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Releasing Your Spiritual Children

Key: When the time is right, you need to let your spiritual daughters and sons fly!

In his book *Disciple*, minister and teacher Dr. Juan Carlos Ortiz writes that leaders must know how to release their people so that they can grow spiritually:

But you know what happens in the modern church? We pastors stop somewhere along the way; we know how . . . to administrate, to help, to have some healings, or even to teach—but then we stop moving. We become corks. The sheep grow and grow and start jamming up behind us, unable to grow further until we grow some more ourselves. They keep listening to our sermons, and soon they know everything we know, and then we have nothing but a pressure chamber.

The pastor is not a cork intentionally; . . . he is a victim of the structure like everyone else. It's always been done that way.

If the pressure becomes great enough, the pastor gets uncomfortable enough to ask the bishop for a transfer. So the bishop takes out one cork and replaces him with another!

If it is a congregational denomination that doesn't have bishops, the problem is even worse. The pressure keeps building until the channel finally explodes and the cork flies out! He gets really banged up in the explosion, of course, sometimes so badly that he can no longer continue in the ministry.

All this is avoided, of course, if the pastor keeps on growing to apostleship and the sheep keep growing right behind him.

If a pastor is truly a father to his congregation, he cannot be changed (or exploded) every two or three years. What family changes fathers every two years? Maybe our churches are more like clubs that elect presidents for a certain term and then elect someone else. But if we are family, we are a family; we stay together. The father keeps turning over responsibility to his sons [and daughters] as they grow.¹

Only a dysfunctional parent keeps his or her grown children at home when the children are ready to marry and build homes of their own; a normal parent encourages his or her children to go and establish their own homes! In the same way, any spiritual leader who keeps those under his or her care from becoming all the Lord has called them to be is dysfunctional. Such a pastor is not functioning as a proper leader. Sadly, there are many in the Church who are stunted, immature and impotent due to "leadership" of this kind.

When our son, Josh, was 15, he was responsible to mow the lawn each week (but this is not why the Lord gave him to us!). Mowing our lawn trained him and gave him the skills and motivation to mow his own lawn in the future. In the same way, we train our spiritual children with knowledge and passion so that they will do likewise for the next generation.

If spiritual blessings are not passed on to our spiritual children, the next generation is in danger of losing everything. When God's people took possession of the Promised Land, they served the Lord as long as the leaders set good examples for them and

gave them godly instructions. But when Joshua and the elders of that generation died, the children of Israel forgot the mercies of God to Israel: “When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel” (Judg. 2:10, *NKJV*).

Apparently, Joshua and the elders had not trained others to inherit and then pass on a continuing spiritual legacy. Without spiritual fathers to remind them of what the Lord had done for them when He brought them out of Canaan, the people turned away from God. They no longer remembered or cared about the nation’s covenant to obey the Law of the Lord. A spiritual legacy was lost to the next generation because no one had trained them to train others, which is the essence of spiritual parenting.

After Jesus rose from the dead and just before He ascended into heaven, He encouraged the Twelve to take on the responsibility of His Church. Jesus set an example for us to release our spiritual children to “go and do it” (for a discussion of the model Jesus set for us, see chapter 9). We need not be afraid of this step! When Jesus sent out the 72, He exclaimed when they returned, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Jesus witnessed His ministry, multiplied by 72, confounding the work of the enemy. And lest we forget, Jesus promised that we would do greater works than He had done (see John 14:12).

What are the greater works? We can only find out if we follow His example and release our spiritual children to multiply our ministries.

Release Them to Reproduce

Once while I was teaching a leadership-training seminar in Honolulu, Hawaii, I met a young man who had been sent out by his church a year before to plant a new church in neighboring Pearl City. This church plant had reached many young people with the gospel—70 young people had given their lives to Christ within the past few weeks! I wanted to experience this dynamic

ministry for myself, so the young pastor agreed to take me to a youth meeting before he dropped me off at the airport.

We jumped into his station wagon and headed for the local school where the meeting was held. Inside, the young people were singing wholeheartedly, worshiping the Lord with their arms outstretched. They meant business with God! After a time of worship, everyone sat down and the lights flicked on. The youth pastor grabbed the microphone. “Everyone needs to be in a power huddle,” he charged the group of new believers. “It’s a place where you can get to know other kids, and there are people to help you out when you have a problem or a question about your life with God.”

After the meeting, the pastor explained the truth they had discovered. “We have so far reached 225 young people, mostly from unsaved homes, and we’ve found that these kids need relationships. So we started power huddles—small groups for young people. The young people in power huddles are growing in God, while the young people who are not involved are having a hard time.”

With the heart of a spiritual parent, the pastor revealed his releasing strategy: “I’ve told our youth pastor that he must plant a new church with these young people when he believes the time is right. I had to tell the church about the strategy, or I might be tempted to keep him here in order to help me build this church.”

This pastor had learned the value of reaching the next generation and empowering them to reproduce themselves. There is among us a whole new generation of pastors, small-group leaders and church planters who are enthusiastic and often unconventional. Though we parents may not always understand our children, we must always encourage them to dream big and allow God to use us to help them fulfill those dreams.

If you are a pastor or a Christian leader, let me take a moment and address a few remarks specifically to you. You must commission this next generation to establish their own power huddles and their own new churches. You must not hold them back. Empower these young people and then rejoice with them when they reproduce!

The younger generation in our churches wants to experience something new and relevant to their age group. Believers in the 18-to-35 age bracket have shared with me that although they are involved in their churches and respect and honor their leaders, they believe God is calling them to something new. They are no longer satisfied with traditional church structures. They come into the Kingdom looking for reality, not religious structures. They want relationships, not outdated church programs. They have a God-given desire to build new homes.

