



—
Woven
Together through
**MENTORING
COMMUNITIES**
—

Lifelong Leadership

MaryKate Morse

AFTERWORD BY LEIGHTON FORD

Anyone in ministry leadership knows how lonely it can be. Seminary training and giftedness—vital as they are—are not enough to spare leaders from problems and challenges they didn't see coming or those dark nights of the soul they must keep to themselves. *Lifelong Leadership* is a godsend. You hold in your hands a step-by-step, practical guide to create and launch a Mentoring Community—a time-tested practice that has been used globally to end leadership isolation and that benefits emerging leaders with the wisdom and support they long for and need.

CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES, author of *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women* and *Malestrom: Manhood Swept into the Currents of a Changing World*

Leighton Ford is widely regarded as the greatest mentoring leader of his generation. He and his ministry partners MaryKate Morse and Anne Grizzle have inspired me and countless emerging leaders to lead more like and more to Jesus. This powerfully insightful and immensely practical book will empower you to help a new generation discover their God-given beauty and power and make their unique contribution to the world.

KEN SHIGEMATSU, pastor of Tenth Church, Vancouver, BC; author of *Survival Guide for the Soul*

YES. Mentoring, in community, is essential—not optional—for every frontline ministry leader. In *Lifelong Leadership*, MaryKate Morse casts a vision for the purpose, power, and practical shape of life-changing, sometimes even life-saving, Mentoring Communities. Stop going it alone and start growing in a group.

ANGIE WARD, PhD, leadership author and teacher

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Lifelong Leadership: Woven Together Through Mentoring Communities

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*Dedicated to
mentors all over the world who love and lift up
the next generation of leaders*

Contents

(Unless otherwise indicated, chapters are written by MaryKate Morse.)

INTRODUCTION: The Story of Mentoring Communities ix

PART ONE: The Need for Leaders and the Needs of Leadership

1 The Urgent Need of Emerging Leaders 1

2 What Is Spiritual Mentoring? 21

3 Safe Times, Safe Places, Safe People:
Where Leaders Grow in Christ 35

4 Mentoring Communities in the Bible 49

PART TWO: Essentials of Lifelong Leadership

5 Solitude (written by Anne Grizzle) 67

6 Prayer and Bible Reflection 79

7 Listening (written by Leighton Ford) 95

8 Questions 113

9 Discernment 129

10 Group Listening Prayer: The Core Spiritual Discipline
of Mentoring Communities (written by Anne Grizzle) 143

PART THREE: The Mentoring Community Experience

11 The Rhythm of Spiritual Mentoring Communities 157

12 Building and Sustaining a Mentoring Community 171

AFTERWORD: My Mentoring Story (written by Leighton Ford) 187

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: 203

NOTES: 205

Introduction

The Story of Mentoring Communities

Deep and wide

Deep and wide

There's a fountain flowing

Deep and wide

CHILDREN'S SONG BY SIDNEY E. COX

Christian leaders need safe places, safe times, and safe people to help them grow spiritually and be fruitful over the long run.

FROM DECEMBER 3–8, 2016, a group of us gathered at the Bellfry (a retreat home) to focus on writing this book. Each morning we met for prayer. On Sunday morning, the second Sunday of Advent, we read the lectionary reading for that day, Luke 3:1-6, which tells of John the Baptist's mission to proclaim repentance and prepare the way of the Lord. We all believed we were called to prepare the way of Christ so that many might come to know his love and grace. We were all on differing journeys, like John the Baptist, to be faithful. Our lead mentor, Leighton Ford, noted those things about us and then reflected on the serendipitous way the six of us were brought together throughout the years of Leighton's ministry.

Two of us—Anne Grizzle and MaryKate Morse—had separately approached Leighton after he spoke at a conference (one on the East Coast and one on the West Coast) to ask a follow-up question. From those simple questions came years of deep friendship.

Two of us—Raphaël Anzenberger and Chris Woodhull—were students in different programs from different places. Each applied for a scholarship and a leadership program created by Leighton. Both were instrumental in the thinking and experiences found in this book.

One of us—Nick Valadez—applied to be Leighton’s assistant.

At a transition point in Leighton’s life, he gathered us and several others together to discern his and Jeanie’s next step in life. He had been an evangelist with the Billy Graham crusades. He had developed a training and mentoring program, Arrow, for gifted young leaders going into ministry and evangelism. Now he believed God was preparing him for something more focused.

With much prayer and conversation, we discerned the next step: training people to create Mentoring Communities that support developing leaders. We believed that this was the missing component from most leadership-training programs. We also believed the pressing need for leaders was a spiritually mature mentor and companions for the long, difficult haul of ministry. Leaders everywhere felt alone.

On March 29, 2006, in Rock Hill, South Carolina, five of us and Leighton made a commitment together to become the Mentoring Community team. We would figure out how to train other possible mentors to create Mentoring Communities in their areas of ministry. Our calling was

to advocate and practice the art of Christ-centered spiritual mentoring from generation to generation so as to enhance the spiritual, emotional, and relational health of kingdom-seeking leaders who have a passion to lead for Jesus, like Jesus, and to Jesus and, through his Spirit, to be a part of God’s transforming presence in their communities around the world.

