

The Equipping and Empowering Community

Ava Kate Oleson (D.Min., 2011)

D. Min. Program Coordinator,
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, MO

Within the parameters of the Assemblies of God (AG), I was empowered and equipped to evolve from an inexperienced freshman to a person navigating the art of leading in the church at the local, district, and national levels. I discovered that belonging to the AG as a credentialed minister provides extraordinary opportunities for superior leadership development. I experienced first-hand that long-term sustained impact is possible when the minister connects with a community that recognizes the call of God on one's life and serves as an equipping and empowering agency.

Despite the biblical support and outstanding benefits of credentialing, however, many leaders entering ministry in recent decades resist association with a denomination. Anti-institutionalism permeates today's postmodern culture. Although Ed Stetzer admits his weariness in dealing with denominational flaws, he also underscores his strong advocacy for the value of denominations: "Call me a cautious believer in the idea that we can do more for the kingdom of God by doing it together with people of common conviction—which usually means in a denomination—than by doing it alone."¹

The equipping and empowering agency of a denomination provides a network for the creation of effective delivery

systems that equip and empower leaders. The strengthening of interpersonal relationships between leaders plays an essential role in maintaining the church's long-term and sustained impact. Paul's theology of the Church reflects a community of believers who work together to ensure that the many layers of spiritual, emotional, educational, and physical needs of its leaders are met. In so doing, they do not become disconnected and vulnerable to isolation, exhaustion, and lack of proper training.

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research conducted a study revealing that the receipt of commendation and support from other clergy colleagues was the one pivotal factor that determined whether clergy stayed connected to their vocation during times of stress or crisis.² Without this support system, clergy members face a high probability of not surviving their ministerial calling. According to Bernard Bass, director of the Center for Leadership Studies at the State University of New York, Binghamton, research indicates that when a leader feels part of a larger entity, he or she will experience a reduction in felt stress. "The insecurity of feeling isolated is replaced by the security of a sense of belonging. Transformational leaders create a sense of identity with a social network of support."³ Bass affirms that

leaders with a support system that includes group associations experience longevity and continued effectiveness, unlike those without such support.⁴

A closer look at the writings of Paul and his personal need for such a support system demonstrates the implication of strong interpersonal relationships between leaders. The empowering influence provided in these types of connections, forged over time, is an overlooked, yet vital benefit of denominational affiliation. Though Paul appeared independent, his ministry efforts always involved a network of close relationships, which he called his coworkers (Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; 2 Cor. 8:23). Paul's coworkers played a strategic role in meeting his physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs. Through those relationships, Paul carried out his entire ministry. This interdependent, mutually supportive, equipping, and empowering community that transcended one single local body sustained his ministry. One can trace Paul's value of and need for relationship throughout all thirteen of his epistles.

Timothy and Silas Support Paul

Paul introduces 1 Thessalonians by stating that the letter is from him, Silas, and Timothy. Immediately Paul identifies his interdependence with his team. As a close team, Timothy and Silas helped Paul plant this particular church. In verse 2, Paul writes: "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers." He specifically uses the plural, indicating the social unit of the team. He states, "out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you" (2:17). Paul and his coworkers "longed" to see their friends in Thessalonica.

Taking this team approach, Paul would often send Timothy to a particular local church. "For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17). Paul stated: "I have no one else like him ... Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Phil. 2:20-21).

Paul had physical and intellectual needs as well. While he was in prison, Paul asks Timothy to "bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). Soon winter would arrive, and being in a cold, miserable cell, Paul was beginning to feel the need for the cloak he had left with Carpus. This cloak resembled a heavy wool blanket with an opening for the head and slits at the side for his arms.

Although a man of great faith, this request indicates Paul's human frailty and need for ordinary physical care. He also requested that Timothy bring his "scrolls, especially the parchments." He not only needed warm clothes for his body, but books to keep his mind active. The scrolls could refer to his writing materials, while the parchments could refer to his books, likely copies of the Old Testament. As John Stott wisely wrote: "When our spirit is lonely we need friends. When our body is cold we need clothing. When our mind is bored we need books. To admit this is not unspiritual; it is human. These are the natural needs of mortal men and women."⁵ Just like Paul, church leaders also need such support systems.

