See One, Do One, Teach One

Having Welcomed the Opportunity to Lead, Women Executive Pastors Look Toward the Next Generation

by Meagan M. Taylor
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Overview:

Article Summary
Many women in executive ministry roles have forged paths in church leadership by careful stewardship of the resources available to them, even if minimal. They have especially built upon the mentorship and development opportunities provided by other leaders. Mentorship has not only been an important part of these women’s professional experience, but has become a primary means to equip women throughout the church to develop their God-given leadership gifts.

Further Reading
Brave New Women: The Transformation of Women’s Ministry in the 21st Century Culture
leadnet.org/resources

A Radical Future for Women’s Ministry
leadnet.org/podcast/
When Mary Carroll graduated law school in 1976, she was one of only 20 women in a class of more than 300 men. Thirty years ago, hers was not an uncommon experience among professional women. For more than 20 years Mary was a corporate attorney for a major car rental company and directed the company’s international development plans in Asia/Pacific and Latin America.

Then in 2004, when she accepted an executive staff position at her church, she thought she’d fallen into a time warp. “When I came into the ministry environment it was mostly men in leadership and there weren’t many women available as examples or advisors,” says Mary, who serves as executive director and general counsel at Hosanna! Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN (www.hosannalc.org). Unspoken social norms for women in the church, especially women in leadership, were different from those for women in the workplace, she explains. “You have to feel your way through appropriate conduct … I didn’t know that I didn’t know the rules until a mentor showed me.”

Like Mary, many women in executive ministry roles have forged paths in church leadership by stewarding the sometimes minimal resources available to them, particularly the mentorship and opportunities provided by other leaders. Mentorship has not only been an important part of these women’s professional experience, but has become a primary means to equip women throughout the church to develop their God-given leadership gifts.

Why Mentoring?

The term mentoring, especially in the professional sphere, implies a pre-arranged hierarchical relationship in which the wise elder imparts decades of wisdom to the young protégé, in a series of meetings.

But Judy West, one of the senior level pastors at The Crossing in Chesterfield, MO (www.wcrossing.org) says the most valuable mentoring relationships are rarely so formal or so easy to create.

“Forced mentorship has never worked for me,” Judy says. “It has to be based off of affinity and chemistry.”

Formal mentoring relationships can feel impersonal or unnatural, which Judy says detracts from both people’s
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time investment. She advocates for finding a role model within existing relationships. “There are people who already know what’s going on in my life, my weaknesses and my strengths,” she says. “I trust them to call me on my blind spots.”

People perpetually glean insight and wisdom from role models by simply interacting with or observing them, Judy explains. “A lot of mentorship is that philosophy of see one, do one, teach one,” she says, referring to a common pedagogy applied to medical students. Mentors supported Judy throughout her leadership development process, and she aims to do the same for the women leading under her. “If I bring somebody under my arms like I was brought under someone’s arms, the role model cycle can play out.”

In order to intentionally, but naturally incorporate staff development and role modeling in her daily work, Judy applies the “see one, do one, teach one” philosophy. For instance, she strategically invites assistant leaders to pastoral care meetings in order to expose them to challenging situations they may eventually face on their own. She coaches them prior to and following a meeting she has led, and then supports them through leading a meeting of their own, with the hope that they will go on to teach future pastoral care staff. “As a leader you want to maintain control, but when you can let go and delegate, that is a huge part of discipleship and mentorship.”

Like Judy, many church staff leaders see mentorship as a more imperceptible process that happens while they are on the move, rather than an overt ritual that requires another meeting scheduled into their already demanding work week.

Tammy Kelley, who has served on both the executive staff at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL, and Ginghamburg Church in Tipp City, OH, says she prefers learning from multiple role models than from one formal mentor. “I used to think that was the right way to do mentoring – that I should seek out someone to meet me every Wednesday at two o’clock,” Tammy says, adding that other leaders rarely have that kind of availability. She appreciates the freedom of being able to connect informally, whether it means watching a peer during a decision-making process or simply reading a book by a favorite pastor. Watching other leaders, how they carry themselves, their grace and poise, or how they share difficult words with others is invaluable learning experience that she carries into her work.

Tammy says she leans into mentors most when she needs someone to tell her she’s not crazy. “When something feels goofy or abnormal, I need someone to affirm I am making the right decisions or thinking about the process in some of the right ways,” she says.

Mary Caroll learned to thrive in male-dominated worlds whether law school or church.

