

Series: “The Church: “21st Century or 1956?” (Part 2)
“Permission Giving – Lay Driven”

Have you ever read a Scripture verse or passage a number of times, then read it again and it really hit home? One of those Scriptures for me is Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 11-12. “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” In recent years these words have dramatically altered how I have viewed my role as a pastor.

God gave various spiritual gifts – some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some *pastors* and teachers. What’s their job, according to Ephesians 4? To equip – who? “Saints”. Who are saints? Believers! The word “saint” in the Bible simply means Christian believers.

So. What’s my job description as pastor? To equip you (if you’re a Christian) for ministry. That’s the *Biblical model* for our roles and our work in the church!

This Biblical model is not assumed or practiced in many congregations! In many churches, people figure that the *pastor* does the ministry. (Or, if the church is large enough, that the pastor and *staff* do the ministry). You receive the ministry that the pastor provides for you. The pastor is your shepherd, who takes care of all your spiritual needs. That’s what you pay a pastor to do! This represents what I call the “chaplaincy model” of ministry – the pastor is the chaplain of the congregation.

While this is a very common practice in churches, it is not the Biblical model of how the church should function. The Bible teaches that every Christian is called to ministry. The word “ministry” simply means “to serve” – *every Christian is called to serve.*

Jesus made that clear. “Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’” (Mark 10:42-45).

If you’re a Christian, you are “called to the ministry” just as much as I am called as a pastor. My calling isn’t any higher or more important than yours – it’s just *different*.

You are the “ministers” of the church! Yes, I do ministry too. But a big part of my job is to train and equip you for your ministry, so you can serve in ways God is calling you to serve!

I’ve heard some say, “Well, if we’re doing the ministry, then the pastor is doing less. What are we paying him or her for?” In a lay-driven congregation, the pastor is just as busy, but he or she is spending more time training and equipping the people for ministry! Someone has contrasted the two models this way: *In the typical model churches hold to, the pastor or staff does the ministry and the lay people run the church. In the more Biblical model, the pastor or staff run the church while the people in the church do the ministry!*

What might a “lay-driven” congregation look like - a church where most of the ministry is done by lay people? (I will use examples from my last several churches, where we transitioned into a lay-driven congregation. I hesitate to do this, but in this way I’ll be sharing some of my actual experiences rather than just talking in a theoretical fashion).

Lay people doing visitation. In one church I served, we had a team of lay people (called “parish visitors”) who visited shut-ins, gave home communions, and made occasional hospital visits. We had a lay person on the church staff (unpaid) who had charge of this ministry. When people first came on as lay visitors I had them attend my “How To Help People” classes. After that, this woman who had oversight of our parish visitors led monthly training sessions for the team of visitors. The pastors did some visitation, but most was done by lay people. I’m glad we have a team of people here who are now serving as parish visitors!

Lay people preach. In a large church I served we had a list of people who wanted to preach. I put together a basic course on preaching called *Preaching 101* and taught that course to the lay preachers. In my 12 years there we never had to go outside the congregation to get a guest preacher. In one of the smaller churches I served after retirement, when I left we had 5 people who were willing and able to preach, some of whom had never preached before. One was a lady who joined the church when I was there. In meeting with her about church membership, I asked how she would like to serve, and she said she would like to try preaching. She did, and did a great job!

Studies taught and led by lay people. Many churches have people in the congregation teaching Sunday School classes. In addition, we have had people in the congregation take the lead in small groups, or teach the Alpha course, or the Disciple Bible Study.

Lay people took the lead in some of the counseling. Some men in the congregation worked one on one with people in budgeting and money-management. We had a social worker in the congregation who led several grief groups. Several marriage and family therapists in the church led marriage enrichment experiences (I had done one early on, but after these therapists joined the church, I turned that ministry over to them).

Lay worship leaders. Some people are gifted to lead worship. Many churches with a contemporary style worship have people from the congregation up front helping to lead worship. Many churches with traditional services have lay people reading Scripture (like here) or leading in prayer.

Number of lay people were small group leaders. A lot of the spiritual support and care within the church was done through small groups. Our small group leaders were like pastors, or shepherds, of their own little flock – a “little church” within the bigger church. I talked once with the pastor of another church where there were a number of small groups. He told me how there was a death in the family of one of the small group members. By the time my pastor friend got to the home, their small group members were already there, comforting the family. The pastor stayed a little while, then left, assured that the care within the body of Christ would go on

even in his absence.

Now I want to be clear: I am not saying that the pastor doesn't provide any spiritual care within the congregation. There are times when you need a pastor. I will say it again: *There are times when you need a pastor!* Times when a pastor's skill and training and expertise are called for. *But most congregations are far too dependent on their pastor to take care of them, and meet all their needs! And it is just impossible for a pastor to meet everyone's needs!*

Look at how pastoral care was done in the New Testament Church. Shepherding was done *not* by those who went to Bible College or Theological Seminary and took courses and got a degree. Care and shepherding was done within the church by those *gifted and called by God* for that task. The church appointed them to that role based on their spiritual gifts and calling!

