

FROM DOING IT MYSELF TO EMPOWERING OTHERS

One Pastor's Journey

by Dennis Hesselbarth

Twenty six years earlier, I had planted Hilltop Urban Church. Like most inner city churches, Hilltop was plagued by a chronic lack of leadership. Poor education, frequent crises, and relational struggles brought great instability. I resigned myself to importing stable leaders from suburban churches to run our programs, and “doing the rest” myself. It was 24/7 ministry: people in crisis knocking on the door, fund raising, recruiting, preaching, organizing. Yet I also got lots of strokes--praise for my dedication and impact. I fed on that.

Our community was being served, but deep down I knew lives were not being transformed. Our people remained recipients rather than participants; receivers not givers; followers not leaders.

I knew we need to lift, to develop, to empower. But how?

Change started with me. Conflict erupted. Family members died. Prized positions were taken away. I was fingered for being controlling. (I was!) In my own loss and brokenness, I joined a recovery group in our own church.

There I was powerfully ministered to by the uneducated, broken poor--the ones who “couldn't lead.” The mutual support of this confidential small group with its focus on vulnerability, heart change, and action (not just head knowledge) transformed hearts and spawned leaders before my eyes. The simple 12-step group format meant anyone could lead. They came, observed, opened up, and, before long, led.

I learned several crucial lessons from that group. I recognized that I hadn't developed leaders among the broken poor because I didn't truly believe they could be transformed and lead. I also faced up to the fact that I did have a control issue. I liked, I needed the praise I received when I did things myself. I had to let go and trust others to lead. Finally, I saw that our complex middle-class programs required a style of leadership that didn't fit most of our people. Launching small, simple peer groups could open a path for growing powerful leaders.

But I didn't know how to implement what I was learning. God exposed me to a network of cell churches and then brought a church consultant versed in transformative small group and team ministry. We launched a pilot cell/house church and replaced a salaried children's director with a ministry team of inexperienced urban folk. Over the next few years as our house churches multiplied and new ministry teams were launched, we saw more lives changed and leaders developed than in all the twenty-some preceding years combined.

My role increasingly shifted from doing to coaching and training. I no longer defined my success by what I accomplished, but by the successes of others. A preaching team replaced me--I preached less than half the time. Pastoral care moved to our house churches and became far more encompassing. Collaborative teams gave direction and made decisions. Ministry, even through the inevitable ups and downs of urban life, became energizing!

This all culminated with God's leading me to announce my resignation. Our middle-class folks feared for the future. But not our urban folks. Rather than find another full-time pastor, they asked for continued coaching and formed a team of "broken urban folks" to lead the church.

Paul writes:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the

world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:26-29, ESV).

There is no greater joy than becoming an equipper, partnering with our God as he transforms the weak and unlikely into powerful agents of his kingdom.

This article is excerpted from THE MORE-WITH-LESS CHURCH: Maximize Your Money, Space, Time, and People to Multiply Ministry Impact (Amazon link) by Eddy Hall, Ray Bowman, and J. Skipp Machmer (Baker Books 2014).