Kadi Cole, executive director of multisite at Christ Fellowship in Palm Beach Gardens, FL (www.gochristfellowship.com), concludes that people sometimes recognize their influencers as mentors only in hindsight. “I had people who were mentors to me, but I didn’t look at them in the moment as a mentor,” she says. Looking back, she realizes the impact certain individuals had on
her life, and that those were unplanned encounters. “Those times I tried to make mentorship happen, it wasn’t very fruitful,” Kadi says. “I’ve realized that God is the one who provides me with the right environment and the right people.”

SEE ONE: Who Makes a Good Role Model

Michelle Cox wishes she could say that an influential, inspiring woman played a crucial role in identifying her leadership gifts and coaching her on her path toward the executive director role at Life Center in Tacoma, WA (www.life-center.org). As it was, much of her leadership experience was shaped by interacting with teachers and parents as principal of a private Christian school. “When you deal with people’s money and children there tends to be conflict,” Michelle says with a laugh. “But I see now how it gave me a lot of good experience dealing with conflict.”

After leaving the school, Michelle served as human resources director at Life Center until a new lead pastor began to expand her supervisory responsibilities. Lead Pastor Dean Curry has infused the 90-year-old church with new ideas about diversity in leadership, especially gender diversity.

“I really look for the best person for the job,” Dean says. “God doesn’t restrain who he blesses with leadership gifts, so why should I?” Dean reasons that more than 70 percent of his congregation is women, so in order to be effective in ministry, his church must have representative leadership. Therefore, in hiring decisions, he recruits both men and women as appropriate, according to their abilities. “As a church, how could you possibly become what God intended for you to be in the community if you limit more than half of your church body in using their gifts?” Dean says.

Other women executive leaders share similar stories of senior pastors who were advocates for them as fellow ministers in God’s kingdom and used every opportunity to encourage and develop their gifts.

Mary Carroll credits most of her opportunities and influences as a leader to men. “The mentors I had gave me special projects and called me to meetings where it would have been very easy to just exclude me,” Mary says. “The men that mentored me gave me those leadership opportunities.”

“I have more male mentors than women,” Judy agrees. “All of my sports coaches were men and all of my pastors have been men.” While she and other women leaders are thrilled to have relationships with female peers who cultivate and challenge them in various ways, prominent men have championed supervisory roles for a majority of the women leaders she knows. “Godly men don’t feel threatened and don’t mind calling out greatness in us,” she says.

In her church, the senior pastor sets a precedent for mentorship, says Jenni Catron, executive pastor at Cross Point Community Church in Nashville, TN (www.crosspoint.tv). She describes Senior Pastor Pete Wilson as a relational leader who devotes time to the spiritual growth and health of each of Cross Point’s multiple campus pastors. “Pete models it from the top,” she says, and each campus pastor then mentors his co-pastors and staff.

Sherry Surratt, Leadership Network Director, who recently hosted a Leadership Community for women in executive ministry roles, notes that the majority of women in executive positions attribute their position to their senior pastor or other male pastor identifying their leadership gifts and encouraging them to use their strengths
to benefit the church. ‘It’s amazing to talk to these gifted women, many of whom didn’t fully realize their own leadership potential until it was pointed out by someone they greatly respected.’ Sherry says. ‘Usually it was as simple as their pastor saying, ‘I see leadership gifts in you. Let’s give you an opportunity to use them on our staff.’”

Outside of the essential relationships with pastoral staff, finding a mentor inside one’s own church may not be feasible. Mary Carroll explains how this can create complications. “A lot of times you are dealing with things you are not at liberty to talk about with others in the organization,” she says. Mary suggests networking with peers in executive positions at nearby churches to provide guidance and support. Mary meets quarterly with a group of executive pastors in the Twin Cities to share ideas and experiences. “It helps to know you aren’t alone in what you are dealing with,” she says.

Still, Mary and Michelle are the only women who attend the executive pastor networking groups in their respective cities. “I always feel like the odd ‘man’ out,” Michelle shares. “I don’t think most men are receptive to having a mentee who is a woman.” Michelle envisions a potential mentor for her as being another executive leader at a church with a similar demographic and structure to her own.

In addition to its 90-year history and weekly attendance of over 4,000, Life Center has a Christian school and assisted living facility. “I appreciate start-up churches, but they don’t have the same issues as a church where there are 80-year-olds who have attended the same church their whole lives,” she says. “I’d like to try to find somebody who faces those dynamics.”

