't have to do it all when you give ministry responsibility to leaders who can serve next to you in God's great harvest (Matthew 9:37–38).

2. The Bible says this is the model

Ephesians 4:11–12 tells us, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . .” As we go through the trenches of ministry, it's easy to get stuck in the tyranny of the urgent. But our call (no matter the size of our church) is not to do all the ministry—it's to equip the saints to do ministry.

² [“Small, Struggling Congregations Fill U.S. Church Landscape,”](#) Lifewayresearch.com.

³ [“Small, Struggling Congregations Fill U.S. Church Landscape,”](#) Lifewayresearch.com.

While this passage calls all Christians to ministry, we'll focus in this guide on developing leaders who can multiply your efforts by discipling and training others in your church.

Equipping people for the work of ministry isn't a new idea, or even a New Testament idea. Back in Exodus 18:13–26, we see Moses start his own leadership network. Moses had been Israel's sole leader and mediator, and it must have been wearing him out. With a fresh outside perspective, Moses' father-in-law urged him to give away leadership, establishing leaders over groups of “thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens” (v. 25). By sharing the burden of leading God's people, Moses was free to focus on the things no one else could do.

3. Responsibility creates “stickiness”

It's not just that the Bible calls us to equip our congregants for ministry. The reality is people are craving ministry and leadership training. We often hear about young people leaving the church in droves, but studies are showing that the ones who are given responsibility tend to stay.⁴ That doesn't mean you should give responsibility away willy-nilly, but it shows that “. . . if you want someone to join your congregation and feel part of the place, they need to have something to do.”⁵

Developing leaders in the local church enables more people to receive individual shepherding from faithful and able people. By devoting time to adding leaders to your church, you can reach even more people with the good news of the gospel, while helping leaders grow in their faith.

⁴ [“Seven Ways to Keep Young Adults Invested in Your Church,”](#) Factsandtrends.net.

⁵ Marshall, Colin and Tony Payne. *The Trellis and the Vine*. Kingsford, 2009, p. 97.

Who churches should tap for leadership

As we said in the introduction, leadership means risk. One of the most significant risks a leader takes is choosing future leaders. While we've all experienced incompetent or unhelpful leaders, we've also experienced mature, generous, and compassionate leaders—the kind of leaders we want to emulate.

Thankfully, having a good understanding of what you're looking for in a leader can help you minimize risk to your church.

Where to start

As you consider who's ready for leadership training, begin by reminding yourself of the goal: you're not aiming to do all the ministry yourself; you're equipping the saints for ministry. Be prepared to entrust ministry to others—and to let go of it yourself. And as you get started, pray often that God will bring the right people to mind at the right time.

Then, look over your list of current volunteers. Using Andy Crouch's definition of leadership at the beginning of this guide, who's already leading in your church? Who's already serving faithfully? Those who are faithful with little will probably be faithful with more (Luke 16:10).

From there, look at people on the margins with potential to serve. Maybe there's a new couple that previously led college ministry. Or maybe a teacher wants to start a special-needs ministry. If you think these folks have the right heart to become leaders in your church, you can give them a trial run by asking them to help with specific short-term projects. For example, you could ask the couple that loves college ministry to mentor

a student in your church, or you could ask the teacher to organize an appreciation dinner for families with children who have special needs. Then, once they've proven they'll follow through, you can start tapping them for leadership development and other ministry opportunities.

Qualities of a leader

As you think about potential leaders, certain things should always be true of the people you tap for leadership. Look for people with these qualities:⁶

- **Conviction.** When thinking of people who will have leadership responsibility at your church, you want to ensure they agree with the main points of your theology and ministry philosophy. They probably won't need to argue the finer points of your church's doctrine, and you can train anything they should know. But you will want to make sure they're walking closely with God, growing in their faith, and loving the people in your community.
- **Character.** As Larry Osborne says, "Whenever a staff member's giftedness and platform surpass their character, it eventually creates disillusionment and cynicism among those they work with. It also tends to create festering jealousies and division among the rest of the staff, especially among those who become frustrated and disheartened by all the success and public praise they see heaped on someone they know is actually a jerk behind the scenes." While he's talking about church staff specifically, it's true for everyone in leadership. Look for people who are the same during the week as they are on Sundays, who earn your respect, and who deal fairly and generously with others without watering down truth.
- **Competency.** It's a no-brainer: don't put your super artsy, left-brained thinker in charge of finances and spreadsheets. You want the right people in charge of the right things because that's where they'll thrive. As Romans 12:6 teaches, God has given each person different gifts all for the same purpose: to make the body of Christ flourish. Matching each person's gifts to essential ministry

