

ME TO WE



the end of
the pastor-
centered
church

BY ALAN NELSON

LET'S CUT TO THE CHASE. If you're pretty much satisfied with how your ministry is going, don't waste your time on this article. This is for pastors who feel the need for something *radically* different. If you're not game to do things *radically* differently, you won't consider the audacious challenge I'm about to make.

Like many pastors, I've invested most of my adult life in ministry, with the hope and belief that if I preached well, prayed hard, and loved deeply, my church would reach its potential. But after more than 20 years as a pastor, two church plants, and serving in both small and large venues, I've come to believe that the single biggest barrier to churches reaching their potential is this: the pastor-centric model of ministry.

A Call for the End of Pastor-Centric Churches

If churches are to actualize their calling, we must take a different approach to being pastors. We must *stop* talking about equipping the saints, and *start* equipping the saints—and start *now*.

The typical American church reflects the evolution of the pastoral model, whereby the pastor is the center of ministry that matters. The unspoken mind-set is that lay involvement is a support role, enabling the trained professionals to be the "real" ministers.

What's striking is that we're hard-pressed to find much of what we see in modern pastoral ministry in the Scriptures. In Exodus 18, we find a bedraggled Moses, on the verge of ministry madness and a heartbeat away from leaving the nation of Israel in chaos. He's become the sage on the stage with wisdom for everyone. The former slave nation buys into this version of the Mosaic model, used to being told what to do; but they're not happy, grumbling about the long lines, lack of service, and bottlenecked process. So God sends Jethro to speak ageless wisdom: "What you're doing is not good." In other words, Moses, no one's questioning your call, your motives, or your gifting, but you *cannot* do it alone. Jethro coaches Moses to appoint leaders to oversee groups of 10, 50, 100, and 1,000, and to only take the most difficult cases himself. In the very next chapter, God declares that all of Israel, not just the Levites, will become priests.

A Call to Do What Jesus Did

Instead of building huge crowds with mega-campus and seeker-savvy solutions, Jesus hand-picked twelve diamond-in-the-rough nonclerics to ignite God's revolution. Most of his ministry involved training the Twelve. Why? Because Jesus knew his time was limited. He had one chance to make a big splash, so he reproduced himself in others. Too much effort has gone into studying *what* Jesus said at the risk of overlooking *how* he conducted his ministry. *How* is key here because Jesus' method of pastoring was to invest in a few who'd care for the many. We see his method perpetuated in Acts 6, when the people began complaining to the apostles for more attention. In response, the apostles raised other ministers who'd use their own gifts, so they could be about theirs.

Paul continues this equipping theme in how he raised local leaders. He taught the gifting of the saints in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Paul provided the first real pastoral job description in Ephesians 4 when he said God gave some to be pastors, to prepare the saints for works of service. Note he did not say we're to *do* works of service for the saints, but rather prepare, equip, and unleash the church to use their gifts in serving others. 1 Peter 2 echoes Exodus 18 by reminding us that we're to be a nation of priests, not a nation of followers who are led by priests. Martin Luther reiterates this theme in his "95 Theses," but the idea doesn't seem to have taken root. We need a "re-Reformation," whereby pastors return to our original calling of preparing others for ministry.

Most pastors would agree with Ephesians 4. The problem is how we define *equipping*. We assume that we're equipping or preparing people through preaching, Bible studies, and a few recruitment announcements from the pulpit. Fortunately, key congregations around the country have incorporated an equipping value into their pastoral philosophy. A robust system of training, on-the-job mentoring, ►►

This is NOT about getting more people to serve in the church! This IS about EMPOWERING people to discover and experience their God-given purpose in life, so that God uses them to transform others—and they mature as a result.

feedback, accountability, and team and leadership development are needed for Ephesians 4 to become incarnate. These churches are seeing 60 to 90 percent of their active attendees involved in roles of service inside and outside the church. Most churches can absorb up to 50 percent of their attendees in internal ministry. But when you unleash more than half of your church in service, you reach a critical mass, allowing your church to impact your community, spilling over in such a way that it gets noticed and thus becomes an outreach effort.

Unlike many naysayers, I don't think the time of the seminary is over. Just the opposite. Perhaps as never before, we need seminaries and institutions of higher education to raise the bar in what they do. Their task should not be business as usual, turning out a few priests who'll serve churches with their gifts and skills. Rather, the clarion call should be to raise men and women who are theologically grounded and skilled

in training others (2 Timothy 2:2). The goal should be to turn local congregations into mini-seminaries that will ordain priests who minister as teachers, salespeople, parents, coaches, mechanics, administrators, janitors, computer programmers, store owners, and corporate executives. Then and only then will a church become dangerous to the enemy and a threat to the status quo that besieges so many of our communities.

Unlike Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, we've become safe. We're more like the animals in the movie *Second Hand Lions* who've become domesticated. "And the gates of hell shall not prevail" implies that God's people should be on the offense. Gates are defense mechanisms. The scriptural metaphor

assumes we're on the attack. If this is our calling, something is amiss in the typical congregation, hunkered within its four walls as the community drives by, clueless as to what we're doing inside.

The typical problem with most lay mobilization efforts is that we think of them in terms of filling ministry slots—in other words, cheap labor. If we had enough money, we'd certainly invest it in hiring professionals to run the church. But somewhere along the way, we got our math wrong. Instead of multiplying ministry, we began adding, assuming the pastor's call is to *do* ministry, not *prepare* ministers.

