

Book review

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Fruitful leaders: how to make, grow, love and keep them, Marcus Honeysett, IVP, 2011, 216pp, £8.99

There is a lot to like about this book and much that is helpful. There is also one aspect of the book which is quite unhelpful.

It takes some of the excellent principles of Christian leadership from the Scriptures which are usually found in books mainly for pastors and applies them into a much wider definition of leadership roles. There is a great emphasis laid on spiritual development, of knowing the Lord better and of growing in spiritual character. It is made plain that a servant spirit is necessary for anyone to use their gifts well. This makes the book suitable for those aspiring to leadership and those wishing to help and encourage them.

The book has clear structure and content. It is probably best used as a study resource for individuals or groups. There are lots of headings and sub headings and plenty of bullet points. Whether you will warm to this style is a matter of taste but it allows a short book to cover a lot of ground. Each chapter has questions and checklists with an emphasis on practical application of the points raised. Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 comprise of a spiritual and a practical review respectively. The questions are thoughtful and thorough, but using the book with a mentor or friend would be especially important or such analysis could turn into introspection.

The book is immensely practical and the author's zeal is evident throughout. He wants us to read and then get up and get on with it: There are things to do and steps to take; there is a good balance between encouraging thoughtfulness and urging action. While the questions may make us think, we are not left floating about wondering what to do with fine-sounding principles. Clear programmes are outlined with progress and growth clearly targeted. Every so often I thought that this emphasis was about to go too far – the lists and questions do have some things in common with self-help books with multiple steps to achieving your goals. However, the author draws us back from this by also reminding us of the divine nature of the church and that this is about relationships more than programmes; we learn by observing others and we teach by bringing others into our ministries and our lives.

In this way the book is deliberately spiritual – the head of the church is Christ who has chosen to work through this human organisation. The purpose of the church is the glory of the Lord and the good of His people. Programmes which are well-planned and well-run are important and are encouraged but there is an acknowledgement that they can't work on their own; detached from the source that is Jesus and lacking his love, the programmes would be useless. There is a realistic optimism and a desire that faith will lead to action and this faith is clearly rooted in the Scriptures; those being trained should give good attention to knowing the Scriptures and to believing and applying them. The reality of sacrifice in service is also made plain. This is important and necessary for a book which loves using words like 'vibrant' and 'growth'. Without the reminder about trials and hindrances and Appendix 4's list of leadership killers then there could be a danger of tripping into a success-based theology defined by management strategy, positive thinking and numerical growth. Thankfully these are avoided.

There were a couple of highlights for me. I particularly liked the definition of spiritual leadership on p31 as *'working with people for their progress and joy in God, because you want churches and believers to overflow with happiness in Jesus Christ.'* This balances what might otherwise be seen as a formulaic or prescriptive approach. I also appreciated the emphasis throughout, and particularly in chapter 9, on the responsibility of the whole church in the development of leaders. Christians must learn to be followers and disciples and to urge their leaders to train and disciple them.

With much that is so positive it is a little surprising to find something of a critical and negative undercurrent in the book. It is as if zeal sometimes overflows into frustration. Let me give you an example: Chapter 8 outlines the dire shortage of new leaders and the impending doomsday scenario of most leaders retiring in fifteen years. Having included this, it should have been backed up by some statistics and some analysis of history and culture. If the contention is true then we need to know the roots of the problem. If true, we should take notice, but what is the point of criticising those who are interested enough in the subject that they have bought this book?

This negativity also emerges in the illustrations which outline more problems than solutions. They are also anecdotal, over-simplified and, at least sometimes, fictitious. The first is about Karen, for whom the book is apparently written. She is a young woman struggling to find help in developing her service for the Lord. However, she is not real. This seemed a little odd. Surely there must be some real examples out there somewhere? Anecdotes like these face the danger of being modified to make the point rather than generating real questions to be addressed. There are several negative caricatures such as the pastor-led, one-man-band church, the inward looking pastoral church or the useless academic trained at Bible College. These are not accurate or helpful. Of much greater use would have been real life, detailed case studies from the author's experience. This could have included an analysis of what can be achieved in the short, medium and long term; an honest assessment of the highs and lows of training leaders and the lessons learned from mistakes he has made along the way.

This critical spirit seems strangely out of place with the positive atmosphere of the rest of the book. Not wanting to make the same error, I will positively reaffirm that there is much that is useful in this book. For those who recognise the need for leadership training but don't know where to start, there is a lot of help to be found. For the many churches already engaged in this work, the book is a focussed resource. It will help you to assess, clarify and organise the work you are doing.

Finally, I will conclude with a small paradox which occurred to me as I drew to an end of this review. The vision behind the book sees individuals walking with others with the purpose of growing them as disciples and encouraging them into leadership of various kinds. This can be helped by a book but not accomplished by it. The real proof of the author's ministry and of any current leader who takes this vision to heart will be among those we already know and will know. It will be among those we personally identify, encourage and train and ultimately among the next group who are trained in turn by them. If the Lord blesses such training then the church will be amply provided for.