⁶ This list of qualifications is adapted from *The Trellis and the Vine* (p. 78), a helpful guide for church leaders considering discipleship in the local church.

opportunities in your church gives potential leaders confidence that God can and will use them in his kingdom.

- **Chemistry.** When considering someone for leadership, think about how that person will fit in with your existing leaders. Do they bring something new to the table? Do their gifts complement the gifts of others on the team? Are they enjoyable to work with? Are they overly negative or yes-men/yes-women? If those on your leadership team are too similar to one another, you'll miss opportunities for the growth that comes from introducing new ideas and perspectives.
- **Capacity.** As you're training people for specific leadership roles, consider whether they have time and energy to give to their areas of leadership. If someone can't lead now, you can set occasional reminders to check in with them to see if they're ready to start leading.

And while it's implied in the characteristics above, it's never wrong to reiterate: look for people who are teachable and servant-hearted.

Steps for developing leaders

So you've chosen a handful of people as potential leaders in your church. How do you prepare them for ministry leadership?

The next steps to consider are training and empowerment.

As always, think of these suggestions as tools in your tool chest. You don't need to use every single idea in exactly the way we suggest, of course. Choose one or two things to try first, adapting along the way to fit your church. Then, as it's helpful, try adding another suggestion or two. That way, you create a leadership training system without creating more work for yourself.

With that said, here are the phases of leadership development and steps you can take in each phase.

Phase 1: Training

In the training phase, your goal isn't to download every bit of information any potential leader would need to know about everything. Instead, your goal is to give them the framework they need to understand your church's mission, vision, beliefs, and ministry.

This kind of training focuses more on high-level truths and non-negotiables instead of treating potential leaders like seminary students. There's a time and a place for seminary-level training, but be careful to set your expectations for leadership in the right place—not too high, not too low.

You can easily make your training efforts reflect what makes your church unique. Larry Osborne, pastor of North Coast Church and author of *Sticky Teams*, says:

Pastors are often surprised to hear me say that when it comes to training board members and staff members, the actual material doesn't matter as much as the process. It's not that the material doesn't matter. But if there were only one universal set of detailed organizational and leadership principles that guaranteed ministry success, I'd expect we'd find it spelled out in the Bible, not in a twenty-first-century treatise on ministry. . . . No matter what material I use or even develop myself, it's the process that matters most. Working through the ideas and principles together has far more value than the actual information shared. It creates a shared pool of information and experiences that puts everyone on the same page. As a result, even when we disagree, we at least know what we're disagreeing about.⁷

Depending on how your leaders will serve, one or more of these ideas might be a good fit for your church:

- **Theological training class.** Some churches run a short-term theological training class led by its pastors, elders, or deacons. This class goes through a handful of selected theology resources (books, courses, etc.) to guide potential leaders through the church's beliefs and methods. You can also give assignments to help them engage with the different subjects you cover.
- **Ministry-focused training program.** You may prefer to offer training focused on specific ministries or disciplines. These trainings could focus on teaching people how to preach, counsel, lead small groups, or run specific ministries in your church.
- **Discipling, mentoring, and partnership.** If you have a smaller group of potential leaders, you may prefer to handle training on a small group or individual level. You can partner potential leaders with current leaders for discipleship, mentoring, and shadowing. Here's one incredibly effective method many people rely on for training:

⁷ Osborne, Larry. *Sticky Teams*. Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 134.

- I do, you watch – model what leadership looks like, and give a new leader a glimpse behind the scenes of your leadership
- You do, I watch – give your new leader a chance to lead with you on the sidelines
- You do – once a new leader has watched effective leadership and tried it themselves, let them own it

This tip is probably the easiest to put into practice right away.

