

Building Lay Leadership Within A Congregation

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Outline

Introduction – 3 assumptions

1. Leadership *must be developed*.
2. Every congregation *has* potential leaders.
3. Congregation *must plan* for growth.

I. The Conditioning Program

1. Teach and practice the Scriptural view of the individual *member's role* (not pastor's little helper to assist him in carrying out his ministry; pastor is to assist individual Christians to carry out their ministry).
2. Teach and practice the Scriptural view of the *congregation's role* (not an end in itself, but a means to serve God and people).

II. The Recruiting Program

1. Review the entire voting member membership for potential church officers.
2. Make face-to-face contact with prospective nominees.
3. Choose words carefully when making the appeal.
 - a. Avoid low expectancy.
 - b. Keep motivation spiritual (talk to his heart, not only to his head)
 - c. Make the appeal personal (not institutional)

III. The Training Program

1. Use the Committee for Stewardship as the most effective training ground.
2. Make the most of the training possibilities of congregational and Council meetings.
 - a. Sense of purpose and of urgency should characterize the meetings.
 - b. Plan for change, growth.
 - c. Cultivate spiritual approach to devotion, agenda.
3. Use the capabilities of the Every Member Visit as a tool offering all segments of the membership training for spiritual service.

Introduction

The very way this topic is stated indicates that this presentation will be based on three assumptions. The first assumption is that lay leadership within a congregation can be built and developed, and *must* be. Christian leaders are made, not born. I realize that this may be a painful thought for those of us who somehow imagine that we leaders are born not made—you know, just between us, that the genes and chromosomes sort of fell out right for us leaders. Not so; Christian leaders are made, not born.

The second assumption on which this presentation is based is that there are in every Christian congregation potential leaders who are to be trained. It's a matter of faith with us that God has not withheld from his Church anything it needs to fulfill its God-given assignment. Ethel Waters put this rather eloquently when she remarked: "Jesus don't sponsor no flops." If you're inclined to criticize her, inelegant English, you

force me to ask you, “What do you want—good grammar or good theology?” There’s just a whole lot of practical, Christian common sense in that homely statement. Jesus don’t sponsor no flops. He has given our congregation the potential leaders it needs to do its job; He has also given the assignment to train them.

The third assumption that underlies what I’m about to say is that nothing good happens by accident. In a congregation, you *plan* for growth. One of the reasons why God establishes Christian congregations is to help his sons and daughters in that congregation grow toward Christian maturity. But our congregations won’t carry out that function if we content ourselves with doing what comes naturally.

Building lay leadership within a congregation—sounds like a pretty formidable assignment, doesn’t it? Well, they say that the accepted way to eat an elephant is to cut it in pieces. I suggest, therefore, that we might profitably break down the task of building lay leadership into three smaller tasks, or programs. Call the first one the conditioning program, the second the recruiting program, the third the training program.

The Conditioning Program

A congregation can condition its membership for leadership by consciously seeking to foster a climate favorable to the development of leaders. The pastor will have to consider it a solemn responsibility to help each member to understand himself as God sees him. We hear a lot of loose talk today about how important it is to do your own thing, to be responsible to no one but yourself. This may sound great to the immature mind, but not to the person who recalls that God has said, “This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise.”

God’s kind of leaders can be developed in a congregation only when the *role of man* is clearly understood, when you and I realize that you and I were designed and created by God to be not simply a man, but Gods man, in God’s image, a living, breathing, walking reproduction of God’s character and will. Pastors, when was the last time you reminded the members of your congregation that God has called them to be his priests, his chosen representatives, who serve Him whether they eat or drink or operate a punch press or go out socially? In God’s view the members of the congregation are not pastor’s little helpers, assisting him to carry out his ministry. That’s a fantastic perversion of the truth, The pastor is the one who is to serve the members, helping them carry out their ministry, that special role in life God has assigned to them. St. Paul reminds us that Christ made some men to serve as apostles, others as prophets, still others as pastors and teachers *to equip the saints for their work of ministry* (Eph 4:12). If I forget that my usefulness to God is pretty well measured by my willingness to serve God and people, I pretty effectively frustrate the grace of God.

Another part of conditioning the members for lives of Christian service is making clear what the *role of the congregation* is in God’s plan. Let the preacher not be afraid to say that the congregation is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. There is absolutely nothing intrinsically sacred about the congregation’s structure, or about its procedures, or its paraphernalia. The congregation, like the individual member of the congregation, has been called into existence only for the sake of serving God and people.

