

How to Create Gifted Underachievers – A (Tongue-in-Cheek) Guide for Pastors

Dear pastors, it has come to my attention that my personal experiences with many of you are not unique. I frequently hear from people who have quit their churches because they were so underutilized. It goes like this – God gives one or more spiritual gifts to each Christian. If you refuse to let people use their gifts they will leave your church or worse, they will become gifted underachievers. These are the folks who stay but you'll only let them do the very minor things in your church. This stunts their growth and makes them begin to doubt their faith.

Are these words hard on your ears? Good. Because maybe you've not heard this until now. If your church is more than a few dozen people, you most certainly have some Christians who are not using their gifts. This is a tragedy. It is occurring because you are somehow not seeing the very resources which God has brought into your congregation.

Develop eyes to see. I have heard so many of you say things like “Who knows that person? Are they well known? Can they draw a crowd?” I say to you – are you running a church or a Sunday morning show? Which is it? Why are you focusing on the external features of your people? Look at their hearts. You may believe that you are indeed looking at their hearts, but do your spoken words reflect this fact? If I had a dollar for every time I have heard a pastor say negative things about their church I would be a wealthy man. Your people have invested their time, money and emotions into following the Lord, so make sure you have the right attitude about helping them grow.

The Descent into Doubt

It works like this – Joe is a Christian. He comes to your church and wants to join and help out. He thinks he knows what are his gifts so he tells you. Then you immediately put up the roadblocks. You tell Joe that he has to sit at your feet for a period of six months. During this time you offer him no responsibilities. Now Joe knows that God has not called him to just sit and do nothing. You, Pastor, have created a hostile environment for Joe. Meanwhile you are perfectly thrilled to have famous preachers, and your personal buddies, to come and speak at your church. What you have in effect said is that you do not trust God to bring experienced Christians into your church unless they come in a way that you expect. This is extremely disheartening to Joe. You are not leading Joe to doubt the faith, you are driving him to so do. You are taking a Christian, a person with spiritual gifts, and you are turning him into a gifted underachiever.

A Better Way

At my previous church we had a better way of handling things. Whenever a person asked to try using their gifts, we created an opportunity for them. A trusted and experienced Christian was assigned to walk alongside the person and provide support and guidance. We often experienced the “freedom to fail”. If someone tried using their gifts and the results were not great, there was no recrimination. There was a good and loving analysis of what could be done better the next time. Many of you are so afraid of something not going right that you won’t let people try using their gifts. Don’t be afraid. If God has gifted a Christian to do something then help them try out their gift.

Letting Go

When I was in seminary most of my classmates were in their late 30s to early 40s, as was I. At that point in life we had accumulated enough battle scars to deepen our trust in God. Most of the churches which recruited from the seminary were looking for guys who were in their early to mid 20s. This mismatch led to a large number of us becoming church planters. Sadly most of these church planters bought into a ridiculous heresy. The heresy was that you should avoid accepting experienced Christians into your church plant. I never believed this lie. God brings people. He brings some to challenge and grow you. He brings some to help you. Only time shows which is which. You cannot reliably predict who is going to be helpful. Over a reasonably large number of people you will be incorrect at least half the time.

Seriously guys, if you want your congregation to grow don’t set up silly externally-focused barriers to entry. Don’t tell me that you would never let me preach. Instead put me in your pulpit on a weeknight, or have me speak to your small group. Test my gift. Don’t prejudge me. And don’t pre-convict any of our fellow Christians. Let people use their gifts. Guide them without trying to control every detail. Do not make the mistake of thinking that God will only bring the people you expect in the way that you expect at the time you expect.

One More Thing

Pastors, I appeal to your desire to reach the lost with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How many people are you currently reaching? Are you willing to rethink your attitude and approach to bringing experienced Christians into your church? There is a lot of skill and talent out there which is not being used by the churches. Will you set aside your pre-judgments and let God bring experienced bond-servants into your world? Will you let the Lord God of Hosts supply reinforcements for your portion of the fight against the forces of sin and darkness? Or will you continue to be the kind of pastor who sets disheartening and soul-drowning blockades which prevent Christians from fully participating in your church? Will you make gifted achievers by propelling others? Or will you continue to be a producer of gifted underachievers?