If you're new to developing leaders and setting up training, you can send potential leaders through online courses through Logos Mobile Education or use VisionBox from 95Network. You can also partner with other churches offering specialized training. Some churches have accredited ministry training programs through a seminary, like The Village Church in Flower Mound, TX. Other churches offer short-term ministry cohorts, such as The Summit Church in Raleigh, NC and The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, TX.

Phase 2: Empowering

In the empowering phase of leadership development, you get to focus more on the action of leadership, where the rubber meets the road. It begins with matching trained leaders with ministry needs that best fit their gifts and passions.

While spiritual gifts assessments may be helpful, we recommend relying more on your personal relationships with people to help match them with the right roles. It's far more powerful than a spiritual gifts assessment when you can tell a leader, "I see the gift of hospitality in your life, and I'd like to give you an opportunity to use it here in our church."

The empowerment phase never really ends, because hopefully, you'll continually be adding new leaders and working closely with existing leaders.

As you think about empowering volunteers, here's our best advice:

- **Don't fill leadership gaps with anyone available.** Your church's ministry is too important to staff with people who are only warm bodies. Instead, try to enlist leaders to serve in areas they're prepared to lead so they'll care about what they're doing and how they do it. As the [95Network team likes to say](#), "We should never allow need to be our volunteer strategy!"
- **Build regular check-ins into your schedule.** It's easy to ask too much from your leaders for too long. You don't want to burn your leaders out, and you don't have to. By checking in often, you can help leaders know they're supported and that they can take a break if they need to. You can ask leaders to commit for a month or year at a time with the option to keep going if they still have the capacity.
- **Release responsibility incrementally.** Don't ask a brand-new volunteer to run your children's ministry. Instead, you can start small and gradually give them more responsibility as your leaders prove they're capable and available.
- **Be flexible about how the work gets done.** There's more than one right way to do most things. Unless something goes against your church's ministry philosophy or doctrine, you'll be best served to give your leaders a lot of freedom to try new methods.
- **Let other leaders be better than you at some things.** You're not going to be the best at everything, and that's good news! The Bible teaches that the church works best when each person is serving according to God's gifting (Romans 12:3–8, 1 Corinthians 12:4–30). Part of empowering gifted leaders in your church means addressing your desire to do everything better than everyone else. It's unhealthy for you because it leads to unnecessary burnout. It's unhealthy for your church because it steals ministry opportunities from the body and fosters reliance on you rather than on one another.

- **Remember, failure doesn't have to be final.** Maybe a new leader tries to launch a Bible study that no one attends. That's okay! Trying a lot of new things means you'll fail at a lot of new things, but it also means you might find new ways to minister to people or engage your community. Perfection isn't the goal; growth is. So give people—and yourself—room to try new things and the grace to fail.

Phase 3: Multiplying

One of the best ways to set up a steady pipeline of leaders for the long haul is to develop a culture of leadership multiplication. In short, train your new leaders to identify and train more leaders.

We see this vision in 2 Timothy 2:2 as Paul exhorts his mentee, Timothy, saying, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” Paul's training was supposed to multiply to other leaders—and yours is, too. As a pastor or church leader, you'll always need more people around you who know the gospel, live the gospel, and can teach the gospel to others.

Preparing your leaders for multiplication is simple. You just read the guide for it. Simply:

- Teach your leaders how to identify and empower others (you can even walk them through this guide as a starting point)
- Remind them often to be on the lookout for new leaders

Occasionally asking your current leaders, “Who do you see in your sphere of influence who has leadership potential?” will put the question on their radar, and they'll be more likely to spot and train new leaders.

Leaders who make more leaders—leaders who multiply—make it possible for churches to grow exponentially. With these tips, you're well on your way to sharing ministry responsibility with faithful and capable people in your church—possibly even beyond your church.

The reward of developing leaders

Developing church leaders is a joyful endeavor. Not only do you get to train people in godliness but you also get to see the body of Christ flourish because people are using their gifts for God's kingdom. And even better, you get to see the fruit Ephesians 4:11–16 envisions: churches united in faith, growing in maturity, and built up in love.

We hope these tips help you develop leaders in your church! Let us know what's working for you on [Faithlife](#), our online communication hub for churches.



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