Tammy Kelley says one of the most common obstacles she encountered as church leader was how to gain an appropriate voice in a predominately male setting. “In some circles men were familiar and friendly to women in leadership, but in others being a woman was such an oddity that I had to learn the right balance,” she says. She didn’t want to hesitate her way out of participating in the conversation but she also didn’t want to offend her peers. In these early years, she says, a mentor’s guidance would have helped.

“I had to think strategically about who else was in the room, whether the timing and tone were right, and how familiar the group was with the female voice,” Tammy describes. When she was unsure of the disposition of her audience she will also state her thoughts in question form. “I had to determine what was okay to say as a declarative sentence, especially as I was learning my voice.”

At one time, Mary also found herself apprehensive about attending a
meeting where she thought others might resent her being there. Instead, she was welcomed by the group and overwhelmed by their willingness to accept her.

“The Lord is your CEO: he is the chairman of your board and he is the only one you have to think about,” she concludes. In meetings where Mary feels outnumbered or out of place, she says she strives to be humble and gracious about her position while still contributing to the decision-making process based on her professional responsibility. “A lot of women give their personal power away by seeking the approval of men, and biblically we are not supposed to do that,” she says.

Mary refers to Galatians 1:10, in which the apostle Paul asserts that servants of Christ must only seek God’s approval and not that of others. “Clearly scripture advocates wise counsel in planning,” Mary says. “However, abdication of our rights and responsibilities as Christian women currying favor or doing things to seek approval of men or of other women rather than the Lord is not upheld.”

Mary has witnessed some of her female counterparts give away their voice and decision-making authority out of fear of rejection, of being alone, of not being promoted. “Generally that fear is based on striving in our flesh and not trusting the Lord to handle whatever the situation is,” she says.

Mentoring is a practicable tool that can directly support young leaders learning to navigate such complex interactions between people of different sexes, generations and backgrounds, says Judy West.

Judy wants to strip away the intimidation factor for young women leaders searching for role models. She says one of the primary obstacles women see in approaching her as an executive pastor is that her authority feels intimidating. “You try to lead by intuition and figure out who you are leading,” Judy says, explaining that cultivating a healthy, personal relationship with her staff members is the best foundation for mentorship. By strategically investing in women, including learning what encourages and discourages them, Judy believes a mentoring relationship can naturally follow.

“I am always asking myself: how do I affirm and call out greatness in women?” she says. “And how do I continue to make sure others are being called to greatness?”

Kadi Cole, who now oversees the pastoral and operations staff of four campuses at Christ Fellowship, says she longed for a professional mentor during her 20s, while she was in college. “As a believer, I learned the phrase ‘we always need a Paul, a Timothy and a Barnabus,’” Kadi says, referring to the relationship between the three apostles. Paul served as a mentor to Timothy, and Timothy followed his example, while Barnabus served as Paul’s champion and encourager. “I have tried to keep those three concepts going in my life,” Kadi says, adding that there are seasons of life when one has greater opportunities to engage with such individuals.

Kadi’s “Paul” was a woman named Jill, who was a lay leader in Kadi’s home church and a spiritual mentor. While Kadi was still a teenager, Jill positioned herself to influence Kadi’s life. “I had raw skill or energy that made her interested in me as a leader in the church,” Kadi says. For nearly 20 years, Jill discipled Kadi in scripture and pushed her to discover answers to her questions in the Word. “She didn’t just assume the spiritual part would be taken care of,” Kadi says.

Because of Jill’s influence, when Kadi is designing leadership development curriculum for the pastoral and administrative staff at Christ Fellowship, she considers spiritual growth as the first priority. “Spiritual development is far more important to leadership than being wowed by anyone’s ‘woo’ factor,” Kadi says, referring to a popular book on strengths and gifts assessment. “And in the end, it really matters.” She believes a primary focus on spiritual growth is the key to any effective mentoring relationship among believers, whether it be a professional relationship or otherwise.

As an executive director, Kadi has her hands full just fulfilling her daily responsibilities, but she notes that the hot topic among her female colleagues is their responsibility toward the next generation. “I want to make sure I am helping young women leverage their leadership skills,” Kadi says.
Jenni Catron recalls a pivotal moment when she realized she needed to be more intentional about engaging the women around her. A few years ago, while having a cup of tea with a friend and co-leader at her church, Jenni’s friend told her: “what you do and how you steward your influence will directly affect the other women that come behind you.”