We began by offering five-day gatherings of invited possible mentors to experience a Mentoring Community, so that they might return to their contexts and create one themselves. We did this for ten years,

INTRODUCTION

attracting leaders from all over the world. The Mentoring Community format resonated deeply with people.

None of us knew then how God would knit our hearts together in friendship and in mission. We all felt clear that we were Way-Makers as John the Baptist said in Luke 3:4: “Make ready the way of the Lord” (NASB). We were to prepare the way of the Lord through creating Mentoring Communities for evangelists and Christian influencers and through training other mentors to do the same. We felt the urgency to support the lonely, difficult work of those who are doing pioneer mission work as church planters, evangelists, social-justice workers, artists, influencers using social media, et cetera. We became to each other a Mentoring Community. We each had a vision for this project, and each was involved in the creation of this book. I, MaryKate Morse, had the call to take the role of editor and primary author.

Our Vision and Mission

Ministry leaders need safe times, safe places, and safe people to keep going for the long run.

Following the leadership and model of Leighton Ford, we have found that Mentoring Communities provide a significant leadership resource for the health and well-being of developing and even established leaders. Through Mentoring Communities, leaders are exposed to a transforming friendship with God and others. This book casts a dynamic vision for this type of leadership formation and development and clearly outlines the architecture required to create effective Mentoring Communities.

A Mentoring Community is a yearly, three-to-five-day gathering of a mature leader mentor and five to ten younger leader participants who step away from work and daily life and come together to rest, listen, and pray for each other.

The community agrees to meet yearly at dedicated times and in retreat-like places to be a safe people together where prayer and safe conversations are the norm. After the retreat, a Mentoring Community stays connected (usually through social media—discussed in chapter 12) for ongoing support, wisdom, discernment, and prayer. The Mentoring Community members become companions for the difficult and challenging work of ministry.

Since 2008, we have been training experienced, mature leaders in the art of developing Mentoring Communities for emerging leaders, and we have focused particularly on those who have a call to evangelism and frontline ministries. These mature leaders are passionate about creating support systems for the next generation of Christian leaders, who often experience great pressure and frenzied busyness and who feel isolated and alone.

We have trained several hundred evangelists and Christian influencers from more than twenty countries to experience the power of Mentoring Communities. Through the Global Evangelists Forum, the Lausanne Movement, and other trusted partners, we have trained outside the United States with local partners in India, Singapore, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Ghana, France, Mexico, Australia, Canada, and many other places around the world.

Dr. Ford leads two Mentoring Communities, one in its thirtieth year and another in its eighteenth year. Participants include now world-renowned leaders who have had a great impact on the evangelical movement and Christian discipleship. Leighton's model is the vision for the Mentoring Community components described in this book.

Mentoring Communities have proven profoundly formational for leaders. Following Dr. Ford's example, other mentor leaders created their own groups in the United States and internationally, and these new groups help participants experience God in their ministry lives for the long haul. My group has met for eleven years.

It is clear to us that God is in this because of the stories we continue to hear from leaders around the world. This work came to us by

INTRODUCTION

the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We saw the fruit of it, and we struggled to understand its scope and content. We realized then that we were doing our small part to prepare God's way for this day and time all over the world by coming alongside others immersed in God's

Kingdom work. Today, we are continually blessed by the stories of leaders everywhere who are nourished and helped by these experiences.

Not only have I been pastored but also pruned; moulded and motivated; I have been so inspired that I started my own mentoring group with sixteen evangelists who have met annually for three days for twenty years. And several of those I mentor have also birthed their own groups, so the tapestry of mentoring continues.

REV. CANON J. JOHN (ENGLAND)

In African society, the elders mentor everyone. There is a general understanding of values in the society, and the elders are trusted to pass these values on. We've lost the commonality of values and the role of elders. This is a very great loss. When I came here [to the Mentoring Community training in Karen, Kenya], I put a date on my paper to put all my thoughts in the notebook. Today, after three days, I have nothing [written] down, so it looks like nothing has happened. But what I have learned these days are notes written on my heart. It isn't written on a page. I'm ambushed by a new approach, and I am very grateful.

BISHOP JOHN, PASTOR AND LEADER (KENYA)

Value of Mentoring Communities

Mentoring Communities provide places for developing leaders to safely share what is on their hearts and what is happening in their lives. In these groups, leaders experience support and prayer without fear of judgment or loss of face. In a community of love that continues from one year to the next, these leaders find accountability for holy living and integration of their inner and outer worlds while engaging in God's mission.

Our experience has demonstrated that most Christian leaders worldwide do not listen for the Spirit or create reflective times and places for fellowship and prayer with no other agenda. Neither do they know how to express God's love to each other by giving encouragement and support in safe environments. Every younger and/or inexperienced leader we meet is hungry for a mentor, yet unfortunately, most experienced leaders are not committed to a plan to develop the next generation of Christian leaders or don't know how to do that well.

- *The primary need for younger leaders is companionship and safe support for their spiritual and ministry journeys.* Many developing leaders do not have church communities that “get” them and that know how to support them in their ministry calling.
- *The primary need for mature leaders is a highly effective, low-lift way to mentor several younger leaders at one time.* Mentoring assures that the church's ministry or the organization's mission continues by preparing the next generation of leaders.

The Mentoring Communities described in this book meet these two presenting needs exceptionally well.

