

# Chapter 1

## The Five Essential Qualities of Highly Effective Leaders

*“David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.”—Psalm 78:72*

There are many excellent books on the subjects of leadership, administration, and management. My intent here is to consider five essential qualities of effective leaders and pastors. These characteristics were gleaned from interviews with ninety-two pastors. Twenty-three of them had healthy, growing churches,<sup>1</sup> and sixty-nine had churches that were plateauing or declining.

An effective pastor—paid or volunteer—is someone who is led by the Spirit, anointed by God, and successful in leading his or her church to health and growth through a compelling vision and the equipping of the laity to do great things for God. We have been able to pinpoint some of the traits common to pastors who lead growing and healthy churches. While each quality is important, it is their collective strength that made the difference in leadership.

### **1. Effective pastors have a passion for a continual connection with God**

Our interviews showed that effective pastoral leadership rests on the foundation of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is maintained daily. These pastors continue to develop an intense and meaningful intimacy with Jesus. One said, “It is my desire to get my heart warmed by the sweet fires of the Spirit before I engage in the rest of the activities of the day.” Another insisted, “I need to feel the heavy presence of God in my life so I can influence others for Jesus.”

When the effective pastors were asked how much time they spend with God each day, they said they invest about one hour praying, reading Scripture, singing, and worshipping God. In addition, many of them devote another hour to praying for their churches, members, communities, and families. These pastors

pursue other spiritual disciplines (regular fasting, spiritual retreats, journaling, family worship, etc.) and are involved with others in accountability groups (prayer partners, small groups, etc.). They are earnestly seeking to grow in their relationship with Christ and to inspire their congregations to do the same. They felt that they couldn't lead people to the well of life if they hadn't drunk from it themselves recently.

Conversely, we found that pastors of declining churches spend less than half an hour with God each day. They felt that their work responsibilities made it necessary to limit their time with God. They said that pastoring requires hard work and good management.

Church members are less likely to challenge a pastor who possesses the appropriate skills and a wealth of experience. However, while skill and experience are both important and shouldn't be minimized, being Spirit-filled and Spirit-led proved to be more significant to effective pastoral leadership. Successful pastors were spiritually authentic; they recognized that their power doesn't come from their personality or giftedness; it comes from God, who called them.

Growing churches are very strong spiritually. We saw this spirituality in the leadership, organization, and driving power of the pastor who followed the biblical principle of demonstrating true spiritual concern for others. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Leaders can't keep watch over others until they have looked after themselves. A pastor can lead other people in spiritual things only in proportion to his or her own understanding and experience.

## **2. Effective pastors can communicate the gospel successfully**

Members and seekers first recognize a pastor's capacity for communication through his or her preaching. We saw that effective pastors spent a minimum of fifteen hours weekly in sermon preparation, while the less effective pastors spent about five hours each week on their sermons. Important as was the time spent in sermon preparation, other factors were just as important for good preaching. These included being aware of the needs and issues that their listeners were struggling with, being able to touch the heart, and knowing how to bring fresh insights from the Bible. The interviews suggested that inspiring preaching produces a vibrant atmosphere that excites people, drawing them to attend church themselves and to bring friends with them. I heard the following statements from members of growing churches:

- "I love my pastor. He makes the Bible come alive."
- "He's interesting to listen to, yet he is very deep."
- "He spent a lot of time in prayer, study, and preparation."

- “He leads me to a better relationship with God.”
- “I am fed spiritually.”
- “I feel the need for change when I am in the worship service.”

For some pastors, communicating well comes naturally, but everyone can improve their skills by cultivating them. Pastors of thriving churches read for at least one hour each day, and they practice their sermons two or three times before preaching them in worship services. They also met with creative people who helped them craft better sermons and explore various ways to share the gospel. Both members and effective pastors agreed that thirty minutes or thereabout was the optimal length for sermons that drew people back.

When we asked pastors what qualities in sermons connected with people, they said the following:

- Sermons that teach us something new. Sermons that bring new insights from the biblical text or the working of God in the world today.
- Sermons that thrill the heart with the gospel and with hope.
- Sermons that awe the listeners with the greatness and majesty of God.
- Sermons that inspire the audience to do something for God and for other people.
- Sermons that connect people with God and help them to live a holy life and serve God in the world.

Church members also said they'd like to tell their pastors:

- Preach from your personal journey so your messages are genuine. Always reflect upon how the text and God have affected your life.
- Be a model of a deeply spiritual person.
- Pray more.
- Recognize the power of your works—what you do.
- Give 100 percent of your effort.
- Don't neglect your family.
- Check your motives.
- Do your research.
- Make the message clear, simple, and interesting, focusing on just one suggested action and one benefit.
- Show your sense of humor, but don't try so hard to be funny that you get too cutesy.
- Talk on a level everyone can understand.
- Don't ever quit—you *do* make a difference.

Finally, here are five rules that we gathered from interviewing and listening to good communicators:

Rule 1. Preach with passion and conviction. Believe to the depth of your being what you are preaching.