It’s easy to pay lip service to this obvious truth, but how easy to forget it, say, in a congregational meeting when budgetary deficits are causing concern. How often don’t we act as though the important thing is, after all, that we make ends meet, that the mortgage gets paid off, that the organization doesn’t become unglued! When the new year’s Program of Work (or, if you prefer, budget) is considered at the annual meeting, how natural it is to recommend a “safe” budget, forgetting that God has not called us to “play it safe,” but to trust our Lord and to follow him, also when he calls us to venture farther away from the safety of the shore!

In order to train potential leaders in the congregation, the present leadership dare not lose sight of this *conditioning program*. Let the public actions of the congregation, as these are reflected in sermons and in the minutes of voters’ and Council meetings, reflect the strong purpose to serve God’s people by helping them fulfil the purpose God has for each of them.

The Recruiting Program

A conditioning program, by its very nature, is preparatory. How well the pastor and the congregation have conditioned members for lives of Christian service will likely be reflected when attempts are made to *recruit* members for positions of leadership within the congregation.

Perhaps I have no right to assume that there is, in fact, a recruitment program for church leaders. I still wince when I recall the experience of attending a congregational meeting at which the election of officers was conducted without benefit of a slate of nominees who'd been contacted previously. It was downright depressing to observe the repeated nominations from the floor, repeated declinations, followed an hour later by a collective sigh of relief when all positions were finally filled with second and third choices. (Incidentally, I doubt whether any of the second and third choices felt very flattered either!)

Surely we agree that a much better way to replace the outgoing church officers is to review the entire list of voting members at a Council meeting a month or two in advance of election, in order to see once again the reservoir of potential leadership the Lord has given the congregation. Let a list be compiled of the names of all men who, in the opinion of the Church Council, have been blessed by God with the talents needed to serve God's people as leaders. And when that list is being compiled, avoid the temptation to pass over the name of, say, a busy businessman or to make his decision for him by saying: "Oh, he wouldn't accept the nomination." When drawing up a list of nominees for positions of leadership, go for the very best men God has given. Phyllis Diller says, "If you aim high enough, you can't shoot your foot off." Our reason for aiming high is considerably more noble. Christ's work deserves to go first class and shouldn't have to take second place to the demands of others on a man's prime time.

After a list of all prospective nominees (as many as a half dozen or more for each position to be filled) has been compiled, the names of the men to be contacted may be divided up among the outgoing Councilmen. They, in turn, will contact the prospective nominees to ascertain their willingness to stand for election. But before these contacts are made, the pastor would do well to discuss this procedure with the Church Council. It's my conviction that the Council ought to resolve to do this contacting on a face-to-face basis; it's too easy to say no over the phone.

Now how about the *recruiting interview*? What would you think of this approach of Hank, an outgoing Councilman, to Joe, a prospective Council nominee?

HANK: "Joe, we've got the annual congregational meeting coming up a week from tonight, and four new Church Councilmen have to be elected. You've never been on the Council, so how's about giving it a try?"

JOE: "Well, I don't know. I'm pretty busy, what with my children growing up and needing me, and with a lot of work to be done around the house."

HANK: "Look, Joe. Every one of the outgoing Councilmen is supposed to get a few nominees, and all but one of the men I've spoken to have turned me down. If everybody would take his turn on the Council, it'd sure make things a whole lot easier and more pleasant. Look, Joe, maybe you won't even be elected; the constitution just says there should, be three nominees for each vacancy. And even if you were elected, serving on the Council won't take that much of your time. There's just one evening meeting a month. Maybe you'd get put on some committee which meets another night or two a month for an hour, but that's all. Whaddya say, Joe? How about letting me put your name down?"

What's wrong with that interview? What's *wrong* with it? It would be difficult to find much in it that's *right*. The talk was not about Christ or about Joe, but about the church. The lord's work was degraded; the position on the Church Council was demeaned. (Just imagine: "It won't take much of your time...") The

motivation offered was not to the Christian in Joe, but to Joe's flesh. ("Every good guy takes his turn on the Council, Joe.") Where was the appeal to Joe's faith, to his love for his Savior, to his desire that the Lord's work be advanced through him? If in spite of that interview Joe consents to be nominated and is elected, he will certainly bring some misconceptions to the job.