I understand completely. I remember how I felt when I was in my 20s and the Lord called me to start a new church—a new wineskin—just as He did with many of my generation. But new wineskins eventually get old, and members of my generation are now the parents. God has given the younger generation the same burden to birth new wineskins, with a different vision for a different era. As spiritual parents, it is in our best interests to parent them and then release them to build their own homes and reproduce.

During the past few years, I have been privileged to disciple a team of young leaders who have started a new type of church in our community: house churches, or as some call them, micro-churches. Many of them do not normally meet on Sundays but during the week instead. Most of them eat a meal at every meeting. Instead of building buildings, they plan to start more small churches. They are burdened to meet the needs of the poor of our community. They meet in homes weekly and all together at various times throughout the year. It is a new church for a new generation.

When I was in my 20s, the new church did not look at all like the church of the generation before me. So why should I expect the church of the next generation to look like mine? I have chosen to release the next generation and help them build new wineskins that meet the needs of their generation. My role is to be a father, to support them in their dreams from God.²

Release Them for the Harvest

In 1996, my friend Jim Pesce started a new church, Harvest Family Community Church, in Keswick, Ontario. Jim and his wife, Deb,

were committed to practicing the principles of spiritual fathering and mothering. More than 84 percent of their church membership were new believers who came to Christ since their church was formed. Jim and Deb have now turned the church leadership over to their spiritual sons and daughters, the spiritual children they parented when the church began. Jim's personal insights are a vivid picture of the harvest being reaped for the Lord that began with Jim and Deb sowing into the lives of just a few:

At the start of our new church, Deb and I spent most of our time with about six newly saved couples. We not only ministered as a team but chose to spend free time together having fun. This is important. Most new Christians need more care and support than instruction.

The ones we brought to Christ have our "spiritual DNA"; they share our vision and our hearts and have our full trust. Because we are like family, there is much room for acceptance, correction and patience to cover the many offenses we cause one another. They know that we will be with them over the long haul and accept them with all their flaws and sins. We love them for who they are, not for what they can accomplish for us.

We believe in them! By spending time with others, they "catch our spirit" and multiply the ministry. Our passions become theirs as they walk with us in ministry situations.

The greatest struggle we face in [spiritual parenting] is choosing to say no to the many other demanding voices that would keep us from choosing to spend quality time with those special few we are [spiritually parenting]. Busyness is the destroyer of spiritual parenting.

Just as the church name indicates, Harvest Family Community Church is a spiritual family that consists of spiritual parents and children. They have discovered that every believer is called to parent as that adult grows to spiritual maturity. This church is now touching the nations of the world.

Omar and Pat Beiler, who are missionaries with the Assemblies of God, served for many years in Austria. They grew an existing church in Vienna by discipling several young people from the university, and the small Bible study group expanded as the Beilers became spiritual parents to the young believers. Four years after starting the small-group ministry, they invited me to conduct a training seminar for them. I was amazed! They had 400 people attending 36 small spiritual family groups scattered throughout their city. Seventy-five young leaders attended the seminar, each of whom was already producing spiritual children of his or her own. This church, with its focus on spiritual parenting, had become the largest multi-cultural church in Austria's history since the days of the Reformation—all within four years!

This past week I was in Kisumu, Kenya, with my friends Hesbone and Violet Odindo. Just over six years ago, Hesbone traveled from the city of Nairobi where they lived to the Kisumu region of his village, Kadawa Village. There he led a few persons to Christ. He and Violet then moved back to this village and became spiritual parents to these new believers and started a cell group with them in the home of a relative. Today, this small cell group has multiplied into nine new churches, dozens of cell groups made up of 2,000 people. All of this was built on relational Christianity, as they trained a host of their spiritual children to become spiritual parents themselves—who in turn have trained another generation of spiritual parents. And the legacy continues on.

I believe the Lord is preparing to pour out His Spirit and bring revival to the Church in these last days. There will be a greater awakening to the things of God in our communities, and uncountable multitudes will be drawn into the kingdom of God. When the Lord pours out this new wine, we must have the new wineskins prepared or we will lose the harvest.

Down through history, there have been those who duplicated the Early Church's method of meeting house to house with positive results. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, was one such individual. During the eighteenth century, he set up thousands of "class meetings" in which people met in homes to grow in God. He once made the comment that

“more has happened in people’s lives in close fellowship than in ten years of public preaching.” More recently, in the twentieth century, David Yonggi Cho from Korea followed the New Testament Church’s example of small groups and for many years has pastored the world’s largest congregation.

I believe our Lord’s strategy to prepare for the harvest is still the same: He wants to draw together common, ordinary believers who have encountered an extraordinary God, and He wants these believers to become spiritual families who will meet from house to house to disciple and train others, preparing for the harvest.

Many Christians today are thirsty for a great influx of new wine: new believers pouring into His kingdom. God is placing a desire within spiritual mothers and fathers to welcome these believers into the Kingdom and train them as spiritual daughters and sons and then release them to reap a harvest. When a young man and woman come together at the altar to be married, there is an expectation that they will eventually have children. The same principle applies to spiritual families. When people are in love with Jesus and with each other, spiritual children are the result. If we are to bring in the harvest God intends, we must make sure that our spiritual children grow up and reproduce spiritual children of their own, who in turn will grow more spiritual parents.

Key Questions for Practical Application

1. What type of leadership causes dysfunctional growth?
2. How can a spiritual legacy be lost?
3. How does busyness interfere with spiritual parenting, and what can you do about it?