



FIVE THRESHOLDS

OF THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

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WE NEED MORE **LEADERS.**

WE NEED BETTER **LEADERS.**

THIS IS ON **US.**



THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE: MORE, BETTER

I have two fundamental beliefs about local church leadership, and our future. First, there are not enough leaders in the pipeline for the local church. Secondly, those who are in the pipeline are inadequately prepared for tomorrow's challenges.

While these are both backed by a little data and two years of research, this short-read is not a book to convince you of these facts.

If you need facts, stories, twenty years of talking and anecdotal slices of life, let's have coffee. This is not written to convince you that we have a problem.

If you are in leadership in a local church, and you have ever tried to hire a _____ (student pastor, worship leader, kids pastor, exec, associate, etc.), you already know this. You were probably surprised to find how difficult the position was to fill. You exhausted the internal possibilities of your church family. You began to work your own network. Then finally, you posted the job online. Eventually, most of us begin to wonder: Is there something wrong with us, or our church?

Do these statements sound familiar?

“We couldn’t find anyone, so someone in our church is filling in temporarily.”

“I can’t believe no one would want this job. This is a great church, and this is a great place to live.”

*“Do you know of anyone? **Anybody?**”*

I have heard these exact statements from pastors of churches of 150, and staff members of churches of 18,000. My belief is that no matter the size of the church or the location, we have a problem in the church leadership pipeline. From the top to the bottom, the pipeline is simply inadequate. This is an urgent need with no quick fixes.

To be clear, I'm not talking about the awesome volunteer leaders that serve in every area of your church. I'm talking about your next employee. When I use the term "church leader," I'm talking about those who draw a paycheck from a local church. We need more of these vocational ministry possibilities coming through the pipeline. We need more newcomers starting in ministry somewhere, and growing in both skill and leadership chops for the future.

But there's a second issue in our leadership pipeline.

WE NEED BETTER.

I type this in the spring and summer of 2015. Culture is changing at a lightning pace, right under our feet. I began in ministry in 1992 in a town of about 7,000 in central Kentucky. As I recall, the biggest social ill in '92 might have been the fight to keep the 10 commandments on the courthouse building. I don't have to convince you that most systems that are built for education and training are decades behind. I believe the rate at which they are falling behind is increasing, not decreasing.

The core problem: Culture changes faster than the systems we have in place to produce leaders.

Don't get me wrong, I'm pro-education, I work in education, and I believe in high standards. But the systems have to change.

I could have this conversation every day of the week.

Do these statements sound familiar?

*“I posted the job online and got 125 resumes.
I didn’t like any of them.”*

*“She quit after six months...completely ill-prepared
for this challenge.”*

*“It’s as if all the good people I know aren’t interested, and the
leaders I really trust won’t give me the names of the good people
they know.”*

By the way, this is true in virtually every field in our country – not just ministry. But I would contend that the fallout for the Church is worse. You’ve heard the statistics, and seen the evidence: the great majority of church leaders fail, become discouraged, and move on to different careers. I’ve read articles that say the average stay is eighteen months, and I’ve read others that say three years. Can we agree that neither is long enough?

Imagine what kind of shape our healthcare system would be in if most doctors got discouraged and quit by the third year. If ministry was healthcare, no one would be able to find a good doctor, and most doctor’s offices would either be closing, or largely irrelevant to our healthcare needs. We’d be treating today’s illnesses with 1984’s solutions.

Our best thinking has brought us to this point. We could debate how we got here, but we’ll leave that to another book, expert, or conference. I

personally did about 15 years of leadership in some amazing dynamic churches around some incredibly awesome people. For the most part, these were exciting places to be in ministry.

I also know I have no memory of ever looking a young person in the eye and saying “you should consider doing this with your life.” I’m ashamed to admit it. If you do this regularly, I applaud your efforts. If your church has many young minds who have gone into vocational ministry because of your influence, I’d love to talk to you. Now, I want to encourage you to challenge your peers. I have met with hundreds of leaders – student leaders in particular – who do not, will not, or believe they actually should not, spend their relational equity on calling the next generation to a lifetime of vocational ministry.

I began to awaken to this issue about 4 years ago through my work with churches around the nation. I described what I was thinking to an old preacher friend of mine at the table one day.

“Seems to me like we can’t wait ’til 11th or 12th grade to talk to a student about lifetime ministry,” I said. To which he replied, “11th grade? No way. We gotta eyeball these guys and gals right after elementary school. When they’re dreaming about being a professional athlete, the President of the U.S., and other great things. We gotta call them before mom and dad get ’hold of them.”