“It hit me right between the eyes,” Jenni says. “I thought I was too young to have any influence, but she stopped me in my tracks.”

The experience inspired Jenni to start Cultivate Her (www.cultivateher.com), an online community aimed at equipping women to lead effectively. Including a blog discussion board and monthly events, the community connects women with similar interests, pursuits and passions to dialogue about their experiences and receive encouragement and guidance.

“I may think I’m being humble when I say don’t have anything to give or share yet, but there’s a point where that is a false humility,” Jenni says. The truth is that every leader knows someone on one side who has more expertise and someone on the other who needs to be raised up and supported. “You are in the middle of a sandwich.”

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and online forums have transformed accessibility for leaders looking to connect with peers and role models. Women leaders are easily accessible between churches that may be on opposite ends of the country so long as they have a

“I thought I was too young to have any influence” says Jenni Catron.
webcam and a Skype account. Long-term, meaningful relationships can be built among people who may have never met otherwise. “I have tried to be intentional about my relationships online and then I get really excited about meeting those women at a conference,” Jenni says of her connections through Cultivate Her.

Michelle has also recognized the need to encourage professional mentorship for women within her church. When she redeveloped the women’s ministry at Life Center, Michelle included a new initiative called SHE Inc., aimed at professional women. The mission of the ministry, which is scheduled to launch in spring 2011, is to spiritually equip women to positively influence others in the marketplace. She hopes to discover women who are interested in developing their spiritual leadership role in the church.

On a personal level, Michelle meets casually with six younger women in various areas of the church’s leadership team. Although finding time and scheduling are continual challenges, she works to meet regularly to answer their questions about ministry situations and individual issues. She adds that mentorship from the top-down is not the only direction of influence among her group. “That would mean I have all the answers, and I don’t.” Michelle says. She sees her meetings with the young women leaders as reverse mentoring. “I can see things from their generational viewpoint, which is really valuable.”

Michelle sees future potential in the women and works to provide them with more leadership opportunities in the church. “I feel like because I didn’t have anybody to look up to, I want them to have not only a model but also a hands-on platform to do some things,” she says. “That’s why I developed SHE Inc.” Since behind-the-scenes staff leaders don’t generally get a chance to be up on stage during the weekends, Michelle sees SHE Inc. as an opportunity for the women to share their expertise in a relevant venue.

On a personal level, Jenni has also invested more time into the women on her church staff to demonstrate leadership qualities that influence her colleagues’ development. Jenni shares a story about a worship team singer at Cross Point who was struggling with comparing her gifts to those of others on the team. Jenni pressed in to learn more about the young woman’s insecurities. “I wondered if maybe she wasn’t creating as much space for women around her and was becoming territorial in her opportunities,” Jenni recalls.

As her relationship with Jenni developed, the singer opened up to Jenni about her struggle. “When I started to encourage her that God was using her gifts and affirmed what he was doing in her life, I started to see her become more open handed with the other women on her team.”

The singer gained the confidence to call up others to serve in worship leading opportunities. Jenni likened the situation to a positive snowball effect, where mentorship triggered an onslaught of generosity spreading across the ministry team. “It’s a little scary how much influence you can have,” she says. Such is the impact of mentorship.
About Leadership Network

Leadership Network’s mission is to accelerate the impact of 100X leaders. These high-capacity leaders are like the hundredfold crop that comes from seed planted in good soil as Jesus described in Matthew 13:8.

Leadership Network...
• explores the “what’s next?” of what could be.
• creates “ahah!” environments for collaborative discovery.
• works with exceptional “positive deviants.”
• invests in the success of others through generous relationships.
• pursues big impact through measurable kingdom results.
• strives to model Jesus through all we do.

Believing that meaningful conversations and strategic connections can change the world, we seek to help leaders navigate the future by exploring new ideas and finding application for each unique context. Through collaborative meetings and processes, leaders map future possibilities and challenge one another to action that accelerates fruitfulness and effectiveness. Leadership Network shares the learnings and inspiration with others through our books, concept papers, research reports, e-newsletters, podcasts, videos, and online experiences. This in turn generates a ripple effect of new conversations and further influence. Leadership Network is a division of OneHundredX, a global ministry with initiatives around the world. To learn more about Leadership Network go to www.leadnet.org.

About the Author

Meagan Taylor is a former newspaper journalist aspiring to use her skill to advance God’s kingdom. She lives with her husband near Boulder, CO., where the pair love to seek out new adventures in the wild and hang out with their friends.

Contact Us

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