

## **Transformed Leaders Transform Churches:**

### **How To Find and Free Up Spiritually Mature Leaders**

by Eddie Hammett, Partner, The Columbia Partnership

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Many spiritually mature leaders feel frustrated in their churches, which are in desperate need of rediscovering vitality in ministry. While some churches become more and more stagnant, many believers are discovering a spiritual thirst, depth, and desire to integrate daily life and faith. Why the disconnect? What would happen if church leaders could find and free up the spiritually mature in their congregations? One of the most exciting dimensions of my ministry these days is watching how transformed leaders can transform churches.

### **Discern the Disconnected and Help Them Find Their Place in the Church**

I'm discovering a growing number of spiritually mature and thirsty believers who can't find their place in the institutional church. Some of these are victims of burnout: giving too much, serving in too many capacities, and ignoring their spiritual grounding. Others are victims of church abuse: being beaten down by guilt trips rather than finding encouragement, forgiveness, and unconditional love. Still others, the spiritually grounded persons in pursuit of maturity and growth, find that the classes or groups are too social and not very spiritually relevant, or the grouping itself doesn't provide the needed peer relationships to nurture their spiritual pilgrimage or provide appropriate mission opportunities.

Some would say these spiritually mature ought to be mature enough to "fit in anywhere" or "provide leadership for others." While there may be a nugget of truth to this, the other side is that the spiritually maturing person needs a "special diet," as does every other group of persons on the Christian journey. How can the church help those searching for their place to find roots and wings that will give them nourishment and fulfillment and help them soar? Such a situation would not only transform them but also transform the church!

How can a church discover those leaders who are on an intense spiritual journey but are not finding their place in the local church's weekly (weakly) activities?

1. **Watch attendance patterns** – When previously active persons begin to fall into inconsistent attendance patterns, it's time to pay attention.
2. **Watch energy patterns** – When persons, once active and interested, begin to lose energy about church issues, it's time to inquire what is going on.
3. **Watch participation patterns** – When persons who have served faithfully begin to say, "It is time to let someone else do it" or begin to decline opportunities, it is time to inquire about the shift. The inquiry is not to talk them into something, but to help them rethink their call, their gifting, and a possible redirecting of their ministry.
4. they are moving closer and closer to the door. They are probably "dropping out." **Watch seating and fellowship patterns** – When persons change their fellowship circle or the place where they typically sit, they may be telling you something . . . particularly if
5. **Watch for the "bubble up" people** – These persons come to you with questions and deeper interest about issues presented in sermons, teaching, or testimonies about growing in Christ, developing a personal ministry, or discovering or rediscovering spiritual vitality and ministry.

6. **Intentionally reach out and network** – Persons on a search for more need to be acknowledged and networked with others, from either your church or other churches, on a similar journey. This networking and acknowledgment usually attract others who feel disconnected and may be looking for a new place to connect.
7. **Resource and equip them** – Once acknowledged, the spiritually thirsty need to be resourced, blessed, equipped, and nurtured. This might be a book, a tape, a website, or another person you suggest that helps inform and guide their search. You might then offer to dialogue with them after they read the material or get the group together who is following the beat of “a different drummer.”
8. **Pray to see and hear** – Watch and listen for those who are disconnecting from local church issues or to discern those who are spiritually mature but not finding their place in church life.

Over 80 percent of our churches are plateaued and declining in this country, and most churches cannot find half or more of their members. Something is seriously wrong! It seems timely to do some prevention and recast the net to draw in those we’re losing. When those who are disengaged experience a personal and spiritual transformation, they can transform their churches. Their transformation occurs when their needs are acknowledged; when they network with those who share similar interests, gifting, calling; and when they are intentionally affirmed, encouraged, equipped, and resourced.

### **How to Free Up and Nurture the Transformation of Leaders**

Rather than trying to keep those who are disconnected in the traditional “boxes” of the church, we need to create new venues for affirming their calling. Indeed, they may be those whom God is calling to lead us into the new. It may be their “dis-ease” that God uses to plant new seeds, new structures, new ministries that will help the world experience his mission. How can we free up and validate those we find, nurture the transformation, and create feedback loops from their journey to those who continue to benefit from the traditional church?

