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## HOW TEAM LEADERSHIP BENEFITS THE HEALTH OF PASTORS

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### *Abstract*

The role of a pastor is more challenging and complex than it has ever been. With the increased demands come increased stress, which has resulted in burnout and failure on many different levels. The traditional leadership structure with a pastor sitting alone at the top only seems to exacerbate the problems associated with the stress of ministry. Pastors and churches are rethinking leadership paradigms and developing senior leadership teams that set the overall direction of the church. Pastors on these leadership teams believe that serving on a team of leaders has caused them to become healthy and maintain health over the long haul of ministry.

### THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE

We have all heard the stories. A quick Google search will produce dozens of articles on prominent pastors who have been removed from ministry for moral failures or abuses of power. But the popular stories are likely far

outnumbered by the stories known only by a single congregation or by a small association. Pastors have problems not only with moral failures but also with suicides and medical leaves because of stress and anxiety.

Being a pastor is hard, and it only seems to be getting more difficult. At one time, the role of the pastor seemed pretty simple: preach and pray. A pastor did not really need a job description because the expectations were straight forward. He was to preach, most likely three times a week, and then pray and serve as a chaplain to people with the remaining hours that he had during the week. Other ministry responsibilities were then handed over to others. These expectations seemed to follow the pattern in Acts 6 when the Apostles determined that it was not right for them to handle the distribution of food to the widows because they needed to focus on the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Churches and church programming were rather simple too. While different denominations each had their different, unique emphasis, most had “the big three” (Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night services), as well as an educational component that was likely on Sunday morning. Not a lot of thought was given to creating unique programs, nor was a great deal of time spent on the development of the church as a whole, but things have changed.

With the influence of the Church Growth Movement and *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren, along with other books that were written around the same time, churches and pastors were challenged to think differently.<sup>1</sup> Churches began thinking in terms of purpose and effectiveness. They were challenged with new ways of doing church that would move beyond what had been traditionally done. They wanted to become more effective at what the church was first established to do. New guests may ask a pastor about his vision for the church, and such a question would not be considered unusual. In the past, based on the denomination, a visitor knew exactly what to expect from a church, but that is not the case anymore. People want to know what makes a church unique and the underlying values that propel the church forward. While these things have helped many churches to become more effective, they have also added significant

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Every Church Is Big in God's Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

pressure to their leaders.

This increased complexity created increased demands on the pastor. No longer could the pastor just preach and pray. He was required to lead.<sup>2</sup> While the pastor was, and in many instances still is, expected to do the same things that he was doing, now, with the increased leadership demands, his role has changed. In large churches, he must take on the mindset of a CEO, making sure that the entire organization is moving together to reach the goals that it laid out each year. Again, think of the increased pressure. No longer can a pastor focus most of his energy on message preparation; he must commit mental energy to leadership issues like alignment, purpose, and development.

The pressures may be even worse on pastors of smaller churches. In previous generations, the small church pastor was viewed as the chaplain. If he delivered good messages and was there for people when they needed him, everyone was happy. Today, the role of the small church pastor is similar to that of a small business owner. For things to get done, the pastor must do it, and the work must be done with the quality of the big church down the street. The demands to be available to people all the time are crushing.

Additionally, with the accessibility of the Internet and on-demand access to the world's best speakers, the mandate for excellence in communication has increased considerably. All of this combined with the fact that the world is changing faster than ever before has created demands that are often viewed as being too much for one person. This pressure to do more and be better is pushing many pastors to the breaking point. This pressure is causing some pastors to seek a better way to lead.

The typical American church is led by a single leader who is often the face of that church. In some recent high profile examples, the face of the church has either resigned or has been forced to leave, creating a significant leadership vacuum that damaged the church significantly.<sup>3</sup> From the

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2 Malphurs talks about the need for pastors to change from this traditional paradigm in *Building Leaders*. Aubrey Malphurs and Will Mancini, *Building Leaders: Blueprints for Developing Leadership at Every Level of Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 12.

3 Ben Tertin, "The Painful Lessons of Mars Hill: What Can We Learn from the Collapse of Mark Driscoll's Church?" *Leadership* 36, no. 1 (2015): 18.

outside, it seems that some of the issues that led to these transitions were caused by the isolation of a singular leader at the top of the church. Is it imperative that church leadership be structured in this way? Is it being alone at the top that creates undue stress on that leader, causing medical issues? Could there be a different leadership model that is actually healthier for a pastor in the long run? In fact, there are examples of churches that have implemented a different model, a team leadership model, and the leaders of those churches believe that their models help them to be healthy and effective.<sup>4</sup>

## **BIBLICAL BASIS FOR TEAM LEADERSHIP**

In addition to practical demands of ministry that cause churches to rethink leadership structure, a reexamination of the biblical basis for teams has caused a growth in team leadership. Throughout the Bible, many examples exist of teams of leaders who carry out the mission of God. The first and greatest example of team leadership is the Trinity. We see the Trinity at work in the act of creation. Though Genesis 1:1-2 may not have been written from a Trinitarian perspective, the passage reveals that God (the Father) “created the heavens and the earth” (NASB) and that the Spirit was “moving over the surface of the waters.” John 1:3 states that “all things came into being through Him” (i.e. the Son). While each member of the Trinity is equal, and all three persons are equally God, their roles are different.

