

THE EQUIPPING CHURCH

SERVING
TOGETHER TO
TRANSFORM LIVES

Sue
Mallory

ZONDERVAN™

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN 49530



The Equipping Church

Copyright © 2001 by Leadership Network, Inc.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mallory, Sue.

The equipping church : serving together to transform lives / Sue Mallory.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-310-24067-0 (hardcover)

1. Lay ministry. I. Title.

BV677 .M35 2001

253—dc 21

2001026584

This edition is printed on acid-free paper.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked THE MESSAGE are from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995 by Eugene Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture references marked NLT are from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NKJV are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NRSV are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other — except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Interior design by Nancy Wilson

Printed in the United States of America

01 02 03 04 05 06 /v DC/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	13
1. Starting the Journey in Helplessness	17
2. When the Church Is Healthy, She Dances	25
3. Making Systemic Changes Can Be Shocking	35
4. Examining, Poking, and Prodding the Church Culture	53
5. Checking the Conveyor Belts at the Exits	67
6. Launching the Vision	83
7. Discovering Gifts, Talents, and Experience	101
8. Matching People with Strong Connections	123
9. Pushing Back a Little	149
10. Viewing the Vision of Three Equipping Churches ..	169
11. Perpetuating the Transformed Vision	179
<i>Postscript</i>	195
<i>Appendix: The Equipping Church</i>	197
<i>Core Values of an Equipping Church</i>	198
<i>How to Change the Culture</i>	200
<i>How to Build the System</i>	201

1

Starting the Journey in Helplessness

SOME OF MY REGULAR holy moments these days occur in my car, far from my church building. My husband and I are among the privileged who drive our pastor to radiation treatments. The gradual advance of cancer has recently forced him to give up the formal title of *pastor* in our church. Charles no longer preaches. He doesn't have to—his entire life has become a sermon.

We talk a lot during these trips to the hospital. Actually, I do most of the talking; he does most of the listening. But when he does speak, I know he has been listening. I reflect on all that God is doing in the church today; Charles thinks about all that God will do to get him through today. I'm excited about the ministry to which God has called me; Charles is overwhelmed by all the ways in which God's people are ministering to him. I'm driven by the vision of the body of Christ being all that it can be; Charles is a humble participant in and beneficiary of that vision coming to reality in his corner of the world.

My pastor, Charles, and I share a lot of history in our parallel walks with God. We've come a long way in the last two decades. In a startling way, God has almost exactly reversed our roles. Many of us who have learned so much from Charles over the years now have the honor of ministering to him. He taught us a lot about ministry; now we get to practice on him.

BEFORE THE VISION

I BEGAN THIS JOURNEY into ministry in what I have come to see as the perfect starting place: helplessness. My own faith development occurred

in a three-generation home. We lived with my grandparents after my parents' marriage broke up. I was deeply affected by the unshakable faith of my grandparents, as well as by the ambivalence of my mother, whose divorce had been handled by her church in a demeaning way. Her pain was deep. I wasn't always able to sort out my yearnings to trust the Lord of the church from my fears and other feelings connected to the people of the church. I gradually became the kind of person who belonged to the church but wasn't exactly sure how the church belonged to me.

My first awareness of helplessness came to me when as a young mother I felt the weight of responsibility for my children's faith. It grew as I wondered about bringing my kids up in the neighborhood church we had attended for several years. There seemed so little there that I could enthusiastically pass on to my children. It never occurred to me that the church might change or that I might have a role in that change. All I knew was that some kind of change needed to happen. I wanted my children exposed to a faith that would challenge and sustain them.

God graciously answered a prayer for which I had no words. A friend invited us to visit her church, which was some distance from our home, because she knew I was concerned about the needs of our family. She was excited about the signs of life that were appearing in her congregation. My family and I arrived at the church we now call home looking for some kind of visible spiritual vitality. We almost immediately sensed an intangible difference. We saw people taking God seriously—and having fun at the same time. A glimmer of hope was beginning to intrude on my first stage of helplessness.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Brentwood Presbyterian Church was just hitting stride again after two years without a pastor. The new minister was in place, and the impact of his ministry style was beginning to be felt. Our first impressions probably revealed more about our needs than about the church. We were captivated by the new, the different—the life we observed and the welcome we received.

We found a young pastor preaching passionately about what he called “the priesthood of believers.” I thought he had invented a new and exciting concept. Soon he showed me in 1 Peter 2:4–5 that he was actually preaching an ancient biblical principle.

