

# Why Every Church Needs a Leadership Pipeline

By Scott Ball\*

Leadership is a critical component of any thriving church. From the earliest days of the church, God has called and equipped leaders to guide, shepherd, and oversee His people. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, emphasizes the importance of leadership when he writes, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12, ESV). Effective leadership is essential for the health, growth, and impact of the church.

Despite the clear biblical mandate for leadership development, many churches struggle to consistently identify, train, and deploy leaders. Some churches rely on a handful of long-time leaders to carry the weight of ministry, while others scramble to fill leadership vacancies as they arise. This haphazard approach to leadership development often leads to burnout, ineffectiveness, and missed opportunities for growth.

In light of the importance of leadership and the challenges of developing leaders consistently, every church needs a systematic approach to leadership development, known as a leadership pipeline. A leadership pipeline is an intentional process for identifying, assessing, training, and launching leaders at every level of the church. By implementing a leadership pipeline, churches can ensure a steady stream of equipped and empowered leaders who can effectively advance the mission of the church. In this article, we’ll explore the biblical basis for leadership development, the need for intentional leadership development, the benefits of a leadership pipeline, and the consequences of not having one.

## The Biblical Basis for Leadership Development

### Examples of Leadership Development in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, we see examples of intentional leadership development. One of the most prominent examples is the relationship between Moses and Joshua. In Exodus 17, Moses identifies Joshua as a military leader and entrusts him with leading the Israelites in battle against the Amalekites. Over time, Moses continues to invest in Joshua, bringing him up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 24:13) and affirming his leadership in the presence of the congregation (Numbers 27:18-23). By the time Moses passes away, Joshua is well-prepared to take on the mantle of leadership and guide the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Another example of leadership development in the Old Testament is the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. Elijah, a powerful prophet of God, identifies Elisha as his successor and invests in him through mentorship and training (1 Kings 19:16-21). Elisha goes on to carry forward Elijah’s prophetic ministry, performing even more miracles than his predecessor (2 Kings 2:9-14).

### Jesus’ Model of Leadership Development

In the New Testament, Jesus provides the ultimate model of leadership development. From the outset of His ministry, Jesus intentionally calls and trains a group of disciples to carry on His work after His ascension.

Jesus invests deeply in His disciples, teaching them, modeling ministry for them, and empowering them to participate in His work. He sends them out two by two to preach, heal, and cast out demons (Luke 9:1-6). He also gives them opportunities to practice leadership, such as when He feeds the five thousand (John 6:1-14).

After His resurrection, Jesus commissions His disciples to make disciples of all nations, promising to be with them always (Matthew 28:18-20). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, these disciples go on to establish and lead the early church, fulfilling Jesus' vision for the spread of the gospel.

### **Leadership Development in the Early Church**

The early church continues the pattern of intentional leadership development modeled by Jesus. The apostle Paul, in particular, demonstrates a commitment to raising up and mentoring young leaders.

Paul invests deeply in Timothy, his "true child in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2). He brings Timothy along on his missionary journeys, entrusts him with important leadership responsibilities, and provides ongoing encouragement and guidance through letters (1 and 2 Timothy).

Similarly, Paul mentors Titus, another young leader in the early church. He charges Titus with the task of appointing elders in every town and provides clear instructions on the qualifications and responsibilities of church leaders (Titus 1:5-9).

The early church also recognizes the importance of appointing and empowering leaders to oversee the growing community of believers. In Acts 6, the apostles appoint seven men to oversee the daily distribution of food, freeing them up to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word. This delegation of leadership responsibilities allows the church to continue to grow and thrive.

These biblical examples underscore the importance of intentional leadership development in the life of the church. By investing in and empowering leaders, the church can ensure the ongoing advancement of the gospel and the health of the body of Christ.

### **The Need for Intentional Leadership Development**

#### **The Impact of Leadership on Church Health and Growth**

Leadership plays a crucial role in the health and growth of the church. A study by the Barna Group found that the effectiveness of a church's leadership is the most important factor in its overall health and vitality. Churches with strong, godly leaders tend to be more vibrant, missionally engaged, and spiritually fruitful than those with weak or ineffective leadership.

Conversely, a lack of qualified leaders can hinder a church's ability to fulfill its God-given mission. Without clear vision, wise decision-making, and effective equipping of the saints, churches can become stagnant, inwardly focused, and disconnected from their communities.