Leaders from ages twenty-five to forty-five (and sometimes older) often feel alone. They have been in ministry for five years or longer.

*We heat our house with the same wood. . . .
When you bring leaders together in a group,
you have an impact that multiplies it.*

BARRY (CANADA)

Idealism has passed. They have few or no safe places or safe people with whom to process their spiritual and life-stage journeys. They are hungry for conversations with mature leaders. They long for experienced

leaders to listen to them and pray for them. They lack a safe community of peers who know their stories and are cheering for their

INTRODUCTION

spiritual success. These lacks often result in burnout and emotional fatigue, cynicism, spiritual dryness, or unfortunately, loss of integrity and a shift to self-promotional leadership habits.

At the beginning of their ministry journeys, younger leaders attend and are active in the local church and yet often feel constrained by older churchgoers who don't quite understand them and policies that are bureaucratic and risk averse. They are hungry for a deeper life with Christ. Because of this book's solid biblical foundation and exegesis and clearly written, experience-based guidance, younger leaders will benefit from reading and implementing the wisdom and step-by-step process detailed in it. Older leaders with a heart to lift up the next generation of leaders will recognize an easy and effective way to invest in other leaders' lives in the pages that follow.

Mentoring one-on-one is effective, but I wanted to multiply evangelists. Mentoring Communities are an effective, sustainable way to do just that. I have been training young evangelists of every stripe and placing them in Mentoring Communities for over ten years. We began with a handful of evangelists; we now have over a hundred and are mentoring even more.

RAPHAËL, EVANGELIST (FRANCE)

Mentoring Communities began as a global effort with Leighton Ford's first group of young leaders from all over the world: Germany, Australia, Singapore, England, and the US. The interest in Mentoring Community training has expanded to all continents except Antarctica. This widespread demand makes it impossible for the training team to respond to all the requests. Therefore, this book serves as a comprehensive, step-by-step, practical guide for experienced leaders in any country to learn how to create and launch a Mentoring Community, including direction regarding its purpose, nature, and components.

Mature Christian leaders will be able to gather others and lead

the group through the experiences outlined here. This book also works for peers who have no access to a mentor but want to create a peer Mentoring Community. The outcome will be highly functional Mentoring Communities for emerging leaders throughout the world by the formation of safe times, safe places, and safe people. The book describes what these groups are, why they are important, and how they work.

There are many books on mentoring but none on how to create a Mentoring Community. This book is unique because it

- uses a prayer-and-listening formational model for mentoring, where once a year, every year, the group commits to several days together in a retreat setting;
- uses a lead mentor and peer mentors who commit to meet in community for the long haul;
- works as a mentoring model for men and women leaders in mixed, gender-focused, or affinity groups;
- works cross-culturally and globally in diverse settings from privileged to less privileged environments;
- works for seminary- or Bible school–educated leaders or for leaders with little or no education;
- is especially helpful and meaningful for those in frontline ministries, such as evangelists, church planters, Christian artists, entrepreneurs, and reformers; and
- offers replicable, uncomplicated guidance for creating Mentoring Communities.

This book serves as a guide. It will continue to grow through the experiences of those who take it to heart. We would very much like to hear from you, should you have insights and experiences to add to this resource. We've included as many personal stories as possible. They either

INTRODUCTION

were submitted by the individuals named with the express purpose of inclusion in this book or are composites with fictional names that represent the types of things we've seen and heard in Mentoring Communities. None of the stories break confidentiality agreements.

May the Lord bless and keep you as you “prepare the way of the LORD” in whatever manner God has called you (Isaiah 40:3).

PART ONE

The Need for Leaders & the Needs of Leadership

1

The Urgent Need of Emerging Leaders

When there is no distinction in conduct between Christians and non-Christians—for example in the practice of corruption and greed, or sexual promiscuity, or rate of divorce, or relapse to pre-Christian religious practice, or attitudes towards people of other races, or consumerist lifestyles, or social prejudice—then the world is right to wonder if our Christianity makes any difference at all.

CAPE TOWN COMMITMENT, 2010

WHEN I BECAME A CHRISTIAN at the age of eighteen, it was a liberating day. I felt happy and free. Before my step of faith, I had had many dark and harmful experiences. I was broken, sinful, and far from God. I couldn't find anything to fill the hole in me—until I accepted Christ. I had tried the world, relationships, other faiths, and other ideologies. Finally, while in college, I accepted a simple invitation to trust Jesus, and I haven't turned back.

I was eager for the journey, and since I was away at college, I wasn't always sure what to do next or who might help me. Unfortunately, I soon realized I was on my own. I often wondered how different my journey might have been if I had had someone to mentor me in those early years. I felt very much alone, though I did join a Christian student

group and got very involved in its activities, local and statewide. I was engaged and busy, but I was not disciplined.

I felt as if I were stumbling along. I had many questions, but mostly I remember wishing I had someone who would guide me. For me, that didn't happen until I was in my late thirties and early forties, as a married adult with children—which is a long time to wait for mentoring companionship. Because of that experience, I have determined to be a mentor to younger leaders and even older ones who are just beginning to find their way.

