

Guest editorial

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Banyan trees and banana trees

“Nothing grows under a banyan tree.” This South Indian proverb speaks of leadership styles. The banyan is a great tree. It spreads its branches, drops air-roots, develops secondary trunks and covers the land. A full grown banyan may cover more than an acre of land. Birds, animals and humans find shelter under its shade. But nothing grows under its dense foliage, and when it dies, the ground beneath lies barren and scorched.

The banana tree is the opposite. Six months after it sprouts, small shoots appear around it. At 12 months a second circle of shoots appear beside the first ones, now six months old. At 18 months the main trunk bears bananas which nourish birds, animals and humans, and then it dies. But the first offspring are now full grown, and in six months they too bear fruit and die. The cycles continue unbroken as new sprouts emerge every six months, grow, give birth to more sprouts, bear fruit and die.

Training followers. Many leaders are like banyan trees. They have great ministries, but when they pass from the scene, there are no leaders to step in their shoes because they have trained followers, not leaders.

It is gratifying to train followers. They are an appreciative audience that makes us feel important. They imitate our ways. They do not challenge our thinking, or go beyond our teaching.

It is easy to train followers. We decide what they should learn, and how they should learn it. We encourage them to raise questions, and we give the answers. We teach them to follow our directives and to guess our minds.

There is an immediate success in training followers. We can mobilize many to build our program. This approach is also efficient. It takes time to train followers, and to allow them to learn by making mistakes. But this success is short-range. When we depart, we leave sheep but no shepherds.

As husbands and wives, and as parents, it is easy for us to treat our spouses and children as followers — to demand that they obey us, and to think and behave as we do. As ministers it is easy to train our parishioners to be followers — to make them dependent upon a professional leadership to carry out the ministries of the church. As missionaries it is easy to treat native converts as followers — to not trust them as long as we are around, and to make certain they carry on the work as we do. In each case, we create dependent people, and kill the leadership

potential in others. Such spouses, children, parishioners and natives never grow up. To do so they must rebel against us.

Training leaders. Training leaders is less rewarding for our egos. We must teach people to think and decide on their own, to challenge our beliefs, and to argue with our decisions. When they take over, they will go beyond us, and take credit for their own growth.

Training leaders is more difficult. We must value their input and encourage a critique of what we say. We must grade them not on how much they agree with us, but how well they think. We do not ask them to guess our minds, and we avoid putting them down, even though their initial responses are naive and simplistic. We focus on problems they must solve rather than on fixed bodies of information.

Training leaders is less efficient in the short run because it takes time and effort which could be spent on the task. Decisions must be negotiated, plans constantly changed, and we must adjust our own schedules and goals. But it is more efficient in the long run. Our reward comes when we find ourselves surrounded by young leaders discovering new abilities, assuming new responsibilities, and raring to take over and go beyond us.

Spouses who encourage their husbands and wives to be leaders develop family styles of mutual submission. Parents who build their children as leaders begin early to teach them to think, and to treat them like young adults. Pastors who teach their laity to be leaders encourage Bible studies and lay initiatives in the ministries of the church. Missionaries who train nationals as leaders give them responsibilities early, and support their decisions. All must allow budding leaders the greatest privilege they allow themselves, namely the right to make mistakes.

Training leaders who train leaders.

Training leaders, however, is not enough. Too often we train leaders who, in turn, train followers. We teach them to think ideas, but not to build humans. They learn to use people to build programs, not programs to build people.

It is hardest of all to help young leaders to catch the vision of training leaders and to pass that vision on, but this is essential for a successful family, church and mission. Paul writes, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

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