#### **The Shortage of Equipped Leaders in Many Churches**

Despite the critical importance of leadership, many churches face a shortage of equipped and empowered leaders. A survey by Lifeway Research found that nearly half of Protestant pastors say their churches have difficulty finding enough volunteers to do the work that needs to be done. This shortage of leaders can lead to overworked staff, untapped potential among members, and missed opportunities for ministry impact.

Several factors contribute to this leadership shortage. Some churches neglect to prioritize leadership development, assuming that leaders will emerge naturally over time. Others may have limited resources or expertise to invest in leadership training. Additionally, many churches struggle to identify and deploy potential leaders, missing out on the gifts and talents within their congregation.

### **The Dangers of Neglecting Leadership Development**

Neglecting leadership development can have serious consequences for the health and effectiveness of the church.

1. **Burnout and overload for current leaders:** When churches rely on a small number of leaders to carry the weight of ministry, those leaders can quickly become overwhelmed and burnt out. This not only harms the leaders themselves but also diminishes the church's ability to carry out its mission effectively.
2. **Stagnation and decline of the church:** Without a continual infusion of new leaders and fresh vision, churches can become stagnant and start to decline. A lack of leadership development can lead to a maintenance mentality, where the focus shifts from reaching new people to simply preserving the status quo.
3. **Missed opportunities for kingdom impact:** When churches fail to develop and deploy leaders at every level, they miss out on the incredible potential for kingdom impact. Equipped and empowered leaders can multiply the church's efforts, reaching more people with the gospel and transforming communities for Christ.

The shortage of leaders and the dangers of neglecting leadership development underscore the urgent need for churches to prioritize intentional leadership development. By investing in a leadership pipeline, churches can ensure a steady stream of equipped leaders who can effectively advance the mission of the church.

### **The Benefits of a Leadership Pipeline**

Implementing a leadership pipeline brings numerous benefits to a church, helping it to thrive and fulfill its God-given mission more effectively.

#### **Clarifying Leadership Roles and Responsibilities**

A well-designed leadership pipeline clarifies the roles and responsibilities of leaders at every level of the church. By defining the core competencies and expectations for each leadership position, churches can ensure that leaders understand what is required of them and are equipped to fulfill their duties effectively.

This clarity reduces confusion, duplication of efforts, and gaps in leadership. It also helps leaders to focus their time and energy on the tasks that are most essential to their roles, leading to greater efficiency and effectiveness in ministry.

#### **Identifying and Developing Future Leaders**

A leadership pipeline provides a systematic process for identifying and developing future leaders within the church. Rather than waiting for leaders to emerge on their own, churches can proactively scout for individuals with leadership potential and invest in their growth and development.

This involves creating opportunities for emerging leaders to learn, practice, and refine their skills through mentoring, training, and hands-on experience. By providing a clear pathway for leadership development, churches can ensure a steady stream of equipped leaders who are ready to step into key roles as needed.

### **Providing a Pathway for Growth and Advancement**

A leadership pipeline not only identifies and develops future leaders but also provides a clear pathway for growth and advancement within the church. As leaders demonstrate faithfulness and effectiveness in their current roles, they can be equipped and empowered to take on greater levels of responsibility over time.

This pathway for advancement keeps leaders engaged, motivated, and growing in their faith and skills. It also ensures that the church has a deep bench of qualified leaders who can step up to fill new roles or replace outgoing leaders as needed.

### **Ensuring Continuity and Sustainability of the Church's Mission**

By developing leaders at every level of the church, a leadership pipeline helps to ensure the continuity and sustainability of the church's mission over time. As leaders come and go, the church can maintain a stable foundation of godly leadership that can guide it through seasons of transition and change.

This continuity is especially important for key leadership roles, such as the senior pastor or elder board. With a leadership pipeline in place, churches can identify and prepare potential successors well in advance, reducing the risk of a leadership vacuum or crisis when transitions occur.

### **Maximizing the Potential of Every Member**

A leadership pipeline recognizes that every member of the church has unique gifts, talents, and callings that can be used for the glory of God and the good of His church. By providing opportunities for all members to grow and develop as leaders, churches can maximize the potential of their entire congregation.

This not only benefits the church as a whole but also helps individual members to discover and fulfill their God-given purpose. As members are equipped and empowered to lead, they can experience the joy and satisfaction of using their gifts to build up the body of Christ and advance His kingdom.

In summary, a leadership pipeline brings numerous benefits to a church, including clarifying roles and responsibilities, identifying and developing future leaders, providing a pathway for growth and advancement, ensuring continuity and sustainability, and maximizing the potential of every member. By prioritizing intentional leadership development, churches can position themselves for greater health, growth, and impact in their communities and beyond.