Rule 2. Preach to two people: one who is hearing what you're saying for the first time, and one who is hearing it for the last time. Preaching to the first one will make you seeker-friendly so you'll use terms and language that non-Christians and nominal Christians can understand and relate to. And preaching to the second will fill your sermon with urgency.

Rule 3. Preach biblical sermons that are relevant. Some preachers' sermons are biblical but not relevant to life today. The combination of the two is the essence of effective preaching.

Rule 4. Preach simple yet challenging sermons. Make the sermon so simple that everyone can understand it and yet challenging enough that it motivates people to action.

Rule 5. Think from the point of view of the listener. A pastor well known for his speaking ability told me that he thinks, not like a theologian, but from the point of view of a gas-station attendant who came to church out of curiosity or the wife who comes to church without her husband or the man who is tempted to compromise at work. An effective pastor said, "I always think of their need and the words of hope and comfort I give to them from the Lord."

### **3. Effective pastors can cast the vision successfully**

Pastors aren't just preaching to inform but are also consistently communicating the vision to the church in a simple, holistic, and captivating way. One pastor said that a person who has a compelling vision "believes that our best days are ahead and that God can perform remarkable acts in our midst." Every effective pastor that we interviewed had a clear vision for his or her church and knew exactly how to take that church from where it was to where God wanted it to be. They readily led the church in this process, but they recognized it was the responsibility of the entire body of Christ to bring it to fruition.

I noticed that in many of the growing churches, the vision was cast every Sabbath with interesting stories, biblical metaphors, slogans, banners, songs, skits, and so forth. One pastor labeled it "creative redundancy." It became very clear to me that everyone knew the vision and was thrilled not only to buy in to it but also to live it.

When we interviewed members about the vision of their church, they articulated the vision and then affirmed, "We have a great vision at our church, and everyone knows what it is." At one growing congregation, I asked a ten-year-old girl if she could tell me their vision. She immediately responded, "Our church's vision is to save the world." There is no church growth without compelling vision.

Here are some vision statements I found in Seventh-day Adventist churches that are growing:

“Love God, love others, and serve the world.”

“To be passionate about God’s love for the lost and to become active in His ministry locally and globally.”

“To connect people with the Father.”

“To see every person become actively involved in ministry and witnessing.”

“Sharing the Christ who cares, together.”

“To pursue the lost with a passion, and to love one another because God loves us.”

On the other hand, very few of the pastors, leaders, and members of plateauing or declining churches knew the mission or the vision of their church. In one interview, I called the head elder and asked him whether he knew the vision of his church. His response was, “No, but if you are interested I can get it for you.”

I said, “Well, just tell me the main ideas.”

“I can’t do it off the top of my head,” he confessed.

The vision doesn’t have to be perfect, but it needs to be clear. We noted three elements of effective vision casting. First, the leader was confident about the vision, believing it to be true based upon his or her sense of God’s vision. This confidence was based on prayer, Bible study, and deep reflection on the condition and history of the church and its community. Second, the vision was communicated with passion and inspiration. Third, it was simple and memorable.

Effective pastors successfully communicate the gospel and the vision of the church in inspiring ways.

#### **4. Effective pastors can bring about change**

Leaders with this competency create an environment conducive of change, lead the process successfully, and anchor the change in the congregation’s culture. We discovered that many of the growing churches we studied had been sick, some so diseased that they were dying, but God used a leader and circumstances to revive them.

Leaders open to change practice critical thinking. They aren’t mere reflectors of other people’s ideas, plans, programs, and visions. Too many pastors, because of their lack of time or skills, are doing little critical thinking and reflection. In their effort to grow their churches, they copy existing models and expend their energies on promoting programs. The mission of the churches these people lead becomes conducting programs rather than saving souls. Assessing the situation, asking critical and thoughtful questions, and coming up with solutions to meet

the urgent needs of our time are at the heart of leadership. Spiritual leaders ask three basic questions:

- Where is God working? (They want to know so they can join Him there.)
- How can we be more effective in what we do?
- What are we doing that isn't effective anymore?

Pastors need to have the courage to end activities that are no longer effective or to repurpose an activity so it can be effective again. Critical thinking will help them move their churches from stagnation to creativity and innovation.

One pastor noted, "There is no church growth without meaningful change." In an age when mission consciousness is lost in the church, it is essential for the pastor to be able to lead the congregation to become a "mission outpost." Our interviews revealed that pastors of growing churches helped their members reclaim their role in bringing people to faith in Christ. They highlighted a God-given cause that galvanized the congregation and kept unity through change. Their model didn't feature the pastor as the sole evangelist. Instead, his role was to exemplify evangelism to the members and to equip them as evangelists.

Changing a church is very difficult. It brings pain, criticism, and challenges. But leaders who persevere to the end reap amazing results.