Compare that interview with this one:

HANK: "Joe, your name was mentioned at a meeting of the Church Council the other evening. You know that at the annual congregational meeting Monday after next, four new Councilmen are to be elected. I'm here to ask whether you would consent to serve as a nominee."

JOE: "Well, I don't know. Frankly, I hadn't ever thought about it."

HANK; "You know, Joe, that membership on the Church Council is important. From a practical standpoint, the direction our congregation takes, whether it will be satisfied to rest on its past performance or whether it will try to increase its efforts to share God's love with people will depend to a large degree on the leadership provided by the Council. As we reviewed the list of members the other night, we were convinced that God has given you certain gifts that could certainly help our congregation be what God wants it to be. We have no doubt about *your love* for the Lord Jesus, or about *your willingness* to serve him if you were elected. What we don't know, and what we're asking you to decide, is if the Lord has made it *possible* for you to serve, since we do know you're a busy man."

JOE: "Well, that's true. I don't have a lot of spare time."

HANK: "There's no question about it, Joe. Work on the Church Council, if you should be elected, could probably *not* be done in your *spare* time. You might very well have to revise your schedule; I know I did. But I'm not sorry, because I experienced once again that when you put the Lord first in your life, you don't end up holding the short end of the stick. There is *work* involved on the Church Council but there are *compensations*, too—like the thrill of knowing that you're being used by the Lord to advance his work, like the wonderful feeling of knowing that your gifts and abilities are being invested so as to bear dividends for eternity."

JOE: "I don't know quite what to say."

HANK: "Don't feel you have to make up your mind now if you have your doubts. Talk it over with your Lord and with your family. I'll be glad to contact you again in a week or so."

What's different about that interview? You're talking to the man's *heart*, not only to his *head*. You're talking about the *man* and his *Lord*, not about the *congregation* and its *needs*. You're talking not about a man's relationship to an *organization* that will no longer be in existence the day after Judgment, but about a man and his relationship to the only *Savior* he's ever going to have.

It's my opinion, furthermore, that if we want to be successful in recruiting the congregation's top men for the Church Council, the nominating and electing procedure must be such as will impress the prospective nominee of the orderliness, the efficiency, and the high sense of purpose of Church Council and congregation. Why not have the terms of office of the new Councilmen begin January 1, rather than at some unspecified time in January, some time after the annual congregational meeting? How about scheduling the election in November or December, so that the new Church Council could be installed and ready to go on New Year's

Day? This would of course mean that the Church Council's quest for Council replacements would have to begin in September or October.

The Training Program

You will agree that a big reason why the *community* does *not* always take the church more *seriously* is that the *church does not completely take its work seriously*. In industry it would be unthinkable not to make plans ahead of time for replacing key personnel in the event of death or retirement. Is there a good reason why a Lutheran congregation should not use the same common sense? What training can we and should we offer prospective church leaders to make them more effective and more efficient servants of God and man? It's been my experience that the congregation's Committee for Stewardship is the most effective training ground for Church Councilmen. This, of course, assumes that the Committee for Stewardship is something other than a Finance Committee whose major assignment is opening offering envelopes and recording contributions. Ideally, the Committee for Stewardship is an idea committee, a study committee, sort of a congregational steering committee, and sometimes also a conscience prod. Don't let the members of the Committee for Stewardship be elected; let them be appointed. Let such be appointed as are flexible enough to be receptive to hearing of the changes God would like to bring about in our lives, and who possess the ability to envision not only what the congregation has been but what under God it might be if in God were really having his way with it. Let this committee study God's charter for a congregation and its members, and let it share these insights through reports at congregational meetings, through regular mailings into the homes of the congregation. Make it a routine matter to ask this committee to review financial reports sent into each home ("State of the Congregation" reports), to insure that motivation is kept high especially in this critical area of finance, where the hard-headed "business approach" threatens to take over. Give this committee the assignment of planning and conducting an annual educational Every Member Visit. In my experience, the alumni from the Committee for Stewardship generally proved to be the most knowledgeable and most valuable Church Councilmen. So much for pre-service training for Church Councilmen.