It’s as if 20 or 30 years ago we began to give the message that you can be in “ministry” no matter your occupation. This is true. Has this accidentally eclipsed the call to lead in the local church? I contend that it has, and this is the primary reason we are here.

I’m convinced we need more and we need better leaders for the future. We need colleges reinventing. We need seminaries getting in on this topic. We need institutes and certificate programs. We need churches of all sizes investing in creating more and better leaders, now more than ever.

I am 45 years old, and if I have thirty more years to work hard, then this is the topic the Lord has placed before me. I think I bought in fully when I sat in the balcony of Willow Creek Church in the early 90s and heard Bill Hybels say, “The church is the hope of the world, and will never be all that she can be until she is led well.”

We need more and better leaders. And I believe there are five thresholds we need to break through to get there. ■



THE THRESHOLD

thresh-old THreSH (h)ōld/

2. the magnitude or intensity that must be exceeded for a certain reaction, phenomenon, result, or condition to occur or be manifested.

My wife and I just made our tenth move in twenty-two years of marriage. Our story is beginning to sound a little sketchy as we describe the places we've lived. Are we running from the law, or are we white-collared gypsies? You learn a lot when you move this often. Like the best places to get boxes, how to keep dishes from breaking, and how to get friends to do the heavy lifting.

One thing you've got to learn is the art of the appliance dolly. In order to successfully execute a move, you must learn how to strap a fridge or washer to a dolly, how to maneuver the corners, and most importantly, how to get over the threshold. Surely you have experienced rolling a heavy piece of furniture on a dolly down the hall or the exterior walkway of a home, only to have the wheels come to a dead stop as they chalk themselves against the threshold.

A door threshold serves a great purpose. It helps seal out the wind, rain, noise, and other associated things we don't want from the inside of our homes and apartments. But the very thing that makes a threshold work well also causes the standstill, when you are trying to navigate over it.

This is the moment when extra effort and a different leverage point must be used, lest you find your fridge scratching the hard wood floors on the other side.

There are probably fifty-seven things the church must do to raise up a new generation of leaders. They are probably all very important. We could write about any number of spiritual disciplines, theological trainings, and heart-felt revivals that must take place in our country for there to be more and better church leaders in the future.

I'm pushing five.

I didn't really choose these five topics. In a way, they chose me. I lived them, and now I am positioned to do something about each of them in a small way. Maybe you are positioned to push on one, or three, or even all five. Perhaps you will find your own way to help call and equip the next generation of leaders for the church.

If you are reading this as a church staff member, my question is always "who is the next YOU?" This is on all of us. I will do all I can to help you raise up and equip those who are coming behind you. To do this, I believe it is essential that we bust through the following five thresholds. ■



ONE: CALLING

The Beginning of the Leadership Pipeline - It Starts With Us

I'll never forget riding home from a weekend leadership event with my youth pastor. It was around 1982, and I was bouncing along in the church van looking at the back of his head as the miles clicked off in the middle of the night, thinking "someday I want to be like that guy." Little did I know that seminal moment as a goofy 13-year-old would shape the trajectory of my life.

I don't remember the theme, the games, if there was music, where we ate, or even what we did. But I remember every detail of the moment when he

looked at me and said, "I see ministry in you." Call it a calling, call it influence, call it what you want, but I never looked back after that comment. I stepped into whatever volunteer and leadership roles I could at the local church. That moment would propel me into the next 3 decades through to today.

My youth pastor intuitively knew what my team and I have come to live and breathe every day: finding the next generation of church leadership is on us. Those of us in influential roles at the local church level must identify the ones who have the potential to be the

next generation of influencers. Carey Nieuwhof said it best recently on our campus, that the Church needs more “influential entrepreneurs and not just pastors.” These traits begin early in life.

It is true that we must teach, train, educate, and coach new leaders in radically different ways for the future health of the church. We are tweaking it all, but to wind up with a different result, we need to start with a different type of raw material.

What does an entrepreneurial influencer look like in 8th grade or 11th grade, or as a 24 year-old? Those of us in leadership at the local church have to find these key moments to look them in the eye and say “I see ministry in you.” Influencers in middle school might actually be the rebel – that challenging kid in your youth group, or on your sports team. Who is the kid who’s getting other kids in trouble? Who walks to their own beat? We need influencers who could go do anything

with their life. We need to look at them and say “I see ministry in you...consider this.”