## **5. Effective pastors have the ability to lead and influence others**

Effective pastors can lead and influence other people because they have a passion for God and for people, and they talk about it with excitement and enthusiasm. In our interviews with pastors of thriving churches, it didn't take more than five minutes to feel their passion about God, people, and evangelism, and to get excited about it. Dynamic leaders have strong convictions about what they are doing, but leadership goes beyond merely having convictions to the ability to inspire others with those convictions.

Effective pastors are able to lead and influence others in the following ways: they can identify, develop, and support lay leaders. The early church was a movement led primarily by the laity. Today's pastors who are following this model rely heavily upon the ministry implied by the "priesthood of all believers." One pastor commented, "We need to learn to delegate. We need to pray that the Lord of the harvest will bring people to us who can help us in this and other responsibilities. It is impossible for us to do it alone." (See Matthew 9:35–38.) Not only will the laity help to reach the lost, but they themselves will reap the benefits of a closer walk with God and a renewed love for His children.

Interestingly, our survey showed that pastors of growing churches worked about forty-five hours per week, while those in plateauing and declining churches

worked fifty to sixty hours per week.<sup>2</sup> Effective pastors spent their forty-five hours with intentionality, capitalizing on every opportunity to mobilize others into action for Jesus.

The survey we conducted revealed that growing churches had more than 50 percent of their members involved in meaningful ministry<sup>3</sup> and about 10 percent in evangelism.<sup>4</sup> Pastors coached members and leaders to develop and put to work their own leadership gifts. In contrast, plateauing and declining churches had only 30 percent of their members involved in ministry and less than 3 percent in evangelism.

Member involvement was increased by the leaders' intentionality in training and equipping the lay members. The survey highlighted the fact that pastors of growing churches spent up to one-third of their time equipping the laity to do ministry and evangelism—approximately ten to fifteen hours every week. In contrast, pastors of plateauing and declining churches spend fewer than two hours a week in training.

The priority of developing lay leaders was reflected in contributions of both time and money. Healthy churches devoted up to 10 percent of their budget on training and seminars. They spent this money in a variety of ways: buying DVDs and books, sending people to seminars, and bringing experts to conduct training. Many plateauing and declining churches reported that they had little or no budget for training.

Second, effective pastors lead by example. They don't just cast the vision; they embody it. One pastor told me, "I never ask my members to do anything that I'm not doing. Our strengths are used to show others what to do. Our weaknesses are used to show others how to rely on God."

Churches are inspired by pastors who lead by example. Many pastors of growing churches shared with us stories of winning their friends and neighbors to Christ. We weren't surprised, then, when we found that their members were actively involved in personal evangelism too.

Many pastors told us that the effect of their example was multiplied when they went above and beyond the call of duty. For example, when a pastor followed up on an *It Is Written* interest, his members were less inspired than when he shared a testimony about his neighbor attending the small group meetings he held at his house.

Several members we interviewed told us that they were inspired by their pastor's examples of spending time with God, of providing leadership in his home, of balanced living, of time management, and of other areas related to personal and church development.

Third, leaders take risks. They weigh the consequences of their decisions and aren't afraid of failure. Effective pastors often see opportunities that others missed. They view past "failures" as occasions to improve for their next attempt.

One pastor shared that when people told him that public evangelism didn't work anymore, he decided to do it more frequently than he had before. However, he modified his approach, shortening each series and making extensive use of lay leadership. His church experienced tremendous growth because of the risk they took.

Effective pastors are also decisive leaders. They're willing to take a stand on important but controversial issues. One pastor said to me, "When it comes to difficult decisions, don't be afraid of expressing your ideas and feelings. Always take a stand. But then always connect, even with those who disagree with you. Relationships always trump everything else. Finally, do not be anxious or lose sleep over it. It is not about you, but about the kingdom of God. He is in charge of His church, and He will take care of it."

Leadership is a much bigger thing than merely holding a position or having a title. The pastor is a leader by virtue of what he does rather than what position he holds. Pastors are called to know how to work with and through people, how to minister to people, and how to lead people. Our research revealed that highly effective pastors have five essential leadership qualities: the passion to continually have a connection with God, the ability to communicate the gospel, the skill to cast the vision successfully, the competency to bring about change, and the ability to lead and influence others.

While some pastors and members may naturally possess some of the leadership qualities mentioned in this chapter, all can develop and improve their leadership abilities with intentionality and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If leaders want to grow others, they must be growing themselves.

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1. Our definition of growth is a 3 percent increase in membership, baptisms, and attendance for a minimum of three years.

2. These statistics didn't include ministry done during Sabbath hours.

3. Our survey defined *ministry* as consistent involvement and planning in church programs and functions, and leadership such as teaching in Sabbath School, organizing special events, involving themselves in community services and church choir, and so forth.

4. Our survey defined *evangelism* as consistent involvement in witnessing through activities such as giving Bible studies, sharing their testimony with others, distributing literature, conducting or assisting with evangelistic meetings in the local church, and leading or assisting with the visitor and new-believer Sabbath School class.