Charles wasn't preaching a plan or a program but holding a truth before us like a diamond. He was leading us around the gem called “the priesthood of believers” and inviting us to view it from every angle. I sensed somehow that this truth about God's plan for believers might hold the answer for what I was longing to experience in the Christian journey. I thought I was ready for the next step. It turned out to be a huge step

backward. God used a painful and unexpected detour to take me where he wanted me to go.

Before I could mentally deal with the significance of what I was hearing in church, I was ambushed by an overwhelming health challenge. A seemingly minor accident led to long-term, life-changing complications. Over a two-year period of debilitating pain I experienced deterioration of my jaws and severe accompanying headaches. Helplessness returned with a vengeance. A bewildering maze of diagnoses led to the first of several reconstructive surgeries for ruptured and fused disks in my jaws, which left me temporarily disabled. You could literally say that I was laid off from my multifaceted job as the mother of young children. Necessities like cooking, cleaning, and mothering became impossibilities. For a time life was divided into three phases: times when I couldn't speak because I needed surgery, times when I couldn't speak because I had just had surgery, and brief times when I could speak and tried to get everything said as quickly as possible before the cycle repeated itself. My self-understanding as a competent person took a severe blow. Pain-free living faded into a memory. I was faced with a shattering inability to meet my family's needs.

Almost before I could wonder where to turn, people from church showed up, took over, and did what I couldn't do. They served cheerfully and practically. They changed our lives. Just like that; no fanfare or warning. They met our needs faster than I can tell the story and more completely than words can describe. On some of my lowest days, when helplessness and frustration presented unanswerable questions, God showed me that he could settle a complex argument with a casserole, that he could defeat doubt by means of a quiet friend who sits in silence, offering merely the gift of presence.

I had never experienced the church in action like this. We had never been loved in such ways by people who barely knew us. I still marvel to think that my children have grown up knowing that people in the body of Christ really care for each other. They know the community of Christ as so much more than a theological idea. For them, it's life! For me, helplessness became the hard teacher I learned to appreciate because it taught me that Christian service is not one among many options, but it is central to God's call in our lives. The possibility that I too might experience the joy of serving became a driving force to get me healthy again.

I look back on those days of pain and inactivity with a sense of awe. God imparted an emphatic lesson to me through the messages of my pastors, the misery of my condition, and the ministry of fellow believers: The body of Christ lives by mutual giving and receiving. And I had a lot to learn about receiving as well as about giving.

I came out of that unanticipated detour and rehab time with a commitment to make sure others experienced the joy of being served as I had been served. I, who had been given so much, longed to find a place where I in turn could give. I didn't know what this "giving" would look like, but I knew it could happen because it had happened to me.

My lessons were far from over, as helplessness became a familiar companion during recurring deterioration of my jaw, ineffective solutions, and further surgeries that punctuated the next twenty years. I came to understand the simple paradox that one of the preliminary requirements for equipping ministry is a deep awareness of helplessness. Those who do not recognize their helplessness tend to resist asking for help. Those who try to do life entirely on their own find it hard to accept the very real help they need. Those who are very capable of doing a lot sometimes miss the joy of seeing how much more they can accomplish working with others. What's more, those who deny their helplessness may not even seek what they need from God.

One of the preliminary requirements for equipping ministry is a deep awareness of helplessness.

THE VISION COMES TO LIFE

DURING THAT TIME FRAME (a round the year 1985), Charles had already been pastoring our church for several years. He was discerning that the people needed help to take the next step in order to apply the biblical principles about the priesthood of believers. He believed that believers would serve if given the right opportunities. He wasn't sure what the process would look like, but he knew it was how God was calling him to lead. He began looking for someone in our congregation who might be interested in discovering what a lay-driven church would look like and how it would act. The quest each of us was on led to the wonderful collision of our lives.

The history and memories Charles and I shared during our drives to the hospital began with those early days and tentative decisions. But it goes far beyond what God has done within Brentwood Presbyterian Church. The vision of equipping churches has taken shape in different places in such unique ways that we now only point to basic biblical principles and smile at all the ways God brings the living body into reality in unusual places with amazing people.

What follows begins with our initial vision and traces our journey to the present. Along the way we've discovered that God has been doing

The vision of equipping churches has taken shape in different places in such unique ways that we now only point to basic biblical principles and smile at all the ways God brings the living body into reality in unusual places with amazing people.

similar things in many other churches. We share lessons in common, but specific local applications vary considerably. If you have been longing to participate or pastor in an equipping church, I want to help and encourage you in this book. But the corporate ministry God desires to bring about through you and the believers around you will be a tribute to him. It will bear God's unique stamp in your unique place. It will take your breath away!