A little later in life, my church hired a Worship Leader who was a little ahead of his time (translation: he didn’t last long. He was progressive!) But he was the first guy I heard actually lead worship. I’m sure compared to what we do today it would be considered goofy, but I remember sitting there with a lump in my throat on a Sunday night as he used a band and an overhead projector. “I want to do that with my life,” I was thinking.

He invited me in. He gave me opportunity. I spent some late nights at church helping him set up the Christmas set, I worked on the production teams, and he gave me leadership opportunities.

It probably would have been easier on him and his ministry if he had only spent time with the most gifted, best talented, and people his own age. I’m glad he didn’t. He’s the primary reason I am where I am today.

Fast forward, and I guess I went all-in in '92 when I first sat in the balcony of the Lakeside Auditorium and heard Hybels say “The church is the hope of the world, and nothing can transform communities like the church when it is lead well.”

My subsequent thirteen years of full-time ministry, five years of consulting with hundreds of churches, and now three years in higher education circles, I still believe both: nothing can do what the local church can do, AND we have to lead better and differently, moving forward. You and I are the recruiters. In Omaha, we call these vocational ministry prospects “The 3%.” My youth pastor didn't take all one hundred of us on a leadership retreat. He tapped the short list. He looked beyond our awkwardness. I'm sure there were sure bets that didn't pan out and long shots that turned out awesome, but he was the mouthpiece of God in my life.

Thirty years later, I carry a name in my wallet of a

student that I'm praying will answer the call. I get these names from current church leaders. They know best. We don't rely on marketing firms or even high school counselors, because we know who can recognize future ministry material. It's youth pastors and worship leaders, like the ones I was blessed to grow up under.

“Ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers to the fields...” From my perspective of where I'm embedded in the Kingdom leadership pipeline, the fields have never been whiter. ■



TWO: SOFT SKILLS

The Third Rail - Jesus is Not Enough

“Being smart and loving Jesus is not enough.”

Even as that phrase was coming out of my mouth, I was wishing I could take it back. “Jesus is not enough?” said the young and eager freshman. I was caught between what I know to be true and what a bumper sticker says. “Actually...no,” I said. “Jesus is not enough.”

Blasphemy, right? If you are still reading, allow me to explain what I mean. We teach that there are three rails a future church leader is going to need in order to lead effectively.

1. Education: Today’s young leaders better know what they believe and be able to contextualize it in a changing culture that is shifting under their feet. Every church leader does not have to be college educated, but colleges and seminaries have typically served us well and will continue to do so in topics that every leader needs, like Bible Knowledge, Theology, Doctrine, History, Ethics, and the like.

2. Spiritual Formation: I assume I don't need to explain much here, either. Future leaders must love Jesus; they must know what it means to be a disciple, and to disciple others. Those who don't love Jesus and love people don't last in ministry.

These are the two rails on which ministry preparation has moved forward. If these two were enough, most of our churches would be in great shape and our pipeline would be full.

These two aren't enough. A third rail is needed, with just as much intentionality, assessment, and "teeth" as a GPA.

3. Soft Skills: A couple of years ago, I led several roundtables with church leaders of all sizes from all over the country, asking them a simple question: What are you looking for in your next hire?

What amazed me every time I facilitated this

meeting was that it took about 20 minutes for anyone to say anything "spiritual" or Biblical. Right off the cuff, they told me what I already knew, but needed them to say: Skills sets like entrepreneurial thinking, self awareness, time management, self care, leadership, team building, problem solving, professionalism, work ethic, servanthood, and dozens more.

I know I don't need to convince you that these traits are in rare supply not only in ministry, but in our culture in general. These skills are tough to teach and difficult to assess, but we must do better. The Church needs us to develop our next leaders in this way. There is a history of train wrecks of bad church hires to prove it.

Who hasn't been blindsided by a flawed personality trait, or low emotional intelligence of someone who interviewed really well and was hired? Your hire can be smart, he or she can love Jesus, but if you've hired someone lacking the soft skill set that the ministry demands, you will be disappointed. And the

leadership culture in your staff team could be a mess in short order.

Millennials (and yes, even the Jesus-loving Christian millennials) take a beating on this topic. How many times have I heard “kids these days are just so...”

Yes, this takes immense intentionality. It takes a lot of talking with both the student and the church leader in the area where they are actively serving. It takes short-term pain and failing safely in a healthy and growing church to realize long-term gain for the Kingdom Leader. Above all, it takes a partnership with current local church leaders who intuitively know what a leader is and what potential looks like. ■



THREE: PLACEMENT

The Starting Line Really Matters

Much has been written about “statistical abuse,” especially in Church leadership circles. Any of us who write, speak, sell, or cast vision have probably been guilty. I’m no exception. Everything in me wanted to start this article with “an average stay in ministry is about 18 months.” But I deleted that sentence. I am not going to try to quote research about how long an average stay is in vocational ministry. It’s easily Googled.

