



Lay Pastors Ministry for Today's Church

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St. Vincent de Paul ran an orphanage in Paris during the first half of the seventeenth century. One winter day he opened the front gate to find an abandoned infant lying in the snow. He brought the bundled baby back into the warmth of the room where he was meeting with a number of wealthy women who helped support the orphanage.

Naturally, St. Vincent asked them what he should do with the tiny, frail creature. One of the women suggested that perhaps God intended for the baby to die, as a punishment for the sins of the mother. Appalled at this attitude, St. Vincent angrily retorted, "When God wants dying done for sin, he sends his own Son to do it!"

This is grace, mysterious, inexplicable, but touching and overwhelming. It is worth devoting the whole of our lives to a response to this grace.¹⁾

This seventeenth century document reflects an attitude that many people have adopted as a way of thinking and a way of living in the twenty-first century. In the church, there are many people who do not feel, or accept, a responsibility to care and give in the name of Jesus Christ. They may warm a pew seat, but do not step forward to advance the ministry of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The grace of God, as seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus, should evoke a powerful response – a response that takes the form of caring and love that is expressed in the most practical and tangible ways to show devotion and commitment to furthering His cause.

The other side of this coin lies squarely on the shoulders of the clergy who do not encourage, equip and disciple the laity so that they can carry out the privilege of caring for God's people in their time of need.

The biblical foundations for the Lay Pastors Ministry are recorded in Ephesians 4:11-12 and I Peter 5:1-4.

Ephesians 4:11-12: 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.²⁾

This verse places a responsibility upon the ordained clergy in the twenty-first century to

be about the business of equipping the laity for ministry in the context of the Body of Christ – the Church.

It also places the responsibility of the laity to desire and seek being equipped to provide ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. When the laity read this text, they legitimately need to ask the question: How can I be equipped to carry out ministry in the context of my local church?

As I write this article I reflect upon a church that contacted me to come and do an orientation on Lay Pastors Ministry. They want to better understand the concept and to specifically get a basic understanding of Lay Pastors Ministry as described in Dr. Melvin J. Steinbron's book *Can The Pastor Do It Alone?*

What is exciting about this invitation is the fact that it came from lay people who are seeking, and who have a pastor who also wants to learn how to better equip the saints for the work of ministry. Here you have a working relationship that is fostered by seeking, learning, dreaming, and visioning about how lay people can care for the people within the local congregation.

The second foundational test is I Peter 5:1-4. Peter writes: Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.³⁾

There is a major attitude that Peter teaches us that takes us directly into the heart of Jesus. If anyone willingly gave His all, it is Jesus. Peter tells us about the kind of attitude we need to have when it comes to providing care: not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it.

God uses many ways to help the laity see a vision for their ministry. The Word of God, and the clear call of the clergy to lay people to serve, are two of the most important ways that God does this. However, the attitude commanded is key to the effectiveness of the outcome. Peter is specific when he talks about doing the Lord's work: not under compulsion but willingly.

Dr. John Maxwell tells the story of being in a small plane with a pilot friend and noticing the attitude indicator. Not understanding how an aircraft could have an attitude, he questioned the pilot and got an education in life. Yes, a plane does have

an attitude; it is the aircraft's position in relation to the horizon. When the nose is pointed up, it is called a nose-up attitude, and when the nose is pointed down, it is called a nose-down attitude. The attitude of the plane directly affects the performance of the plane.

So it is in life. Nose-down attitude: negative, critical, pessimistic; nose-up attitude: positive, encouraging, enthusiastic. If you have the nose-up, enthusiastic attitude, the performance of whatever you do will be dramatically affected for the better. Those who do their best and accomplish the most in life invariably possess this contagious characteristic of enthusiasm. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord, and not for men (Colossians 3:23).⁴⁾ When the attitude centered on Christ is "nose-up" the benefits can be immeasurable.

On the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation website, there were some incredible insights between acting kindly and its benefits. The following was submitted on September 11, 2008:

Numerous scientific studies show that acts of kindness result in significant health benefits, both physical and mental. Here are some key points –

- Helping contributes to the maintenance of good health, and it can diminish the effect of diseases and disorders, serious and minor, psychological and physical.
- A rush of euphoria, followed by a longer period of calm, after performing a kind act is often referred to as a "helper's high," involving physical sensations and the release of the body's natural painkillers, the endorphins. This initial rush is then followed by a longer-lasting period of improved emotional well-being.
- Helping can enhance our feelings of joyfulness, emotional resilience, and vigor, and can reduce the unhealthy sense of isolation.

Now take these "secular" observations and transport them into the benefits Peter advises us to have: I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly.

What might be some of the benefits in the lives of those who provide care, those who receive care, and the way both of these people impact the church?

- Helping contributes to the maintenance of good health, and it can diminish the effect of diseases and disorders, serious and minor, psychological and physical.

A healthy church does ministry that promotes confidence – the freedom to be able to express feelings and allow places and times where caring and encouragement can be experienced and expressed. This is a wonderful description of what a personal relationship within the context of the model of Lay Pastors Ministry can provide.

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I cannot begin to tell you how many people have expressed to me the incredible feelings of joy they have experienced as they gave and received care from people within the "flock families" of the Lay Pastors Ministry. I have often made the observation that both the caregiver and the one who is cared for are mutually blessed.

- Helping can enhance our feelings of joyfulness, emotional resilience, and vigor, and can reduce the unhealthy sense of isolation.

There is the story of a woman who was sitting alone in a church filled with people who paid no attention to her. There was a time in the service when people were to "share the peace." This is when people greet one another in the name of Jesus. The pastor noticed that this woman seemed to be lost in the crowd. He went over to her and extended his hand and gently placed his arm on her shoulder and warmly greeted. He noticed she instantly got tears in her eyes. After the service was over he asked her what she was thinking when he greeted her. She responded to her that he was the first person who had "touched" her since her husband had died.

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 142:4 "Look on my right hand and see - there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me, no one cares for me."

We have found countless people who have felt a sense of isolation within the Body of Christ whose lives were transformed by Lay Pastors who reached out and brought the warm and life-giving love of Jesus Christ into their lives. They did this by being with them in times of non-crisis and crisis.

If the church of the twenty-first century is to be the church that God calls it to be, the equipping of the laity to care for other lay people is critical. Lay Pastors Ministry for Today's Church is not just the title of an article; it is an imperative that can change a church from the inside out.
