

## **The Equipping Church: Pastors and Parishioners Side by Side**

*It's time to regain the biblical mandate that encourages us to equip  
and release every Christian into ministry  
by Sue Mallory and Alan Nelson*

Sue Mallory was your typical parishioner, attending church with her family on Sundays and getting her “ticket punched.” She appreciated the worship services of her Southern California congregation, but never really got involved. Then Sue and her family went through a health crisis. People from the congregation heaped mounds of ministry on her, even as a new, fringe person. She felt overwhelmed with gratitude and grace. When she returned to health, she decided to get more involved in service.

One day her pastor approached her about the possibility of spearheading ministry involvement in her church as an unpaid staff person. She said yes, and began to mold and develop an equipping ministry in her home church. Zeal for her ministry and a vision for an equipping church resulted in her being tapped on the shoulder as an equipper of equippers. A decade later, Sue Mallory is leading a national organization called Leadership Training Network (LTN), a ministry to help congregations become equipping stations.

Scripture says, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

If this is true—that the primary role of professional clergy is to prepare Christians for works of service as opposed to providing works of service to Christians—then perhaps we can understand why so many believers lack maturity and fullness of Christ. In other words, few local congregations today embody the value of “every member a minister” or live out the “priesthood of believers.” The result—stunted Christians and overworked pastors.

After years of experience in both local church work and national ministry with thousands of congregations, here are some key things Sue’s learned about an equipping ministry, which have been modified from her book, *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives* (Zondervan), exclusively for readers of Rev.

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granting permission and actively validating are different attitudes.

Allowing others to share the spotlight, receiving affirmations, and being involved in the thick of ministry and budget decisions are examples of validation. Hiring staff to develop ministers, as opposed to doing ministry, reflects a financial value statement. Even in preaching most pastors tell stories of how they got a call for help, stepped into their phone booth to don their Super Pastor cape, and then swooped in to save a needy soul. Instead, tell stories of parishioners serving others. Better yet, let them tell their own stories—by interviews, video testimonials, and in written form. The more you can bring attention to the good things happening in addition to pastoral staff work, the lighter your job becomes, and the more productive the ministry of the church becomes.

### Changing to an equipping model attracts resistance

Churches change more slowly than most organizations. You can preach a series of stirring messages on body life, shared ministry, and the priesthood of believers so that people stand and say, "Let's do it!" But voting to become an equipping church, and actually employing an equipping structure are two different matters. When people see what the improvement will do to their status quo condition, there will be some fallout and resistance. Obviously, every church utilizes members for a number of ongoing ministry roles, but most churches aren't equipping churches. The latter will require a certain level of discomfort, change, and retooling—a source of conflict for most churches.

For example, it's the pastor's responsibility to make sure that people receive quality care. It's not the pastor's responsibility to personally provide that care. The first time Jane Doe—who's trained and has recognized mercy gifts—shows up at the hospital in place of Pastor Peace, you run the risk of getting static. "Where's my pastor? Why can't a real minister call on me? What do we pay them for?"

Did they receive care from the church? Yes. Did someone call on them? Yes. Pastors who aren't strong enough cave in to the pressure of past codependency and will often go back to the old way of doing things. It takes time and energy to help people understand that we're all gifted, and we need to be developing and using our gifts. This, too, is a resistance magnet because you're raising the level of involvement in the lives of busy people. Before people discover the joy of ministry, they have to endure the idea of giving up some of the old ways of church life. Thus, before making a public announcement about the new idea, it would be better to work on it behind the scenes for one to two years in

## Revise Your Language

New paradigms require the use of new language, in part because culture is attached strongly to language. For example, the word “lay” tends to be a demeaning term, reflecting mediocrity, ignorance, and incompetence. The concept steals from the legitimacy of a grace-endowed Christian. If every believer has supernatural gifting as Scripture teaches, then who are we to downplay these specific anointings? The idea that “I’m just a layman,” has become a reflection of a belittled, amateur minister. These and similar terms are not biblical themes, but have evolved over the years of church history.

Besides removing terms that raise the wall dividing clergy and laity, we want to avoid employing secular terminology which steals from the spiritual and biblical foundation of unpaid service in the church. Helping people discover their calling as well as the blessing that comes from being used by God is a primary job of pastors and paid professionals. Using words which enhance this awareness is important.

The following chart provides a suggested list of the kinds of shifts in language that will promote and re-enforce the mindset of ministry and transformation. Identifying the language you presently use and evaluating its effectiveness can be both challenging and fun. Experiment with changes. Make sure that people:

- understand the language you’re using,
- understand the message you’re conveying,
- and connect the language with the culture in which you live.

### Secular Mentality

Do you?

Delegate

Fill slots

Use job descriptions

Call people volunteers

Have committees

### Ministry Mentality

Or do you?

Share ministry

identify ministry opportunities

Use ministry descriptions

Call people ministers, unpaid servants, servant leaders, saints serve on teams

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reviving the priesthood of believers, calling pastors and parishioners to serve side by side. We can either fight this flow and continue doing business as usual, or we can tap into what God's doing and strive to become equipping churches. To do this, we need pastors who are committed to both letting go of the traditional pastoral image and grabbing on to a vision which sees every member as a minister and gives more than token attention to making this a reality in the local church.

Sue Mallory is the executive director of Leadership Training Network and author of *Guide to Building the Equipping Church* (Zondervan) and the September 2001 release, *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives* (Zondervan), from which the principles in this article are adapted. ([www.leadershipnetwork.org](http://www.leadershipnetwork.org))

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### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Walker, Williston. *A History of the Christian Church*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970. p. 81. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Ogden, Greg. *The New Reformation – Returning the Ministry to the People of God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990. p. 12 and p. 22. Print.