I know that any of us who have been around church leadership for a decade or two would agree that

the average stay in a ministry position is not long enough. We also know that short stays by leaders leave local churches stunted and stunned. We all have our own stories of revolving doors of student pastors, worship leaders, and Senior Pastors.

How can we get on the solution side?

I believe two thresholds in particular can address staying power in ministry: placement & coaching. Here’s my theory: where you begin really determines your first decade (or two). I have no stats that I can

abuse to support this theory, just my own story and the stories of many others.

There are always exceptions, but simply stated: if you have a positive experience in your first ministry, you will stay longer. Before you say “no duh” and click away, please consider the implications of this if you are in a position of influence over a young leader looking for their first ministry experience. This is on us, for the next generation of young leaders just beginning.

In today’s local church culture, there are plenty of desperate churches looking for leadership. I encourage many of our soon-to-be grads and alums to realize that just because a church will pay you more than you thought and will hire you is not a reason to take a ministry position. This is why the health of a church is a more important factor early in ministry than location or pay scale.

We drive students to consider if where they are heading is a place of health. Most importantly, it must be a ministry where they will be held to the high standards of personal and leadership development. Beginning in a place where an older leader is going to mentor, challenge, develop, and evaluate ministry performance will put a young leader on a trajectory that will land them in a better place in a decade or two.

I didn’t appreciate this enough when I was beginning in ministry. I didn’t realize I was serving under and around some prevailing leaders. They didn’t allow me to be lazy, or phone it in. They kept me in it. They let me fail in a safe place. This put me on a trajectory that landed me in places I would never have dreamed just a few years later.

There’s a funny little gap factor here: Many of us who stayed in ministry for more than a couple of years did ministry for fifteen or twenty years. Many of those friends are now Senior Pastors (yes, I feel old typing

this). On the other side, a great majority went to the wrong place, got discouraged, and quit or were fired within the first three years. It seems there are no in-betweens.

This continues to happen, and it's disheartening. There is a great cost here, and we will discuss that more in the fifth section.

Nobody wins in this scenario. The student, the local church, The Kingdom – we all lose.

Where a young leader begins matters. Who is coaching (and having a coach at all) matters even more. ■



FOUR: COACHING

We Need More than a Mentor

After 13 years of ministry I was fortunate to jump on a start-up rocket ship and fly all over the U.S. consulting in churches. I was probably in four hundred churches over the five+ years. I don't want to exaggerate here, but I believe I heard over two hundreds times: "Please help us find a _____" (youth pastor, kids' pastor, worship leader, executive, tech director, etc.) Size of church, denomination, and region of the country did not matter.

I also came to realize that churches and church leaders of all types are still isolated and alone most

of the time. Despite the conferences, blogs, tweets, and more, most feel as though they have no one to talk to and no one would 'understand.'

This is a particularly acute problem in the first years of ministry. A new church leader who is just beginning needs a coach more than ever. I define a 'coach' to our graduates as someone who is at least five years ahead of them in a ministry they might want to be part of. This can be simple: One hour a month on Skype, or a call. The newbie brings the questions and the coach is simply there to coach.

I like the definition of coaching as this: one who supports a learner in achieving a specific professional goal. It's not discipleship, or even mentoring. We all need these things, too, but coaching is the act of helping a new leader stay in the game, to realize they aren't alone, to overcome current obstacles, and avoid future ones.

I had this in my first three years of ministry. I sought it out, and I didn't even know what I was doing. I can tell you their names, and they are friends to this day: Glenn, Greg, Bart. When one didn't have time, I sucked the life out of another one. They took me to conferences, they had ideas I could steal, and they had leadership tools I could borrow until I developed my own. Most days I was lost, and many times I felt like giving up. They gave me the confidence to know that they had lived through it, and I would, as well.

Just a year in, I knew one thing for sure: ministry is hard. Two decades+ later, and I now know the truth: doing anything that is 'awesome' is pretty

difficult. 13 years of ministry, 5 years of business, and now three years of higher education – all of it has been difficult. Why do I take on extremely difficult and seemingly impossible things? Well, it's the way God wired me: Walk into a mess, start cleaning, tear down what's left, cast a vision...people begin to follow it, they make it their own, and something gets built that is bigger than all of us.