Descriptions of teams of leaders occur in other places in Scripture. Moses was confronted by his father-in-law, Jethro, for trying to do everything himself. He was told to raise up others to hear the complaints of the people so that he would not wear himself out. Through this process of delegation, Moses created a team of people who were able to mediate complaints. Throughout the period of the Exodus, Moses was not alone as the singular leader. Aaron held a very important role as Moses’ spokesperson in Egypt and then was looked at as the de facto leader when Moses went up on the

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<sup>4</sup> Leadership Network completed a study of 253 churches that were using some form of team leadership. This study served as the basis for the book *Teams that Thrive*. Ryan T. Hartwig, Warren Bird, and Dave Ferguson, *Teams That Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015).

mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Even Miriam seemed to hold some level of leadership among the people. We may not read about the three of them holding leadership meetings to determine direction, but a kind of leadership team is in place.

In the New Testament, the Apostles served as a leadership team for the early church. They functioned together to make decisions such as appointing others to oversee the distribution of food to widows in Acts 6. While Peter was viewed as the point leader at that time, the Apostles did seem to make consensus decisions that led to the growth and development of the church. Even within the structure of the church itself, a plurality of leaders is present. Though there are differences of opinion related to the exact nature of the references, multiple leaders of a church are often addressed. Before Paul went to Jerusalem, he gathered the Ephesian elders. Paul instructed Timothy to appoint elders and to teach men who could then teach other men. Peter addressed elders in the book of 1 Peter. One could argue that these “elders” do not equate with the modern role of the pastor. While this may be the case, they do illustrate a team of leaders working together in the church.

After seeing the biblical evidence of leaders working together as a team in some way, we could ask for a reason for such an arrangement. Is it possible that God’s design for the churches was that they be led by teams of leaders? This design neither precludes a point leader nor does it dictate that decisions must be made in a purely democratic way. Is it possible that teams of leaders working together create a healthier environment for a senior leader and potentially a healthier organization as a whole?

## **DEFINING TEAM LEADERSHIP**

Defining team leadership in church ministry can be a challenge. For some people, team leadership means establishing teams of lay people and equipping and empowering them to lead in different areas of ministry.<sup>5</sup> This approach is certainly one type of team leadership and is a model that pulls members of a church into significant roles in leadership. This design

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<sup>5</sup> George Barna, *The Power of Team Leadership: Achieving Success Through Shared Responsibility* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2001), 9.

is a primary focus in Barna's work, *The Power of Team Leadership*.<sup>6</sup> For other people, having a church team means looking at the whole church as a single team where all members need to understand how they function as a member of the team.<sup>7</sup> Wayne Cordeiro talks about how getting everyone in a church involved in the ministry can transform a church.<sup>8</sup> Both Barna and Cordeiro discuss some very helpful ideas, and while involvement in ministry roles in the church is vitally important, they do not really discuss leading as a team.

Another reason team leadership can be so hard to define is because there is not one right way to lead and govern a church. While the book of Acts gives a picture of the leadership methodology of the early church, and we read instructions given to church leaders in Paul's letters, no one verse or chapter describes how all churches should be governed. Some descriptions of how the church was governed are provided, but there is no prescriptive biblical passage that determines that it should be governed a certain way. As a result, there are many acceptable ways that churches are led. As Larry Osborne states in his book *Sticky Teams*, it all depends on the church and includes the variables of history, polity, size, and personal gifting of the leaders that are involved in the church.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, if a church were asked who makes up their leadership team, a variety of answers could be given. That list could include elders, deacons, a ministry council, all staff members, or a subgroup of staff members. Once this leadership team is identified, how they function and what their actual role is could be just as varied.

One church may describe their elders as their leadership team. While those elders could be considered a leadership team, they could potentially function in only a permission-giving role by simply saying "yes" or "no" to ideas that were presented to them. In another church where the elders are considered to be the leadership team, those elders could serve a very

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6 Ibid.

7 Wayne Cordeiro, *Doing Church as a Team*, Revised, Updated ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 11.

8 Ibid., 20.

9 Larry Osborne, *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 87.

different function like bringing directional ideas to the table. In yet another church, the elders could serve as chief caregivers to members of the congregation and may or may not have any input to the overall direction of the church. Therefore, greater focus needs to be given to bringing a clear definition to “team leadership.”