The result of ministry addition is what we loathe about our jobs. For the most part, in spite of endless sermons, worship services, Sunday school lessons, and Bible studies, people never seem to mature. They can espouse Scriptures and doctrines, but with minor pushback in a board meeting or confrontation in the parking lot, perceived spiritual fruit flies out the window. We confuse longevity with maturity, moving from Pampers to Depends with hardly a notice. Ephesians 4 says that the result of people using their gifts is maturity, a lack of up and downness. The reasons are primarily threefold:

[NOW TRY THIS]

Watch the movie *The Preacher's Wife* with your spouse or ministry leadership team. Discuss these questions afterward:

- 1 How does this reflect the typical church in America?
- 2 What were the congregation's expectations of its pastor?
- 3 What seemed to be the pastor's expectations of himself in this role?
- 4 What nearly happened to the pastor and his marriage due to this approach to ministry?
- 5 How similar or dissimilar is your style of ministry to this one?

1 **God's grace is what matures us.** Gifts (graces) are the faucets through which God's Spirit flows. When we limit this flow to the few graces possessed by the pastoral staff, then the congregation will be retarded in its growth. A lack of water or nutrients will stunt any living organism. When we multiply the flow of God's grace through the orifices of gifts, both in numbers and types, this catalyzes growth that results in maturity.

2 **Exercising after spiritual eating strengthens us.** The current model of ministry enhances passivity, whereby we gather together at events, listen to music and preaching, and then go about our regularly scheduled lives. Like binging on buffets without exercise, we become spiritually obese if we're always getting or if we as pastors are just assuming that people are implementing what they hear. Experiential learning is the key. If we'd help our people use a fraction ►►

of what they got, we'd see logarithmic growth. When people use their gifts through service, they get exercise. This builds the body of Christ.

3 Being used by God motivates us. If I could summarize hundreds of conversations I've had with pastors the last few years, I'd say that the single biggest frustration we feel is a perceived lack of commitment in our congregations. It shows up in attendance, attitude, participation, and tithing. We've nurtured a culture of consumerism, but serving fosters a spirit of ownership. We shouldn't be surprised when people say, "I don't have time." That's a smoke screen. We all have time to do what we really want to do, or feel we need to do. When we see the impact our act of service makes on another human being, it motivates us to do more, to make the time, because I realize that "I matter."

We are approaching what I believe to be the perfect storm in terms of seeing a "re-Reformation in the church." Five dynamics are converging over the next few years that may serve to redefine what we do as pastors and how churches function:

1 Ministry is becoming more complex. No one is saying that pastoring has gotten easier in recent years. As this trend continues, it will force us to rethink how we do what we do. Pastors who want to survive, let alone thrive, will be forced to engage others in the process. We can't do it all. We'll either kill ourselves trying or we'll exit in numbers we've never witnessed.

2 People are seeking purpose. As Boomers reach retirement age and experience what psychologists refer to as "generativity," there is going to be a huge interest in giving back and getting involved, as we seek to invest in what outlives us. Combine that with a continued Gen-X rejection of slickness and the Millennial's interest in collaborative teams, and we're apt to see less interest in a core few getting all the action.

3 Authentic faith is becoming essential. Outsiders have little tolerance these days for paid professionals espousing religious dogma. Real's the deal, meaning for people to take Christianity seriously, they're going to need to see unpaid fans demonstrating their theology through altruistic acts of service.

4 Church change requires leadership. Churches are dying for lack of change. Pastors need to quit feeling bad that we're not wired to lead, and most

of us admit we are not. No big deal. But we must tap those who are, within our congregations, if the church as an organization has any hope of changing. Leaders are agents of change, meaning pastors must open up leadership to those actually gifted at leading, or else organizational decline and death will result. Pastors must disciple these leaders so they are fit for leading and then assume the role as back-seat influencers.

5 Traditional spiritual formation isn't working. We can rely less and less on preaching and other "tell-em" methods of discipleship. We must return to more of an on-the-job apprenticeship, whereby we experience serving together, cultivating and seizing teachable moments that arise in real-life situations—outside of classroom discussions of biblical content. For instance, we learn a lot more about the good Samaritan by feeding the poor in a homeless shelter than by dissecting Luke 10 in a Sunday school class.

If we continue to pastor in the traditional, pastor-centric paradigm, we'll pretty much get the same results we're getting now. But a small and growing group of pastors and churches are discovering better and simpler ways to invest their energies, whereby the pastors become empowerers more than emperors, by equipping people to serve. I believe that pastors have grossly underestimated the important role they're called to play in their churches, by assuming that they're supposed to be *doing* ministry, no matter how good at it they get. Instead, if they would see themselves and act like the preparers of ministers, their churches would begin to tap their latent potential. The irony is that in general, this will require more of a back-seat, behind-the-scenes role, when most of us are familiar with being upfront and in the spotlight. It's our dream at Rev! Magazine to amplify this vision and fan the flames of this movement that God is doing in churches. 🌟

ALAN NELSON is the executive editor of Rev! Magazine and is passionate about understanding the organizational issues of the local church.

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See Alan Nelson's new book, *Me to We: A Pastor's Discovery of the Power of Partnership (Group)*, for practical ways to use the ideas in this article.



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