Surely I heard in college that this would be hard, but I wasn't listening. I am sure that I've been to countless conferences, and sat through sessions about these topics, as well. But it cemented into me in my first few years of ministry with Glenn, Greg, and Bart. I was fortunate. I was lucky, and I've been told as much.

We have to stop allowing men and women to wander into the wrong place all alone, get beat up, and then quit within the first three years. Those of us who are guiding and encouraging the next generation of leaders should require them to have a coach as they walk into ministry. We should all be investing in this, as well. This should be normal. This should not be luck. Let's work to make it so. ■



FIVE: ROI (RETURN ON INVESTMENT)

The Cost to a Kingdom

I'm in higher education. You can't pick up a USA Today, or watch the news for very long without hearing the disaster stories of the industry of which I am a part. The normal story lines are something about "increase in costs and decline of value." I'm a newbie, and it has been a crazy 2.5 years coming up to speed. Tough times call for innovation, and that's where I'm hanging my hat as an outsider.

This is not yet another article about expense vs. value of a college education. I can't debate it. I want us to consider the investment of the Kingdom of God into the leadership pipeline. Let me ask a question that is really hard to answer: What is a new leader at

a local church worth?

Where I'm embedded in the Kingdom, we spend about 26k annually on a student. Like many good schools, we deeply discount the price. Nobody pays the sticker. By the time they've graduated some have invested as much as sixty grand in their education. And we are about as inexpensive as a college education comes these days.

Please note I didn't ask "what do they pay?" That's for another day. I asked "what are they worth?" We need to start adding up the internships, the mentoring, the prayer times with professors, and

the donor dollars. We should tally the billable hours church leaders are on campus coaching and encouraging instead of doing their 'real jobs' back at the church. If I monetized out what is really going into these future leaders, they aren't worth only sixty grand. We're looking at like a quarter of a million dollars of Kingdom investment.

Think of it this way: During their internships and service opportunities, how many less-than-awesome songs did they sing? Or how many less-than-convicting sermons did they preach? Or how many thrown-together campfire talks for the youth group were given? All in the name of developing the next generation of church leaders.

How many pastors mentored, coached, cajoled, inspired, emailed, tweeted, prayed with and cried with the next generation to help them with their calling?

I know this is controversial because I live it every day, but I'm going to type it anyway: We must

invest in the right potential. We can't invest in the uninspired who will eventually move back home to live with mom and dad and work three part-time jobs. We can't afford the worn-out higher-education mantra that "they learned how to learn."

More than anything, it takes intentionality in our investment.

We need to get more out of this, don't we? By the time our students are walking in to their first ministry they should be highly-desired, hireable, called, gifted, passionate, and ready for the challenges of a shifting culture.

This is why we need to be: calling the right ones, developing their soft skills, being intentional with placement, and coaching them when they get there. The Kingdom of God needs a higher ROI than it is getting in the leadership pipeline.

From the bottom to the top, we need the pipeline full of ready-to-go leaders at all levels. The pipeline issue is bigger than just one industry. This is on us. This is on me. I'm not the professor, but I hope the Lord gives me thirty years to help innovate the process. Won't you join me? ■



SAMUEL

The Voice of God

There's an interesting story in I Samuel 3, of God calling a youngster by the name of Samuel. You know the story. God calls out to Samuel three times, but it takes the older and wiser Eli to help him discern that it was God calling him.

I wonder what the voice of God sounds like to those in your middle school, high school, or college ministries at your church? Maybe they have the occasional thought of ministry, but their parents, peers, and culture are pushing that thought away. I contend that this is going to take an audible voice. It's going to take

you and me to influence the very best to do this with their life.

Recently a youth pastor had told us how awesome a prospective student from his youth group was, and how this student was ministry material. But sitting in the office with the youth pastor, the student verbalized aloud that he thought he could do this, but looking at his pastor he said, "I've never really heard you say it. Do you think I can actually do this?" We were shocked. Had the pastor never said this to him? Was he talking to us but not the student?

Was he afraid of burning relational equity?

I wonder how many awesome student leaders are in our ministries who never hear the voice of God call them into ministry because the voice of God in their life sounds a lot like you and me? I bet if you engage in this topic, and you ask the Lord to send the workers into the fields, you will wind up with the opportunity to be His voice.

I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the voice of God sounded a lot like my youth pastor when I was in middle school. I'm glad he spoke up and called me out. May we do this for the next generation of more and better leaders. ■

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