The first thing that happened to me after my conversion was a clear memory of God's call on my life when I was a girl of ten. My parents had taken me to a church to honor a missionary who was retiring after twenty-five years as a single woman on a mission in the Truk Islands.¹ She was small in stature, with white hair pulled back in a bun. I don't even remember her name. She told story after story of loving and serving the islanders, and then we had cake. As I listened to her sharing about her ministry, the Lord spoke to me and said, "You will serve me like this one day." This was the first time I heard God. When I accepted Christ into my life at eighteen, the call returned, real and urgent. I have committed myself to the church and to God's mission in the world ever since.

Without mentoring, I was an earnest but ineffective evangelist. I locked my sister in the bathroom so I could tell her about Jesus, and she yelled at me to let her out. I upset my grandmother by standing in front of the television while she was watching her favorite show, trying to tell her that she needed Jesus. She got so frustrated that she threw her slipper at me. I'm sure that those without guides and mentors are still watched over by God, but I wonder how differently my life might have gone if someone had taken an interest in me and my call. When I responded to Jesus' invitation in college, I remembered my call, though my effectiveness as an evangelist and Christian leader was sorely lacking for many years.

Without mentoring, I stumbled, trying to figure out how to lead well. I didn't know to whom I could turn when I had troubling questions about faith or when I had difficulties with some people. Also, after my conversion, I was surprised at the poor quality of Christian witness that I experienced in some older, more seasoned leaders. In my naiveté, I believed that the longer you walked with Jesus, the more saintly you became.

I expected pastors and Christian influencers with years of study, prayer, and close fellowship with Jesus to be holy, kind, generous, and capable. It shook me to my core to have a youth pastor try to assault me and a married church leader show inappropriate affection to me. It rocked me that the adult leader in the Baptist Student Union was an angry, withdrawn woman.

I am no longer naive about such things, but I continue to be troubled by the shallow character and tepid commitment of some Christian leaders, who profess righteousness but live otherwise. As I mature as a spiritual leader, I am also aware of my own weaknesses and struggles. I am now one of those older leaders who don't always lead or serve well. Serving for Christ is a lifelong battle of interior forces and outside challenges. It is not uncommon to read of well-known Christian leaders who fail.

I remember when Ted Haggard, the leader of the National Association of Evangelicals (2003–2006) in North America and the pastor of a megachurch called New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA, fell. He had all the resources at his disposal to prevent his life from imploding. He was happily married with children. He had prestige and access to all the major political and cultural leaders of that day. He had money to pay for counseling and spiritual direction. Surely, he knew seasoned, saintly leaders to whom he could turn for help. Even if he simply confided in a few trusted friends and asked for prayer and help, his life story might have turned out differently.

Instead, in November 2006, a male prostitute, Mike Jones, let the

world know that Ted Haggard had paid him for sex over a three-year period and for the drug crystal meth.² Haggard denies some of the details but none of the substance.

How did this happen? What damage do things like this do to the witness of the church? Where were Ted's accountability persons? How had his elders failed him? What might have happened differently if he had people in his life with whom he could confess and get help early while on this journey to ruin? The forces of our own Western culture press us into its mold wherever we live. In the West, our independent mind-set and lone-ranger lifestyles make it easy to isolate our personal lives from our public lives. We don't need anyone.

The commercialized tendency in the church to elevate a charismatic male to the top to attract more people is a recipe for moral failure or character flaw. The world's need to have messiah figures gets translated in the church to promoting a single male authoritarian leader at the top. This need elevates and then isolates leaders, not allowing them to publicly falter or doubt. If a leader confesses doubts or struggles, elders often react rather than come alongside and aid the leader.

In a community of brothers and sisters, there is strength. We were designed to need one another, so it is no wonder that we falter when we are expected to stand alone. Ted believes God has forgiven him, and his family has. He is pastoring a small church and trying to make something of his life. Of course God forgives, and a leader can seek God's mercy and grace. But how do you restore the image people had of the Christian faith's effectiveness to change their lives when those they trust fail?

The purpose of this chapter is to make a clear case for the urgent need for today's leaders to have safe times and places to go apart and have safe people with whom they may be honest and transparent about what is going on in their inner world. Being a part of a Mentoring Community might have made a difference in Ted Haggard's life. It certainly would have helped me.

Urgent Need for Evangelists and Christian Leaders

*Africa is the world's fastest-growing continent.
Sixty percent of the African population is below
twenty-five years old. Who is Jesus to our generation?
How do we help them stay faithful?*

EMMANUEL, PASTOR (RWANDA)

When Jesus ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples at Pentecost, the early believers eventually went out like a flood to tell everyone the Good News of Jesus Christ. After the infilling of the Holy Spirit, this Good News poured out from Jerusalem, according to Jesus' words: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). To witness is to bear testimony to what you have heard and seen and know to be true in your own life.

The early church flourished on this compulsion to share the wondrous message of Jesus Christ, who died for us, rose for us, and brings us before the very eyes of God as holy, blameless, and beyond reproach. They flourished not only on the words but also on the wondrous changes Christians brought to the culture. Christians cared for orphans and widows. No one else was doing that. Christians went into prisons and cared for the incarcerated. No one else was doing that. Christians cared for the sick, even during infectious plagues. Everyone else ran away. Christ made a difference in the lives of individuals and in the communities in which they lived.