Support by the Thessalonian Church

Consider Timothy's report about the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 3:6-8) and how it brought Paul great encouragement: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again" (vv. 9-10). Timothy's account comforted and strengthened Paul. As a result, he rose above his distress and persecution in Corinth to continue his mission with renewed zeal.⁶

Support by the Philippian Church

Paul's letter to the Philippians further illustrates the importance he placed on personal relationships. Paul thanks the believers in Philippi for their partnership, sometimes translated "fellowship," in the gospel (Phil. 1:5). This word originally meant a "joint participation in a common interest and activity."⁷ The preposition "in" is a preposition of motion, which indicates that the Philippians partnered with Paul in the ongoing, continued progress of advancing the Kingdom of God.⁸

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he identifies Epaphroditus, another example of a close friend, whom he calls a "fellow worker and fellow soldier whom you sent to take care of my needs" (Phil. 2:25). At times, one can experience difficulty imagining Paul, the icon of the New Testament Church who relentlessly established and nurtured congregations, as having needs.⁹ Epaphroditus nearly died; Paul was quick to say that one of the reasons God allowed him to survive was because Paul desperately needed him (v. 27).

Support by the Ephesian Church

Paul's use of the word "equip" in his letter to the Ephesians illustrates the value of the equipping and empowering Community: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to *equip* the saints for the work of ministry, for *building up the body* of Christ..." (Eph. 4:11 TNIV, emphasis added). According to Walter Bauer, *katartizmon*, the Greek word for "equip," was a medical term used for the setting of a bone, or the preparation of the bone for proper growth and healing.¹⁰ Paul was concerned about the proper nourishment and support of the saints for healthy growth, a positive outcome, and future success.

The noun form is *katartisis* and refers to "the inner strength of the organic relationship of the community and the character of its members."¹¹ This compelling idea implies that Paul believes the whole of the organic relationship of believers working together, sharing resources, establishing core values, and strategizing is far greater than the sum of its individual members. Paul does not promulgate a lone ranger theology. Equipping the saints and evangelizing the lost involves local communities and teams collaborating, sustaining and strategizing with one another.

Support by Phoebe

In Romans 16, Paul spotlights Phoebe as one who strategically impacted his life and ministry. Even though neither Paul nor Phoebe had been to Rome, he trusted her to deliver his personal letter to the church there. Paul requested that they extend to her a hearty reception: "I

commend (stand beside, express solidarity with, recommend, give approval, show, demonstrate, display as an ideal), to you, our sister Phoebe.”¹² Her ministry had such extensive value that it reached beyond her own congregation, with Paul anticipating her ministry in Rome. Phoebe is another example of Paul’s support system that helped shape the Apostle Paul and expand his ministry throughout regional churches.

Conclusion

Vocational ministers desperately need a strong network of life-giving relationships to be adequately resourced. Although the term “denomination” is not

used in the New Testament, the theological idea abounds. Supportive relationships and accountability are two of the most critical functions that denominational affiliation provides.

If you are not functioning within the parameters of a solid denominational setting, consider contact with a trusted leader who can help. If you are a credentialed minister, be intentional about participating in the life of your movement, which provides potential life-transforming encounters. Finally, be willing to contribute to the life of another minister in such an empowering way that he or she, too, can experience long-term sustained impact and thrive in ministry, as did Paul.

¹Ed Stetzer, “Life in Those Old Bones,” *Christianity Today*, June 2010, 24-26.

²Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia Mei Yin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 23.

³Bernard M. Bass, *Bass & Stogdill’s Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, & Managerial Applications*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 656.

⁴*Ibid.*, 657.

⁵Peter Williams, *Opening Up 2 Timothy* (Leominster, England: Day One Publications, 2007), 106-108.

⁶Tim Shenton, *Opening Up 1 Thessalonians* (Leominster, England: Day One Publications, 2006), 62.

⁷Kenneth Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), Logos Bible Software Edition under Phil. 1:5.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Ralph P. Martin, Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 877.

¹⁰Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd rev. and aug. ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 418.

¹¹G. Delling, “*katartismos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 80.

¹²Deborah M. Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God’s Women—Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace and Truth Publications, 2004), 111.