Excerpts for Synergy – Ann Michel

9781501832550

#1

RECLAIMING THE SYNERGISTIC APPROACH



The church today faces tremendous challenges, and change is unlikely to come if we remain locked in an outdated mind-set about ministry. God is inviting us to enlarge our understandings of leadership and reimagine how the work of the church will be carried forward. God is inviting us to step away from culturally defined notions of ministry that equate it with position and profession, power and privilege, and to step back into God’s plan for how the mission of God is to be carried forward. God is inviting us to embrace a more inclusive, collaborative approach to minis- try that more fully engages lay servants, both paid and unpaid. I believe this is why the Spirit of God is calling so many lay persons to various types of ministry in this day.

• Synergistic ministry is a theological narrative that supports and affirms the growing diversity and fullness of ministry.

• Synergistic ministry understands that all ministry

originates with God. It isn’t the possession, privilege, or

prerogative of any human agent or institution.

• Synergistic ministry is an extension of the servanthood of Jesus, not a matter of position, power, or professional standing.

• Synergistic ministry is limitless because when ministry is properly defined as service, there can never be too much ministry or too many ministers.

• Synergistic ministry is predicated on the whole people of

God being called to serve God and one another.

• Synergistic ministry is inherently relational and collaborative. It never rests on the accomplishments of a solitary individual and can’t be reduced to a single office.

#2

ONE CALL

Unfortunately, well-intended Christians sometimes misin- terpret the meaning of their call. I’ve known leaders who refuse to deviate from their own personal agenda, saying, “I have to be faithful to my call.” And sadly, I’ve known leaders who use their call as a bully club to deflect criticism or pull rank on fellow church members. But our call from God isn’t a personal posses- sion or something that gives us special power or privilege. It’s not a spiritual entitlement that obliges others to defer to our author- ity. It’s a gift from God. It’s a sacred responsibility to be lived out not for ourselves but for others.

Sometimes we imagine that some people receive a calling of a different order or magnitude. For example, we assume the call to ordained ministry is a higher calling. And sometimes we think that people who experience God’s call in dramatic or direct ways are somehow “more called” or called to more worthy ministries. But in Christ’s body, no member is more or less essential than any other member, so each of our callings is equally important. There can be no hierarchy within God’s call. If some people experience God’s call more intensely or urgently, I sometimes jokingly sug- gest that it may just mean that God had to work harder to get their attention! Just as there is one body and one Spirit, one faith, one hope, and one baptism (Eph 4:4-16), there is also but one call. All are called. And all callings are equally important.

#3

For a long time, I’d been conditioned to think that there are task-oriented people who are good at getting things done and relationship-oriented people who prefer camaraderie to ac- complishment. However, experience has taught me that nothing could be further from the truth. Relationships are essential to accomplishing all but the simplest of tasks. And sharing in the ac- complishment of a mutual objective forges deep relational bonds. Task and relationship are not diametrically opposed. They are a mutually reinforcing element of synergy. The intrinsic strength of synergistic teamwork is that it unites task and relationship, mak- ing them two sides of the same coin.

Often, it’s our own sense of self-importance that prevents us from investing fully in the potential of relationships. But relation- ality is a gift from God. As we embrace the relational nature of ministry, we reflect more fully the image of the triune God who created us. And we enter into the relational space that nurtures and propels synergy.

#4

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of teams is that they embody shared leadership. Effective teams do not have a single dominant leader surrounded by a group of subordinates. A team is a collection of leaders.4 On truly high-functioning teams, there are no bystanders or onlookers. Everyone shares ownership in the responsibility and the outcomes, and everyone makes a contribution.5

For this reason, effective teams tend to be relatively small. Pat- rick Lencioni defines a team as three to twelve people who share common goals as well as rewards and responsibilities for achieving them.6 The exact number isn’t the point. But a team needs to be small enough that everyone matters. Everyone needs to be actively engaged.

When teams stay lean, members are more likely to get to know each other in a way that promotes mutual trust and collaboration. Everyone feels comfortable contributing to discussions, and every

voice is heard. In larger groups debate tends to supplant dialogue, and it’s more likely that a few dominant voices will prevail.

Because churches tend to place a high value on inclusiveness, they sometimes invite people to be part of teams even when they don’t have much to contribute. That’s a lovely gesture in a Sunday school class or a fellowship group. But on a team with serious leadership responsibilities, it can be a hindrance. Remember, Jesus cared for and related to a multitude of people. He had hundreds of followers. But only twelve were part of his leadership team.

Another critical factor in creating an environment of shared leadership is having distinct, differentiated roles for each member of the team. “For cooperation to succeed,” according to leader- ship experts Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, “tasks must be de- signed so that every person contributes something unique and independent to the final outcome. All individuals must clearly understand that unless they each contribute whatever they can, the team fails.”7 Motivation, buy-in, and accountability are en- hanced when each team member knows the group’s success de- pends on their efforts.

Think of a baseball team. The pitcher knows what he or she needs to do, and so does the catcher. They don’t do the same thing. But each is important, and they rely on each other to play their part. Or recall once more Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians

12, God’s blueprint for synergistic teamwork: “The eye can’t say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you,’ or in turn, the head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’” (1 Cor 12:21 CEB). The body of Christ, just like a human body, can only function properly when each of our organs does what it was designed to do. Members of Christ’s body are united under the headship of Christ, and team members

with different, distinct roles and complementary skills and abili- ties are united by a shared passion for their mission.