When persecution began in Jerusalem, believers went everywhere, bearing witness to Jesus Christ and changing their communities. Everyone was an evangelist. Evangelism meant being the Good News all day, every day. Everyone was a bearer of Good News, whatever one's place or work in life. The early church had men and women, old and

young, slave and free living and proclaiming the gospel and serving the suffering and outsiders in their communities.

Paul expanded the territory for bringing hope. He felt called to preach to the Gentiles. On the Damascus Road, he who himself was a persecutor met a living Lord who told him to go into the city to receive guidance. When Jesus told Ananias to go and heal the very one bent on destroying persons like himself, Ananias obeyed. Jesus said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

Paul, the first missionary evangelist and apologist, gave his life to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ wherever the Spirit led him. He always traveled with others. He listened to the Holy Spirit, and he fearlessly led the early church and proclaimed the Good News. The gospel spread from Jerusalem to the remotest part of the world. We follow the same pattern. This is our urgency, to be people who share the Good

News and influence communities with the wisdom, compassion, and justice of God.

My calling is to mobilize evangelists. They are an endangered species, often without direction and lonely. There are many challenges. They rise up like a rocket and come down like pieces of wood. It is vital for evangelists to mentor and nurture evangelists. Not only evangelists, but how do we mentor politicians to be a continuing witness? How do we mentor judges, policemen, et cetera?

STEPHEN, AFRICAN ENTERPRISE
DIRECTOR (KENYA)

This urgency is as strong and important today as it was in the early church. The world needs evangelists and Christian leaders who are at full capacity. The world needs women and men, old and young, rich and poor who give their lives to lead

like Jesus, for Jesus, and to Jesus. Our faith is not a private affair. It is not for our own personal benefit. Our faith is for the benefit of all humankind. We are a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6, NIV). We are lights set on a hill (Matthew 5:14-16). We have work to do. The work of sharing the Good News (the “going”) and being the Good News

(the “abiding”) is what Jesus modeled for us and what the Holy Spirit anoints us to do.

The field is as ready today as it was in the first century. In the world, there are 2.3 billion Christians, and there are 4.7 billion persons who have not met Jesus Christ. Christianity has quadrupled in the last one hundred years, but because of global population growth, Christians still only make up about 32 percent of the world’s population.³

Wherever you go, whomever you meet, whatever kindness you extend, you bring the living presence of Christ embodied in and through you. There are two messages: a message proclaimed and a message lived. Christ is proclaimed somewhat with words and more so with a life lived in holiness and love. There are people everywhere, people made in the image of God, yearning to meet a loving and present Lord. Some of these people only *you* will meet. Will they experience the nature of Christ through you?

There are also catastrophic needs everywhere that Jesus mandated us to address by loving our neighbors (Matthew 19:19). When God created us, he commanded us to have dominion over all the earth. We are to take care of the earth and the people on it. We are message bearers with the work that we do on behalf of Christ. We need to be at our best to proclaim a gospel of grace and justice. As the early Christians did, our task is to care for the world and its suffering, not build insular churches where we focus on living happy lives.

For example, one-half of the world lives in poverty. Every day, twenty-two thousand children die because of disease, violence, war, and lack of health care. There is work to do to be the Good News to innocents everywhere. There are 72 million primary-school-age children who are not in school. The world needs teachers and tutors and “aunties and uncles” and doctors and nurses to care for these children. These are not just challenges in other countries. These are challenges in Western neighborhoods as well. We are message bearers meant to give prophetic voice and find solutions to the social challenges of our day. These challenges beckon us but also demand of us that we be at our best, like Christ.

The need for evangelists and Christian leaders is no different today than it was at the time of the early church. We need every Christian to have a sense of his or her partnership in the work of God's Kingdom. There is much to be done, and we are given capacity and the Holy Spirit's help to play our part. The need for Christian leaders, however, is primarily the need for *Christlike* evangelists, ministers, and Christian influencers.

Urgent Need for Christlike Evangelists, Ministers, and Christian Influencers

There will be no Christlike mission without Christlike leaders.

NANA YAW OFFEI, LAUSANNE LEADER (GHANA)

There is much to do in almost every way and for people everywhere, in your neighborhood, town, and country. We all have a part to play in God's Kingdom as long as we have breath. It is not enough to speak truth and to fight for justice. We must also commit to being like Christ. It is not enough to know Christ. We must also be completely submitted to the ongoing work of Christ in us, and this is not easy. We are more easily held captive by the world's picture of success and by the limitations of our own agendas. In Jesus' day, not everyone could "see" him. In John 9:39-41, Jesus tried to explain this to the Pharisees: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Some religious people today—Christians—do not "see" Jesus. This can happen to us. Our capacities, callings, and egos can easily supplant Christ's primacy in our lives. We replace a living Lord with our own ideas about faith and ministry. We like our seats at the head of the table. We like our names honored and mentioned. We like people

paying attention to our spoken words, written words, and podcasts. This can move the message off Christ and onto us. This temptation is a result of the Fall and thus is woven into the very fabric of our humanity.

Super Chickens

A researcher at Purdue University, William Muir, studies the productivity of chickens.⁴ He wants to know how to breed chickens that lay lots of eggs and create environments that foster greater productivity. To research how to make “super chickens,” he did an experiment.