Hartwig and Bird include a good survey of the makeup and functionality of a variety of leadership teams in their book, *Teams that Thrive*, and they provide some helpful commentary.<sup>10</sup> What they found is that leadership teams can be composed of a variety of different individuals, but senior leadership teams are unique. These senior teams establish and carry out the vision, and they wrestle through difficult issues that impact the entire church.<sup>11</sup> These types of teams are beneficial to the health of pastors. With this understanding, one could define a senior leadership team in a church as two or more people that determine the direction for the entire church.

Hartwig and Bird provide some other helpful insights. A senior leadership team cannot be a team in name only; it cannot be one person who tells the rest of the team what to do. A senior leadership team is also not a group of people who only have leadership over a certain ministry. Another important factor to note is that this team cannot be composed of two or more people who disagree all the time; it must be a true team in identity. For the team to function well, there must be teamwork. MacMillan, in his book *Performance Factor*, makes this point when he states, “The primary difference between a team and any other type of group is synergism.”<sup>12</sup> The consistency of working together over time allows the team to achieve the desired results.

Lencioni also helps bring clarity to the idea of team leadership. He explains that most leadership teams function as working groups. The individuals on the team perform their duties independently of one another and then report their progress at the next meeting.<sup>13</sup> This group is not

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10 Ryan T. Hartwig, Warren Bird, and Dave Ferguson, *Teams That Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 29–30.

11 Ibid., 31.

12 Pat MacMillan, *The Performance Factor: Unlocking the Secrets of Teamwork* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 26.

13 Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*, 1 ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 21.

a true team. For a real leadership team to exist, the members must be dependent on one another to achieve the desired outcome of the team. Lencioni provides this definition of a team: “A leadership team is a small group of people who are collectively responsible for achieving a common objective for their organization.”<sup>14</sup>

Team leadership is a practice that is becoming more and more common in businesses and non-profits, as well. MacMillan states that teams are not a passing fad but a fundamental shift in how organizations approach work.<sup>15</sup> Barnett and McCormick specifically apply the team leadership model to schools. They state that with the ever-growing complexity of schools, the overall leadership responsibilities are too great for one person.<sup>16</sup> They state, “Where at one time, most organizations had a singular leader at the top of the flow chart, more and more companies are being led by a team of leaders.”<sup>17</sup> These teams wrestle with the mission-critical issues that face the organization with the desired result that the organization performs better.<sup>18</sup> The team approach applied in this context has great relevance for the function of leadership teams in churches.

General Stanley McChrystal, in *Team of Teams*, talks about how even the armed forces have changed the way that they view leadership. The traditional military structure was very much top-down, and soldiers were on a “need to know” basis. With the changing landscape of our world, the armed forces have been forced to rethink the way they operate. Part of the change in operations has been to create more information flow between teams, across branches, and even from the field up.<sup>19</sup>

When thinking through how this is applied in the church, a senior leadership team is not a group that implements the vision and direction

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14 Ibid.

15 MacMillan, *The Performance Factor*, 14.

16 Kerry Barnett and John McCormick, “Leadership and Team Dynamics in Senior Executive Leadership Teams,” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 40, no. 6 (November 1, 2012): 653.

17 Ruth Wageman, Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss, and J. Richard Hackman, *Senior Leadership Teams: What It Takes to Make Them Great*, Canadian ed. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2008), 7.

18 Ibid.

19 McChrystal, *Team of Teams*, 167–69.

that was solely developed by the Senior Pastor. Nor is the team a group of elders who hold the pastor accountable to reach a certain set of goals or outcomes. The leadership team must work to wrestle through the issues that affect the entire church. While leadership teams are proving to be effective in business and non-profits, they can also be an effective way to lead the churches. Hartwig and Bird state it this way, “Thriving churches are led by thriving leaders. Not just *one* leader but *many* leaders.”<sup>20</sup>

## TEAM LEADERSHIP MODELS IN PRACTICE

In the same way that different churches adopt different governmental structures, the structure and makeup of a leadership team can vary from church to church. One thing, however, is constant. The members of the leadership team wrestle through all directional decisions together.

In my research for my Doctor of Ministry degree, I focused on three churches that have implemented a team leadership model. Who makes up the leadership team and their function were different in each case. One church, described as a multi-congregational church, has a leadership team that consists of the congregational leaders from each of their different congregations along with a directional leader who oversees the direction for the entire church.<sup>21</sup> Whenever they add another congregation, that congregational leader joins the senior leadership team. Another church that was a part of the study likens its model of leadership to a law firm. The church functioned with several senior pastors who had been promoted to that title in the same way that a lawyer could be promoted to the level of partner in a law firm. Nothing forced the church to move someone to that level. Senior pastors were chosen based on their perceived leadership value to the organization. The third church that was a part of my research was planted with the team leadership model in place. This church would describe their elders as their leadership team, but the three paid staff elders consisting of a teaching pastor, executive pastor, and worship pastor form

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20 Hartwig, Bird, and Ferguson, *Teams That Thrive*, 7.