How about *in-service training*? (I'll deliberately omit reference to a meeting such as this). It seems almost trite to remark that at every Council meeting, and every voters' meeting, the congregation is training people—not necessarily always for the better. Opening a meeting that was announced for 7:30 at 7:35 reflects neither a strong sense of purpose or of urgency nor a respect for the time of the men who were present on time. All of us have been present at voters' meetings which were needlessly prolonged by rambling discussion, and at which it was painfully apparent that precious time could have been saved if the Church Council had done its home work ahead of time and had prepared for the voters' meeting by formulating appropriate resolutions and recommendations. What may not have been quite as apparent is that potential Councilmen may have been turned off by this inexcusable failure to practice elementary principles of business efficiency as we conduct the King's business.

Are we as Church Councilmen receptive to suggestions for improving our performance? Does the Council waste valuable time at its meetings *problem solving*, when this might easily be delegated to a committee? Does the Council find that most of its work consists *in reacting to change*, or is it active in *planning for change*? We have helped to train a future worker for our Lord's church when we have helped him to see that Christian leaders are not only supposed to *endure* change, or to *profit* by it, but to *cause* it.

As I see it, the qualifications God looks for in church leaders are primarily spiritual. A congregation won't have to worry about its future leaders if the members have been trained quietly and consistently to relate everything to the Lord Jesus. Do you, however, share my fear that sometimes we're so interested in creating and oiling the machinery of the Church that we let the fire go out in the boiler? Our Council and congregational meetings—are they clearly spiritual exercises, or are they really nothing more than a business enterprise carried on in the church building? How much preparation is given to the *devotional character* of the meeting? Or does

every church meeting start, as if on automatic signal, with the announcement: Let's begin with the Lord's Prayer"? Or perhaps with "I have a book of canned prayers here. Do you mind if I read you one of them?"

All of us know from experience in our own families that you *build* responsibility in a child by letting him *exercise* responsibility. What spiritual opportunities do the lay members of our congregation have, to train and develop them for larger responsibilities? Why is it that in many congregations the lay members are engaged for the most part, if not exclusively, in organizational and administrative functions, which deal primarily with the external needs of the parish, when the priestly functions God has assigned to them are largely spiritual in nature? If our congregations are to be what God has called them to be—launching pads for Christ's mission to the world—then the Christians in our congregation must be trained and given opportunity to translate their commitment to Jesus Christ into action. E. Stanley Jones has well said: "A religion that does not start with the individual does not start; and a religion that stops with the individual stops."

A congregation which is interested in training men and women of the congregation, and also the youth, for larger roles of Christian service to God and people will certainly want to offer them the opportunity to serve as visitors in the congregation's annual Every Member Visit. I am assuming that the message of the visit is not *only* or even *primarily* an appeal for larger contributions for the new year's budget, but is rather a redefining of God's aim for his people, as well as for Christian congregations. The presentation should explain clearly that God has called every member of the congregation to be his priest, his chosen representative, wherever in life he happens to have placed us. The privileges and responsibilities of the priesthood are explained, as well as the resources God has given us to empower us for our mission. The work ahead for the congregation in the new year is described in relation to the goals God has set for his people.

Let the Committee for stewardship then proceed to train men and women to bring this spiritual message to their fellow members. Let the Committee set its sights high and resolve that visitors will go only in teams of two and that no team will have more than three visits to make on the day of the Every Member Visit. Let husband and wife teams visit other couples; let teams of two women visit widows or single ladies; let teen-age teams visit members of their own age group. The result of this procedure will be that *over the years a large portion of the members*—men, women, high-schoolers—*will receive training* which will help them not only to understand the meaning of life, but to gain valuable experience *in discussing and sharing this insight* with others. The training received by the participants in a well-planned Every Member Visit will certainly equip and motivate them for other gut assignments in the life of the congregation—participating in Bible study groups, leading religious topic discussions at meetings, encouraging and strengthening fellow Christians who are experiencing difficulty with their Christianity, conducting the congregation's ongoing evangelism outreach, studying the real problems hampering the life and growth of the church and planning an appropriate counterattack.

The big need of the church today is not for more men, just for a better brand. You get this better brand of men by exposing them to Jesus Christ. Right here is the big job of Lutheran congregations and church councils: to provide abundant opportunity for the promises and the claims of Jesus Christ to be brought to bear on the hearts and lives of men.

God has promised us: "You busy yourself with that, and I guarantee you there will be results." Remember: Jesus don't sponsor no flops.