Muir put chickens into two groups. One group contained normal, healthy chickens. He left them alone for six generations of a chicken’s life. Another, separate group included all the super chickens, those who were proven high-producing egg layers. Muir left them alone for six generations. He provided food, water, and a clean environment but did nothing to influence the chickens’ egg laying.

At the end of the experiment, Muir discovered that the group of normal chickens were flourishing: They were laying more eggs per chicken than when the experiment started. In the group of super chickens, only three were left. They had pecked the others to death. The super chickens had laid more eggs through a strategy of suppressing other chickens’ productivity,⁵ by killing or intimidating them so they were unable to lay eggs.

When we think of leadership, we can fall into the same trap. We believe that if we find the right super chickens, we will have success. We look for the superstars.⁶ We give them the best resources and empower them, believing that they will uniquely bring hundreds to Christ or to our churches, or that they will bring in hundreds of dollars for our ministries. The truth is the same in the human world as it is in the chicken world, however: This strategy leads only to dysfunction.

This is the strategy that led to the fall of Bill Hybels, who even wrote a book on character, *Who You Are When No One’s Looking*.⁷ His public and his private lives were not the same. With Hybels’s privileged place

of authority and access as the leader of a megachurch, he lost touch with his primary purpose, to love others as Jesus loved.⁸

Privilege means assuming that someone is a super chicken, that someone has a right to their own point of view, their own way of behaving or misbehaving. In our culture—and often, in our churches—we create super chickens because we desperately want success. We think it can come through one superstar leader. This usually doesn't go well. People get hurt, and this is not the way of Jesus.

Jesus did not profit from his position of power as the Son of God. He humbled himself, even to death, to love and serve us (Philippians 2:8). When we sway from the posture of Jesus, we create two problems: (1) fewer Christian leaders and (2) Christian leaders who are less like Christ.

The Christian-leadership crisis is that we are looking for super chickens rather than developing and mentoring the chickens who are producing eggs. This includes all kinds of evangelists and influencers, women as well as men, the poor as well as the wealthy, the ethnically diverse as well as the dominant culture, the uneducated as well as those in academic settings. When we relinquish our need to have “stars” to make us right or successful, we learn to see leaders in all corners.

Sadly, today, few Christian leaders develop other leaders because they are so busy with their own responsibilities. The temptation is to do and do in order to be seen and honored. These leaders might have younger, less experienced leaders in their entourages, but the size of the entourage is sometimes more for show than for raising up the next generation of leaders. Little is done to relationally invest in these younger leaders or provide opportunities for them to learn skills and develop. The younger leaders must either wait until the super chicken dies or go find another place to lead.

During the life of Jesus, the angst of the Pharisees and Sadducees was both theological and personal. The religious leaders believed that Jesus just had it wrong, and he was threatening all the work they had done for

their Jewish faith to thrive, even under Roman occupation. We know it was personal when we read such things as

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

LUKE 19:47-48

These leaders were angry, jealous, and afraid because the people were spellbound by Jesus and followed him in droves. They could threaten to kill Jesus, and eventually, they did so to “protect” their religious life, as if God had no power or was not active. We cannot judge because in our own way, we can become like these religious leaders. When we separate our theology and behavior from a living experience of Christ and a commitment to a lifelong journey of humble submission to Christ’s work in us, we can become proud, arrogant, and self-sufficient. We can become super chickens, even if we are in a little henhouse.

Discipleship of the contemporary church is so thin, and burnout and failure rates of Christian leaders so high, that loneliness and demoralization among Christian leaders is considered acceptable. We assume that a particular skill set is super, and then we force our leaders to chase those skills to the exclusion of other, more life-giving skills.

Jesus modeled what it is like to be a Christian influencer or evangelist. We see what Jesus sees. We are about healing, gathering in, helping others, preaching and teaching for life, reforming communities, serving the unserved and the poor, just as Jesus did. But in both our lives and the Bible, Christian leaders often become more consumed with guarding their place than serving the least of these.

A group of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology replicated the chicken experiment with leaders to see what would happen.⁹ They put volunteers in two groups and gave them a hard problem

to solve. One group consisted of people with normal intelligence. The other group consisted of people with super intelligence (very impressive IQs).

The outcome was similar to that of the super chicken experiment. The smarter the people in a group, the less able they were to solve the assigned problems because they kept trying to impress each other. The people with average intelligence solved the problems. The researchers found three factors that led to the success of the normal-intelligence group: (1) they cared for each other; (2) they gave equal time to each other, so no one person dominated; and (3) successful groups had more women in them. Even MIT researchers recognized that super chickens do not lead to the best outcomes.

Billy Graham, whom some might consider a super chicken because of his platform and fame, worked tirelessly to support and resource other leaders. He had a vision to unite Christian leaders around the world to learn and contextualize mission and ministry in a rapidly changing world and to encourage and strengthen each other.

Thus began an international effort to work together in the manner of Christ: the Lausanne Movement. The first gathering, in July 1974, had 2,700 participants from 150 countries. John Stott chaired a diverse committee of thinkers who created “The Lausanne Covenant,”¹⁰ which is considered one of the most important documents of the church.¹¹ It was a covenant they made together with God and with each other.