Finding the disengaged or disconnected leaders is one challenge, but then facilitating and nurturing the transformation is critical. Unless their needs are heard, validated, and responded to, very often the personal transformation is short-circuited, which also stifles the church’s transformation. Here are tips for helping insure that leaders are transformed and that they transform churches:

1. **Acknowledge their dis-ease** with church or their own journey. Network them with others on a similar journey and seek to equip them; this helps the transformation begin.
2. **Free them up to follow their dream/calling**, rather than trying to keep them in the “box.” Encourage them to work through their calling and to rethink their ministry.
3. **Commission them to new ministry** after they have discerned the new that God is trying to birth in and through them. A “laying on of hands” commissioning with a liturgy - thus affirming their calling and the congregation’s role in equipping, support, and nurture of this ministry - is a great validator and teacher for all involved. Validating their new ministry, inside or outside the church walls or the traditional church programming, creates a permission-giving atmosphere for others and offers the blessing to them as well.
4. **Provide them a forum and consistent opportunities** to reflect, share, and enlist others into the new. Once God blesses and challenges them in the new, they need to

share with others in the congregation their needs, celebrations, and struggles. Such often creates a feedback loop of new ideas and new ways of doing ministry, which encourages others and/or gives others permission to follow their own calling or dreams. It also creates new venues for ministry and broadens the church members' understanding of the world in which they are called to minister and to celebrate the gifts of their membership.

5. **Create forums for spiritual nurture, networking, accountability, and challenge** for those seeking the new and working within new fields of ministry. One of the most exciting times of my local church ministry is facilitating a School of Christian Ministry (curriculum can be found in my book *The Gathered and Scattered Church*; order through Christian bookstores or via [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)). This School, designed to facilitate and equip the believers on this new personal and spiritual journey, provides pathways for exploring “the inward journey” and “the outward journey.”
6. **Create intentional times of discipling and networking** for those on the new journey. Support, encouragement, and hope-building experiences are vital. These times of prayer, nurture, Bible study, theological reflection, and accountability are essential for leaders in transformation. This can be accomplished face to face, on the phone, in online chat rooms, in telephone conferences, etc. The key is to be consistent, caring, nurturing, and permission-giving.<sup>1</sup>

### **How Transformed Leaders Transform Churches**

The following two stories from my ministry are among the many that illustrate the impact of transformed leaders.

**From Doing Church Work to the Work of the Church:** Suzanne, a faithful, skilled young adult, came to me (I was her minister of education at that time) and declared that because of her participation in gift discovery seminars and her experiences in the School of Christian Ministry, she felt God calling her to a more intentional ministry in her work setting. Many of her coworkers came from hurting families, most with no church home. She also revealed that, even though she had felt this calling for some time, she was unable to follow it because she was so involved in church work that she couldn't do the work of the church elsewhere. WOW! I felt like I had been slapped. She went on to say, “I want you to free me up and hold me accountable for doing ministry in my job.”

This statement encouraged and concerned me. I knew the church leadership's reaction to “freeing her up from church work” - she was one of the best leaders we had! I also had no idea of how to equip her in this new ministry.

But we did just what she asked. Within six months God was obviously moving in her ministry. She and her husband began hosting some of her coworkers' families on Sunday night, around their pool and with homemade ice cream. Suzanne didn't come to the church meeting place on Sundays. We encouraged her and her family to “be church” around their pool. Within a year there were several baptisms in their swimming pool. This one family's commitment and vision, plus a core of church leaders who learned to give permission, helped transform a declining congregation with a poor self-image into a congregation willing to take risks to birth new ministries and learn new ways of being and doing church. Suzanne and her family helped us learn the difference between church work and the work of the church!

**From Running the Machine to Reproducing Disciples:** Ronny, a twenty-year pastor of a rural congregation, was ready to give in to his depression and growing apathy with running the

machine. He said he'd preached and offered classes, seminars, and outreach efforts but wasn't seeing much happen among his people, in his community, or within him. He felt he was dying on the inside.

He and his leaders captured a new vision of becoming a disciple-making church. He voiced the challenge to a small group of his "dis-eased" leaders, who were looking for another way, and they covenanted to pray, search, and seek God's will. Through study, prayer, reflection, and seminars, the vision for becoming a disciple-making church grew deep within their hearts. Over an eight-year period this little, passive, apathetic church has become a vital, innovative, growing congregation that has moved far from running the machine to reproducing healthy disciples! They are now a teaching congregation for others who want to go on this journey. They have created an alternative worship service, multiple small groups, a system of growing disciples, and a thriving ministry in missions at home and abroad. What an encouragement Ronny and this congregation are to many of us.<sup>ii</sup>

When leaders are transformed, catch a new vision, find the support and accountability networks of like-minded persons, and learn to discern and follow the Spirit's leading, their lives are renewed and their churches transformed. Romans 12:2 says it best, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (NIV).

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<sup>i</sup> See Bill Easum's *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers* and his video on permission giving-churches. Order from [www.easumbandy.org](http://www.easumbandy.org)

<sup>ii</sup> Visit [www.missionchurch.org](http://www.missionchurch.org) to learn more about this church's ministry (if you want information about a video on Mission Baptist Church, send an email via that website).

### **Callouts:**

A growing number of spiritually mature, thirsty believers can't find their place in the institutional church.

We need to learn the difference between church work and the work of the church!

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