21 The titles for this church are unique. You can think of each congregation as a campus and each congregational leader as a campus pastor though they have a specific rationale for the language that they use.

their senior leadership team.

Who is on the senior leadership team or how someone gets on that team varies from church to church, but the overall function is the same. The team meets regularly to review and wrestle through the overall direction of the church. In each case, there is one person who is ultimately responsible for the overall direction, but the leadership burden is shared among different people. The senior leaders who are a part of those teams believe that being a part of a team has helped them to stay healthy.

## **TEAM LEADERSHIP'S BENEFITS FOR THE HEALTH OF A PASTOR**

In my research, I conducted a lot of interviews. I was amazed to hear so many stories of the benefits of teaming for the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of the pastors on those teams. For all the pastors who are carrying their burdens alone, they should know it does not have to be that way. They can experience the benefits of leading as part of a team.

The first major benefit of team leadership for the health of the pastor is that there are others who are sharing the burdens of ministry with him. I know what it is like to feel like you are carrying the weight of the entire church on your shoulders. I know what it like when attendance is down on a Sunday, and I wonder what I said to offend people the week prior that made them not want to come back. I know what it is like when a family in my congregation faces a challenge that I desperately want to solve, but I know I can't. I know what it is like to face disappointments and to do so alone. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In the interviews that I conducted with leaders on senior leadership teams, instead of being left alone to deal with the burdens of ministry, those leaders talked about the support they felt. When there was a challenge to be faced in the church, the team faced it together. On those Monday mornings when Sunday felt like a failure, proper perspective was gained. Each of the leaders with whom I spoke took comfort from the fact that they knew they weren't alone. Other people were sharing the load with them.

The second major benefit for leaders serving on a leadership team is

that they are able to have a better balance in life. A major struggle for many pastors is taking time off. This struggle can result from an unhealthy internal need to always be there for people, but it can also come from the expectations of good-hearted people. Events are perceived to be more important when the pastor is there. The pastor is needed at the hospital or in times of crisis. Leading as a team helps pastors have a better balance in life.

Some pastors with whom I spoke talked about how they could be gone on a Sunday without worrying that everything would be taken care of because they knew there were others on the team who could handle it. Other pastors talked about how they could put their families first without feeling guilty that they were doing so. One person that I interviewed talked about personal health struggles and the cancer diagnosis that his wife received. Through his health struggles, he knew he didn't have to rush back to work because there were others who could step in for him while he was absent. When his wife was battling cancer, the team allowed him the freedom to spend time with her, and they held him accountable so that he was actually doing so. Then, as he faced those struggles, he knew that he wasn't doing it alone. He walked through those things together with others.

The final major benefit for the health of the pastor was the pastor's spiritual formation. Pastors can easily become isolated. Often, they can surround themselves with people who say "yes," and they can have an overinflated view of themselves. Team leadership serves to combat all of that. When asked about the benefits of team leadership for themselves, several leaders mentioned humility. One pastor responded that the best part of serving on a team is that a person doesn't get his way all the time. He then followed that up by saying that the hardest part of serving on a team is that a person doesn't get his way all the time. On a team, there are times when a person must defer to others.

In some ways, serving as a team goes against everything that we are taught about leadership in our culture. Leadership is often viewed as power, and we are encouraged to fight our way to the top. Then, when we get there, we can be the ones to set direction and make all the decisions. Serving on a team doesn't allow a person to get his way all the time; it

forces one to surrender and be humble.

One leadership team that I studied was once described as being like a small group. When another leader was invited to observe their leadership meeting, he left saying that they acted like a small group as they were sharing and praying for each other as a small group would. Becoming isolated was not an option for anyone in that group. That leadership team could serve to point out strengths or provide perspective when the leader was in a low moment and then point out weaknesses in the life of the leader when those struggles were blind spots. Everyone with whom I spoke felt that their team was instrumental in their spiritual growth.

As the role of the pastor continues to become more demanding and complex, churches and pastors need to reconsider their leadership model. More and more businesses, schools, and nonprofits are recognizing that the burden of leadership is too great for one person. The church is no different, but the church doesn't have to be led in the traditional way with one senior leader at the top. A team of leaders is proving to be an approach to leadership that is effective and beneficial to the pastors on those teams. Those pastors are healthier physically and emotionally as a result of serving on those teams, and as a result, they can serve their churches better.

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