The third Lausanne Congress met in Cape Town, South Africa, October 16–25, 2010, with four thousand leaders attending from 198 countries. Another document was written: the Cape Town Commitment, which outlines biblical concerns and strategies and gives direction to the concerns of Lausanne for the next ten years. A recognized problem in that document is the tendency of Christian ministries to groom super chickens rather than humble servant leaders. The participants understood that the Good News is embodied in those who live Christ and tell about Christ. Telling is not enough. The Good News is holistic, and these leaders acknowledged that in the Cape Town Commitment:

“The salvation we proclaim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.”¹²

We know we need Christ-centered leaders and evangelists. Yet the Commitment reads, “Arguably the scale of un-Christlike and worldly leadership in the global Church today is glaring evidence of generations of reductionist evangelism, neglected discipling and shallow growth. The answer to leadership failure is not just more *leadership* training but better *discipleship* training. Leaders must first be disciples of Christ himself.”¹³ The work of God’s Kingdom is not to create little kingdoms, building personal empires, but to usher in God’s Kingdom together.

Challenges

Not only is it difficult to be Christlike; Christian leaders face many challenges. Research conducted by LifeWay Research among US pastors in 2015 found

- 84 percent say they’re on call 24 hours a day.
- 80 percent expect conflict in their church.
- 54 percent find the role of pastor frequently overwhelming.
- 53 percent are often concerned about their family’s financial security.
- 48 percent often feel the demands of ministry are more than they can handle.
- 21 percent say their church has unrealistic expectations of them.¹⁴

“This is a brutal job,” said Scott McConnell, former vice president of LifeWay Research. “The problem isn’t that pastors are quitting—the problem is that pastors have a challenging work environment.”

Ministry is hard. In a 2017 whole-life assessment of pastors, Barna

research found that ministry leaders risk failure in three areas: burnout risk, relationship risk, and spiritual risk.¹⁵ Pastors run out of steam. Pastors' core relationships begin to break down, and the spiritual fuel for their calling, Jesus Christ, becomes an increasingly distant, disconnected figure. Pastors and ministry leaders struggle because of the lack of ongoing, meaningful formation of their own inner journeys, the lack of friends who understand their journey, and the lack of emotional and physical rest. When ministry leaders begin to experience burnout or challenges in their relationship with significant people in their lives or with Christ, they isolate and fall into default behavior patterns to cope.

Ministry is hard because ministers are finite, broken human beings (like everyone who walks this earth) who are subjected to unrealistic personal expectations and audacious mission outcomes set by their congregations and fomented by cultural evangelicalism. In a 2016 study, LifeWay Research found that many pastors leave the pastorate because of a lack of support when facing challenges.¹⁶ Their church leaders, councils, bishops, and superintendents aren't helping them. Christian leaders need safe environments in which they can unpack their inner worlds and their outward realities. They need to be able to pray and play and process together in community. They need to cultivate in community a maturing expression of Christ's character and mission in their lives.

Christian leaders are often tired and alone. They are usually overworked and underpaid, and they wrestle with identity and relationship issues. Some are proud. Some are insecure. Some are depressed and burned out. Some are exhausted. The typical solution of working harder does not solve the problems. Following the next model or program doesn't produce the promised outcomes either. Ministry is an unforgiving calling in its unique level of temptation and suffering.

With the press of responsibility and expectations, the burden can become too much. It's easy to imagine how a person looking for a quick fix might turn to alcohol, drugs (especially prescription drugs), or pornography. These hidden "fixes" create even more entrenched addictive

patterns. So what works to support these beloved saints in the field? What avoids the social and spiritual traps of super chickens?

A Solution

We need a way to companion developing leaders for a lifetime journey of keeping their eyes on Jesus; helping them lead like Jesus, to Jesus, and for Jesus. Mentoring Communities create places where a leader's walk, personal and with a mentor and peers, comes together. Mentoring Communities focus on the leader's whole life with the companionship of a mentor and friends.

Personal Walk

As leaders, walking close to Christ in daily life strengthens our character and our witness. The discipleship image used in the Bible is *walking*, following Jesus. When we take a walk, we go from one place to another. We see things. We hear things. We experience things. We have moved. Faith in Christ is a lifelong journey of moving continually closer from the old self to the new, baptized into the living life of Christ.

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 JOHN 1:6-7

And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

2 JOHN 1:6

The community that has embraced the Cape Town Commitment refers to this lifelong journey as “HIS walk.” HIS walk involves paying attention to being persons of humility, integrity, and simplicity.

- Walk in humility, rejecting the idolatry of power . . .
- Walk in integrity, rejecting the idolatry of success . . .
- Walk in simplicity, rejecting the idolatry of greed.¹⁷

How can we tell if we are people of humility, integrity, and simplicity? When our heart for other people and for God is increasing, we are walking toward the light and with Christ. If we have difficulties with lust, anger, pride, despair, arrogance, or fear, if these feelings overwhelm our choices so we choose an easier path, then we are not walking according to the light. We need a mentor and friends to help us when we are weary.

You can learn a lot about leaders by watching them. Hearing about a leader's accomplishments does not mean he or she is walking faithfully with Christ. Listening to an impressive sermon does not enable you to assess the quality of the speaker's character. But you can learn a lot by watching them. I was a presenter at an event that had three prominent spiritual leaders and about twenty-five international participants who were Christian influencers.

