

THE STUCK SYNDROME

ARTICLE 8: EMPOWERING OTHERS

God often moves most powerfully through the smallest of vessels. He catches us off guard and penetrates our hardened minds and hearts through the weak and the small. We have seen this pattern before- with all the grand portals of this world, the power of galaxies lay in a simple manger. So as we look around us, we should begin to expect that God may move most powerfully in the most unlikely people. Are we nurturing this possibility?

According to the research of Christian Schwarz of Natural Church Development, the most comprehensive church study in the world (www.cundp.de or for information in Japan contact Ishihara Yoshito, office@icbc.net), the dominant weakness in churches worldwide is: empowering leadership. Fortunately, this very factor is also considered the easiest and most swift to improve upon, being that change relies predominantly upon one person, as opposed to the whole church.

Why is this problem?" Is it pride in the leader making him overrate his importance? Is it fear of losing control, fear of seeing a job done poorly, or possibly, fear of seeing a job done better? Or is the problem in a people who have been taught, inadvertently, that they are unlikely harbors of divine breakthrough; that they are merely poor little sheep.

Perhaps we have lost sight of the fact that empowering leadership is what God's method is all about. Outrageously, God dispenses authority and power to people- creatures who are entirely inadequate and untrustworthy. God's immense freedom in this regard is one of His irresistible oddities. Ludicrously, He includes us all in the most important tasks of eternity. But at some point, many of us who receive His power, get overly possessive of it. We think we are uniquely qualified, and forget how dispensable we are. We skew our theology to think that ministry, and priesthood, are for the few, instead of for the whole body of believers. So where did we get this model of clergy doing all the big stuff? What could these inflated views be saying about our theology? Do we really serve a God who empowers, a God who entrusts, who takes reckless risks, or do we serve something else?

At some point we must realize that the need is far too big for us. We are too small to stay in control, and still have even a modest impact. When we begin to lose control, greater things can begin to happen, horizons that were too far to be traversed are now easily in range. Inner struggles, that seemed so murky, are also suddenly exposed to new

potential. Celia Hahn comments that, in the Alban Institutes work with congregations, they have found that “out of control moments are moments when a life-giving possibility might break through: new insight, a new direction, new power to move out of a stuck place” might occur.

One of our supporting churches in Oregon, East Hill Foursquare, is an out-of-control church. There is guidance but no control. Oregon is a challenging place to minister, it is in the most un-churched region of the US. But something phenomenal has been happening. Last year, Paul Duris, our youth pastor, came across a startling statistic. Studies show that the chances of someone coming to Christ when they are 5-13 years old is 40%, but from age 14-18 it drops drastically to a mere 4% chance, and 19-death is still only 6%. Not long after this, Paul had a vision about a net being cast into the sea, it was not a net made of rope, but of children, and those children were catching hands of other children lost in the depths. A little later, a motto came into his head: “1,000 kids in the year 2,000”, and he ordered 1,000 follow up books in preparation.

When the boxes of books came little children made a circle around the books, covered them with a net and prayed, “Jesus, empty these boxes. Save a thousand kids this year. Help us be a net for you. Amen.” These same kids were then trained in how to share their faith and lead friends in salvation prayers. Paul waited to see what would happen. Soon stories of playground conversions began to pour in every week. Children shared stories, with tears in their eyes, about leading their friends to Christ all over town. One boy took Paul to his “playground mission field” and said, “My friend told me that he didn’t know Jesus. He said that his mom and dad have been talking about becoming Christians. I asked him and he said, ‘Yeah, I really want to be a Christian.’ So I prayed with him. A couple days later, another one of my friends did the same thing. Then there were three of us. Later I led two other people to Christ at the same spot. Then their brothers and sisters wanted to know Christ, and I kind of talked to them too. Now there are eight kids that have become Christians.” The evangelist in this story is 8 years old.

On December 6th last year, they passed the 1,000 mark, and by the end of the year it was 1,039. Little kids are changing their world- who would be better qualified than they.

But God goes even further than that. Fourteen years ago I came to Japan to minister at Rokudaigaku. I had dreams of leading future CEOs and prime ministers to Christ. God had other plans.

At Okachimachi Christian I was asked to disciple just one boy. A boy without a bright future. Shotaro was a teen who was not just blind but also mentally handicapped. I

estimated that mentally he would probably never be more than 5 years old. Not a great prospect for changing the world. But looking back now, I see my own ambition with shame, and I see Shotaro with admiration.

Each Sunday we would go up on the soot stained roof of the office building where the church met in Ueno and I would tell him Bible stories. We would also sing songs. His favorite was Shu Wa Subarashii (God is so Good). I taught Shotaro truth and he taught me love- in cold gray Tokyo, he loved me enthusiastically. There is nothing greater than love.

While in Japan last August I hear Shotaro was doing very badly. Before I left for Narita, I went to visit him in the hospital. . There lay my poor friend, emaciated like a victim of Auschwitz, with tubes hanging out. His joints bulged in comparison to his stick-like limbs. The playful personality was gone, he was merely hanging on.

I had brought fancy jellies, which before he would have happily slurped down, but his mother told me he could no longer eat. Besides that, he could no longer sit or stand or walk. And the mouth that used to laugh and joke, could no longer talk. The one thing my own deaf daughter lacked was all he had, he could hear, but all else was lost. Inside a broken body, tightly shackled in a prison of darkness, lay a five year old little boy The look in his parents eyes I shall never forget- an indescribable agony- to watch the child you love slowly, and painfully disintegrate.

I talked to him, I prayed for him, and it was like facing a stone wall. But then his father hoisted him up on the edge of the bed and braced him so we could sit side by side. Taking hold of his stiffened hand, with the fingers permanently clawed outward, I began to slowly sing our old tune, “Shu wa subarashii, Shu wa subarashii, Shu wa subarashii, watashi no Shu”. I almost lost it, but somehow got through singing those seemingly inappropriate words. Afterward, his parents wheeled him down to the entrance to bid me farewell. And then, as I parted, Shotaro managed to get one stiffened arm up to say good bye. As I turned to leave I did lose it. My eyes streamed all the way back to the train station.

Shotaro died last week. He is finally free. But I will miss him. . And I find myself in a similar scenario to Henri Nouwen- healed by someone “who had few or no words and considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society.” Who was the real minister in this story? That is humiliatingly obvious. The simple and broken boy taught the highly trained, educated, and mistakenly motivated missionary. I am immensely grateful to have encountered the heart of God through my vulnerable friend..

God moves most powerfully through the smallest and the weakest. Let us begin to look for Him in the most unlikely places. Let us open the door to that power.