#5

A POSITIVE FRAME OF MIND

An appeal is most effective when offered in a bold, forthright, and confident manner. Yet some people seem to have an inherent level of personal discomfort when they approach the task of ask- ing. At an emotional level, they’re back on the high school dance floor, tongue-tied, awkward, and fearing rejection. I understand this emotional anxiety because I’ve been there. But then I realized I wasn’t selling cars or magazine subscriptions. I was asking people to be part of something really important, so there was no need for embarrassment. If your ministry is important enough for you to devote your time, energy, and resources, why would you hesitate to ask someone else to join you? After all, regardless of your min- istry focus, you are inviting people to be part of God’s mission through the church.

If you’re reticent about asking people to get involved in a min- istry or to support it financially, think about these questions: Why is it important to you? Why is it important to them? And why is it important to God? Then practice articulating an ask that conveys this importance. Say it aloud until you can express it convincingly.

Even if the person you’re asking can’t respond positively, they’ll come away from the encounter admiring your commitment.

Attaining the proper state of mind also means staying positive. Even if nine people decline your invitation to chair the hospital- ity team, you must approach the tenth person with just as much enthusiasm and grace as the first. It’s tempting to fall back on ap- peals to guilt or obligation, but they motivate few, if any, people. Expressing desperation doesn’t work either. It communicates that your ministry is struggling and marginal. No one wants to jump on board a project that is spiraling downward. People want to be part of something vibrant, exciting, and hopeful. Enthusiastic, positive asking will attract enthusiastic, positive people.

#6 – Mastering Meetings

clergy friend, as he headed into his umpteenth meeting of the week, joked, “Have you heard the one about the pas- tor who died and went to heaven? His tombstone read,

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‘He never has to attend another meeting.’ ” I replied, only half- jokingly, “What do you think the saints are doing in glory?” If we really believe Christ’s promise “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them” (Matt 18:20 CEB), then our meetings should be holy ground—places where the Holy Spirit can act among us because the people of God have gathered in common purpose. Yet most church leaders dread meetings be- cause they are so often boring, frustrating, and unproductive. But synergistic leaders understand that meetings can and should be positive, productive venues for advancing God’s mission through the church. They learn how to master meetings.

#7

Someone once asked me what it was like to work for my church. “Well,” I replied, “the really wonderful thing is that every- thing is a matter of principle. But the really difficult thing is that everything is a matter of principle.” Church life is most motivat- ing and rewarding when we engage at the level of our deepest pas- sions. This is one factor that contributes to synergy. But passion can also give rise to intransigence, self-righteousness, and myopia, all of which can fuel conflict. In an emotionally charged environ- ment, personality conflicts or disputes can absorb so much of our energy that they eclipse our ability to stay focused on the ministry to which God calls us. And systemic conflict can distract a whole congregation from its true mission. If you find yourself in a situation where you think you need to be fighting a battle, scoring points, or ousting someone who doesn’t see things the way you do, it’s time for a reality check. During a major conflict in my church, I developed a simple, daily mantra. I told myself, “Keep your head down and do your job.” Other members of the church take their cues from how those on staff and in leadership respond to a conflict. So make sure your actions communicate the importance of staying focused on the mission.

#8 – Keep Things in Perspective

When we take on the leadership of a particular ministry, we often expect thanks and praise. After all, we’re not doing it for our own sake but for the benefit of the church and to serve God. But the fact of the matter is whenever you take up the mantle of leadership, you become a lightning rod for criticism, whether it’s deserved or not. It just goes with the territory. So it’s important not to take things too personally. Again, this is easier said than done. But I’ve found that it does get easier with time and practice.

One of the benefits of cultivating some emotional objectiv- ity in the face of criticism is that it allows us to learn from what’s going on. Even if a complaint is truly unwarranted, it’s helpful to consider what might have given rise to it. When we do our best to remain objective and take the perspectives of others seriously, conflicts and complaints can help us adapt to the realities of our ministry context and grow in positive ways. It’s a type of feedback that can help us develop as synergistic leaders.

#9 Feeding Your Soul

A common challenge among church workers, whether clergy or lay, is that their job responsibilities can prevent them from drawing spiritual sustenance from the worship and community life within the congregation they serve. If you’re leading children’s activities or responsible for hospitality, you may never darken the door of the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. If you’re running the soundboard, the finer points of the sermon may be lost on you. If you’re in the chancel directing the choir, you may long for the opportunity to worship in the pew alongside your spouse or fam- ily members. And if you’re in charge of facilities, you’re probably praying with one eye open, knowing that news of an overflowing toilet could come at any time. Similarly, if you’ve moved from the congregation into a staff role, participating in the same groups and classes may no longer feel right. Whatever the reason, if your

spiritual thirst is no longer quenched by the normal activities of your church, you need to drink from a different well.

Congregations with larger staffs will often integrate prayer, Bible study, spiritual formation, and even regular worship into the ongoing work of their staff team. And the pastor or another expe- rienced staff member may take the lead in mentoring the spiritual development of other team members. Some staffs function as a covenant group, with clear expectations around mutual account- ability, communication, and spiritual growth.1

But other ministry professionals find that they need to look beyond the congregation for spiritual sustenance. I know church workers who attend evening services in other faith communities so that they can worship without the distraction of feeling respon- sible for what’s going on. Others seek out retreats, pilgrimages, or learning events sponsored by other religious organizations. It’s also important to redouble your commitment to personal spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, Scripture reading, fasting, journaling, or meditation. Tending your own soul will not only add credibility to your spiritual leadership, it will also be a powerful example to other laity in your congregation. For this reason, personal growth and development are vital, yet often overlooked, factors in synergy. When we take our own leadership and spiritual growth seriously, we become models for others in the church, particularly other laity.