It's only been in recent years that I've experienced the joy and power of a church where lay people do most of the ministry! In all the churches I've pastored, I've talked about the "ministry of the laity". In days past we used to have a "Laity Sunday" – a day when the ministry of lay people was emphasized. We'd often have a lay person speak that day. And I thought, "Great, now we have lay people doing ministry." Looking back, this was rather laughable! How different when lay people are carrying the ball for the ministry of the church *every day!* As I think about it, I find a lot of joy as a pastor when I can minister to people. So, why should I rob you lay people of that same joy!

In order for this lay-driven ministry to happen, a church has to be a permission-giving church! A system, a mind-set, an atmosphere has to be created where people are given permission and encouraged to do the ministry God lays on their hearts without having to jump through a whole bunch of hoops or go to a half-dozen different committees to get approval (or be turned down).

See, many churches operate this way: One or two groups or committees plan programs and determine what the church is going to do. If someone comes along with an idea, or wants to start a new ministry, that individual is required to get permission from that committee. In many cases, they go to the committee, and may be referred to another group or committee. Since church committees may only meet once a month or once every couple of months, it could be weeks or months before someone says yes or no to the request. By that time, the person may get frustrated waiting, or simply give up. (In worst case scenarios, there may be "controllers" in the church who control what's allowed or what's not allowed. "Controllers" can be an influential person in the congregation, or a committee that has a lot of power, or even a control-freak pastor!).

Permission-giving churches operate in a different way. These churches encourage people to follow their God-dream, and free people up to do the ministry God places on their heart. So, when somebody says, "I'd like to start this ministry," or "I feel God has laid this concern on my heart" – the response of the pastor or church leaders is to first ask, "Is this consistent with our church's mission statement and core values?" If it is, then that person is told, "Go, find 1 or 2

other people with a similar concern or a passion, and just do it! If you need help, come back to us, and we'll see what we can do to help.”

Unfortunately, I spent 30 years as a pastor doing things the old-fashioned way. We'd have committees meet and decide on programs for the church, then beat the bushes to try to get people to support what the committee decided to do. But the better way, the more Biblical way, is to let ministries emerge from people who feel called to do those things, and simply allow them to do it. Doing things this way *takes a certain amount of trust that if God wants something done in a congregation, God will lay it on someone's heart to do.*

I have seen the transformation that can take place in a church where people are given permission to follow their God-dream, and ministries are happening all over the place!

I believe God has dreams for this congregation – and God wants to use us to reach out beyond our walls to minister and serve in His name. And I believe the way this is going to happen is not that the Administrative Board or a church committee plans a program, but that God will lay on some of our hearts something that needs to be done for His glory. Is there something God has laid on your heart to do? Do you have passion for some kind of need in the church or community? Maybe for children, youth, widows? I want this church to be able to turn you loose to do what God is calling you to do!

One of the most gratifying experiences for me as a pastor has been to be the leader of a church where ministry is all over the place: people serving in the church and beyond the church in ways I wasn't even always aware of. As their pastor, I didn't have to oversee and try to manage everything!

There is one thing to always remember: most of the ministry we do, most of the ways we serve the Lord, is not done in the church building, but outside these walls. Serving through things like civic clubs, scouting, meals on wheels; volunteer work for non-profit organizations, helping people one on one (family, neighbors, work). It is thrilling to see a congregation freed up to serve, to catch the excitement and power generated in congregations where “the people” are doing the ministry, and where some have been transformed from “pew sitters” – soaking up services offered by the pastor – to people serving in the name of the Lord!

Let me close with stories of what happened to 2 people in a permission-giving church. A lady named June was chairperson of a group called the Caring and Sharing Committee. That group helped to oversee some of the help the church gave to people in need. One day June came into my office and told me that she had a passion for plays and dramatic presentations and would love to see a drama ministry started in the church. But she felt guilty about giving up the work she was doing on the Caring and Sharing Committee. I encouraged her to follow her dream for drama, and not feel bad about bowing out as the leader of the other group. I could tell it was a struggle for her and she was wrestling with guilt over it, but she followed my suggestion. She resigned her position on Caring and Sharing and began a wonderful ministry in the church

around dramatic presentations. Under her leadership and guidance, the idea took off. Over the years the drama ministry did some outstanding work, including a church dinner theater, and several plays in the park that drew many outsiders. All because one lady was given permission to follow her God-dream!

Then there was Becky. Becky was one of our small group leaders. God placed on her heart a vision for a clothing bank at the church. She shared the vision with her small group and they caught the dream too. Becky talked with me about it, and presented her idea to the Administrative Council of the church. They were supportive, but at the time we didn't know how we could find any space in the church. But Becky was patient and didn't give up on her dream. When the church did a major expansion, the church officials agreed to give Becky space to establish a clothing bank, even though that space originally was designated to be a classroom. From there, it took off. Others caught the vision and agreed to help. One of the projects of the clothing bank was to give out free back packs and school supplies prior to the beginning of the school year. The last time this was done I believe they gave out something like 800 free backpacks. All because God placed a vision for ministry and outreach on one lady's heart.

Ephesians 4:11-12 says, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

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