### **The Consequences of Not Having a Leadership Pipeline**

While the benefits of having a leadership pipeline are significant, it's equally important to consider the consequences of not having one. Churches that fail to prioritize intentional leadership development may face several challenges and limitations.

### **Overreliance on a Few Key Leaders**

Without a leadership pipeline, churches often rely heavily on a small number of key leaders to carry the weight of ministry. This can include the senior pastor, a few long-time elders, or a handful of dedicated volunteers.

While these leaders may be highly capable and committed, overreliance on a few individuals can lead to burnout, stress, and potential health issues. It can also create a single point of failure, where the departure of a key leader can significantly disrupt the church's ministry and mission.

### **Lack of Depth and Bench Strength in Leadership**

Churches without a leadership pipeline often lack depth and bench strength in their leadership ranks. They may struggle to find qualified individuals to fill important roles, such as board members, ministry directors, or small group leaders.

This lack of depth can limit the church's ability to grow and expand its ministry. It can also create a sense of uncertainty and instability, as the church may not have a clear succession plan or a pool of equipped leaders to draw from when needed.

### **Difficulty Filling Leadership Vacancies**

When leadership vacancies arise, churches without a pipeline may struggle to find suitable replacements quickly. They may resort to filling positions with individuals who are not fully qualified or equipped, simply because no one else is available.

This can lead to a revolving door of leaders, where individuals burn out or step down after a short period, perpetuating the cycle of leadership vacancies and instability. It can also result in suboptimal leadership that hinders the church's effectiveness and impact.

### **Stunted Growth and Limited Impact of the Church**

Without a consistent flow of equipped and empowered leaders, churches may experience stunted growth and limited impact in their communities. They may struggle to launch new ministries, reach new people groups, or expand their influence beyond their current boundaries.

This lack of growth can lead to a sense of stagnation and decline, as the church fails to adapt to changing needs and opportunities. Over time, this can erode the church's vitality, relevance, and ability to fulfill its God-given mission.

### **Failure to Steward the Gifts and Callings of Members**

Churches without a leadership pipeline may fail to effectively steward the gifts and callings of their members. They may not have a clear process for helping individuals discover and develop their unique talents and passions for ministry.

This can lead to a sense of frustration and unfulfillment among members, who may feel that their potential is being untapped or underutilized. It can also deprive the church of valuable resources and perspectives that could enrich its ministry and mission.

In summary, the consequences of not having a leadership pipeline are significant and far-reaching. Churches that neglect intentional leadership development may face overreliance on a few key leaders, lack of depth and bench strength, difficulty filling leadership vacancies, stunted growth and limited impact, and failure to steward the gifts and callings of their members. To avoid these pitfalls and position themselves for long-term health and effectiveness, churches must prioritize the development of a robust leadership pipeline.

### **Recap of the Importance of a Leadership Pipeline**

In this article, we have explored the crucial role that a leadership pipeline plays in the health, growth, and impact of the church. We have seen that intentional leadership development is not only modeled throughout the Bible but is also essential for ensuring a steady stream of equipped and empowered leaders who can effectively advance the mission of the church.

Without a leadership pipeline, churches may face significant challenges, such as overreliance on a few key leaders, lack of depth and bench strength, difficulty filling leadership vacancies, stunted growth and limited impact, and failure to steward the gifts and callings of their members.

On the other hand, churches that prioritize intentional leadership development through a leadership pipeline can experience numerous benefits, including clarified roles and responsibilities, a consistent process for identifying and developing future leaders, a pathway for growth and advancement, ensured continuity and sustainability, and maximized potential of every member.

### **Call to Action for Churches to Prioritize Leadership Development**

In light of these findings, it is clear that every church, regardless of its size, context, or denomination, needs to prioritize the development of a leadership pipeline. This is not an optional or peripheral aspect of church ministry but a core component of its health and effectiveness.

Developing a leadership pipeline requires intentionality, investment, and a long-term perspective. It involves creating a culture of leadership development, where every member is encouraged and equipped to grow in their faith and skills. It also requires a systematic process for identifying, assessing, training, and deploying leaders at every level of the church.

While building a leadership pipeline may seem daunting, the benefits far outweigh the costs. By investing in the development of godly, competent, and committed leaders, churches can position themselves for greater fruitfulness and impact in their communities and beyond.

Therefore, we urge every church leader to prayerfully consider how they can prioritize intentional leadership development in their context. This may involve assessing their current leadership landscape, identifying gaps and opportunities for growth, and developing a strategic plan for implementing a leadership pipeline.

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