We sat in a circle, and whoever was talking had the full attention of the prominent leaders. Two of the leaders paid attention to each person's comments. During the free time, these leaders chose to go on walks or have conversations with others. They didn't escape to their private rooms. This deeply moved the participants.

One woman said to me, "I don't know who you people are. You have not given us your titles. You sit and eat with us. And you give yourselves freely to help us. Who are you?" She was beginning to see that some of the leaders were well-known people, but they didn't lead with their accomplishments. They led with being present to others.

One of the well-known leaders was very distracted the entire time, however. He sat outside the circle, behind the participants. He was on his phone or computer all the time. He did not look up. During free time, he disappeared to his room. He came late and left early. The

only time he was engaged was when he was speaking. Then he was brilliant with his words and insights. In his super-chicken culture, he knew his role was to be brilliant with his words and thoughts. He was not expected to participate with or engage people unless they mattered to the success of his organization. He was conformed to the values and rules of engagement of this world. Worldly leaders know how to be brilliant and full of insights. Jesus expected Christian leaders to be different. Christian leaders are the ones who know they must walk HIS path of humility, integrity, and simplicity.

Community Walk

The personal walk with Christ is embedded in a community walk. Besides a personal walk with Christ, evangelists and Christian influencers must also be in communities where they can be accountable to their peers and a mentor. When they are not, developing leaders might be searching for a super-chicken platform.

Communal accountability is a rare but necessary feature for Christian leaders who desire an authentic walk with Christ. The early church understood the vital importance of discipling believers over a long period of time and of holding leaders accountable. With this book, we are trying to provide a solution to support developing leaders.

In loving communities, leaders can be their true selves in a safe environment. In safe communities, brothers and sisters in service to Christ experience companionship and encouragement. They can bear burdens for one another in prayer and love. A leader's personal walk has integrity when it's done honestly with others who know their story and bear their burdens with them.

Whether we serve in public platforms or humble places, leaders need safe times, safe places, and safe people to have safe conversations, so we do not drift from the light into the dark. When we are on our own and things get tougher and tougher, it is easy to slip into the shadows.

When we are on our own and people are mean or unsupportive, or betray us, or when we are struggling financially and relationally, it is

easy to slip into the shadows. We are not meant to be alone. Jesus was not alone, so neither should we expect to do ministry without friendship and supportive mentors. We need to walk our faith journeys in communities.

We need community *so that* our personal walk can flourish. We need not only walk with Jesus; we need not be alone in our walk with Jesus. And for leaders, the call on our discipleship is particularly difficult, so we need a real-life reminder that our ministry and mission are part of something much larger that God is doing in the world. This reminder comes through regularly connecting with other disciples beyond our immediate contexts.

Mentoring Communities are *doing life together* over the long haul with a senior mentor and a community of peers. In the same way that Jesus gathered twelve people around him, a Mentoring Community has an experienced leader and a group of developing leaders. Mentoring is a relationship process by which a spiritual leader walks with and guides a group of developing, less experienced leaders. The following chapter details the components of a Mentoring Community more comprehensively.

Closing Thoughts

When I met Leighton Ford, he was speaking about servant leadership. I had read his book *Transforming Leadership*,¹⁸ and I was writing about Jesus' leadership for my doctoral studies. So after his presentation, I went up to ask him how he thought leaders could be trained to be more like Jesus. I have gone up to other leaders after conferences to ask questions. As a woman, I usually get a short answer, and then the speaker moves on to the next person. This gentle man took time to respond. He then invited me to visit his Arrow Leadership training program in Charlotte, North Carolina, the next time they were in session, so I could see firsthand how he trained leaders.

After arriving in Charlotte, I spent the night, and was told that the next day, someone would pick me up and take me to the training site. What astonished me was that Dr. Ford himself picked me up and drove

me there. I was humbled that the second man to Billy Graham on his crusades and the former head of the Lausanne Movement would drive me the two hours to the retreat center. He wanted to get to know me better. He asked me to tell him my story. He asked about my studies. He asked for my thoughts on training Christian leaders. He asked me about my prayer life and where I was growing in my faith. He asked me how he could pray for me.

I asked him about his story, and he shared it with me. Until I met Leighton, I'd never had a senior leader care about who I was or what I thought. I was impressed with his experience, knowledge, and grace-filled wisdom. Upon arrival, we went our separate ways. I showed up for the opening banquet, where students from all over the world—some of the brightest, most entrepreneurial leaders I've ever seen in one place—were seated.

Before the meal started, Leighton said he wanted to introduce the guests. Then he talked a little about me and told the students, "This is someone you must have a conversation with. She is insightful, wise, and spiritually astute. Get your date books out and make sure you have a chance to talk with her." I was surprised and humbled.

After the meal, many students came over with their schedules, asking for a time to meet. Every meal from then on, I ate with someone. I came as an unknown, and then I was known and included. Having an influential person tell others of my value and contribution had a big impact on my leadership development. He shared his space with me and anointed my efforts. From then on, Dr. Ford has been a significant mentor in my life. Because of his support and the communities that he brought me into, I have experienced firsthand the importance and value of Mentoring Communities. Since then, I have not felt alone. I am a better leader, Christ follower, and human being.