EQUIPPING PRINCIPLES

Equipping Is Not a Program

I will tell you this more than once: Equipping ministry is not new, nor is it a program. It is a way of doing and being the church. Much of what you will read in this book was discovered by trial and error. Perhaps “rediscovered” says it better. The principles that I and countless others are still learning have been woven into the fabric of faith by the Lord of the church.

Equipping ministry is not a format that you can “plug and play.” If you think that “team ministry” is the next add-on for your church, please think again. The principles you read at the end of each chapter will warn, prepare, and direct you, but they won't give you a simple program.

God has already done work where you are. The pieces that will make up dynamic equipping ministry are in your church right now. The equippers, the equipped, and the yet-to-be equipped are all around you. Some are hidden, some are misused, some are tired, and some are abused—which leads me to remind you that as a pastor, director of equipping ministries, leader of such an assortment, or church member wanting to share your gifts, your healthiest initial attitude should be one of humble helplessness. Ask God to work through you to produce a healthy example of his body. Every part of the body belongs to God; every part is there for a reason. Your joyful challenge is to help each member discover that reason!

Equipping Is Not Denominational

While I am a Presbyterian layperson, the equipping church is not particularly Presbyterian. As you will no doubt note, my story will have a Presbyterian flavor and language to it, but the last few years' experiences and study have taught me that the equipping church can take root anywhere. It can honor and transform across all denominational lines.

The equipping church represents one of those core biblical mandates that demand attention. More often than not, as I have discovered in the *Presbyterian Book of Order*, the documents of many traditions acknowledge the biblical sanction for a robust participation in ministry by the laity. The loss of lay ministry can be explained or blamed on many factors, and I will do my best to suggest some remedies along the way in this book. But the energy of the laity can best be employed today in reclaiming what was temporarily lost. The affirmation must be renewed almost daily: Lay ministry is not a denominational distinctive, but a biblical pattern and command.

Equipping Is Team Oriented

This principle functions everywhere and will get a lot of attention in the chapters that follow. You will not have a local church based on the biblical model without some kind of team mind-set. The word *equipping* immediately assumes a team model—those who do the equipping and those who are being equipped. One group needs the other. They form a team.

Once you begin to look in Scripture for the guidelines and images of what Christ had in mind for his body, you will be struck by how often the pictures are corporate, not individual. Individuals have certain significant roles in the body, but no individual is the body. When we are “in Christ,” as the Bible so often expresses it, we are *in* with a whole lot of other folk! We are meant to be a team.

Equipping Is Not Quick or Easy

If you are looking for a quick fix for a struggling church, you will not find it in the equipping church model. If you are looking for the truth and for church as God designed it to be, you will find the equipping church model a biblically sound, historically tested, and workable vision for the body of Christ in action. But getting there won't be easy. That's why a shared *vision for what can be* must be part of the original plan.

EQUIPPING HEROES

Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Vital Churches Institute: www.vitalchurches.com
Senior Pastor: E. Stanley Ott

Possessing a passion for a vital church, Stan Ott infected the people, beginning with the leadership, with a vision for what was possible in the shift from a traditional to a transformational church. His methodology was one of “bless and add,” blending the best of the past and adding features that would meet the needs of the people today. Each week he modeled this in Sunday worship by blending traditional and contemporary aspects of worship.

The process began in Pleasant Hills with discovering the needs of people, employing effective principles, and establishing new practices. Through intense study of Scripture and listening to leaders in his church, Stan identified seven vital signs for a healthy church modeled by New Testament churches in Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Antioch:

1. Spirit driven
2. Biblically based
3. Discipleship directed
4. Need responsive
5. “Gathered-scattered” attentive
6. Principle patterned
7. Reflectively practiced

Through preaching, teaching, modeling, and intense prayer Pleasant Hills made the transition (though not always easily) from a pastor-centered ministry to one of shared staff and lay leadership. Small groups were essential to the process and became a part of the DNA of both Pleasant Hills and all the “vital churches” I have encountered. The growth in numbers and in the lives of people has been significant. Stan has multiplied his learning through the creation of the Vital Churches Institute, thereby helping hundreds of church leaders claim the vision for a biblically based equipping church. In a day when mainline churches are declining at a staggering rate, it is exciting to see such a powerful exception to the rule at Pleasant Hills.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Is equipping ministry a value in your church? How is it demonstrated?
2. Reflect on those whom God has grown in ministry, even through helplessness. How and where can these people now take their place among the royal priesthood?
3. Is team ministry a value in your church? What will it take to become more effective and authentic in order to see team ministry penetrate all areas of your church?
4. What evidence exists that your people understand they are a part of a royal priesthood?