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Book Review: Becoming A Healthy Team: 5 Traits of Vital Leadership

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Becoming A Healthy Team: 5 Traits of Vital Leadership

Reviewed by Michael Luster

Macchia, Stephen A. Becoming A Healthy Team: 5 Traits of Vital Leadership. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005. 190 pp.

Dr. Stephen Macchia has a well-established reputation in the field of team ministry. He is founding president of Leadership Transformations, Inc, which provides guidance for pastors, and leaders of ministry teams in areas of decision-making and spiritual formation. He also serves as the director of the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Dr. Macchia speaks from a wide range of direct ministry experience which he describes in the introduction: "My experience is working with people of all ages (children, youth, and adults) from many backgrounds (socioeconomic, political, religious, and ethnic) in a variety of settings (small, medium, and large churches, as well as small, medium, and large ministries)...for nearly thirty years" (17).

In the opening chapters, Macchia develops his operational definition of a ministry team forming the basic structure of his thought: "A Christian ministry team is a manageable group of diversely gifted people who hold one another accountable to serve joyfully together for the glory of God by: sharing a common mission, embodying the loving message of Christ, accomplishing meaningful ministry, and anticipating transformative results" (41). Furthermore, Macchia states that the underlying premise of his book is that believers "should build ministry teams that foster community and cooperation instead of embracing a corporate mindset that leads to competition among members and with other churches, ministries, or teams" (25). In his book, Macchia sets out to define the basic purpose and nature of a ministry team and offers five primary indicators of health as

guiding principles in the process of becoming a healthy team. Macchia's thesis involves the view that healthy ministry teams are teams that trust, empower, assimilate, manage, and serve.

In support of this thesis, Macchia writes that if a team is to be healthy it must have a strong bond of trust between members. According to Macchia, a healthy team builds trust through the practice of effective communication, arranging times of celebration with members and learning how to manage conflict in a manner that promotes the edification of everyone involved. Macchia claims that a healthy team is a team whose members are empowered through diverse giftings from the Holy Spirit. He offers his paraphrase of 1 Cor 12: "For we were all baptized into one Spirit into one *team*" (76). He argues that as followers of Christ, we are called by God to be "interdependently interwoven into a spirit of unity and collaboration with one another" (94).

In the closing chapters, Macchia writes that a healthy team must learn to manage well. He claims that effective management skills are fostered through such efforts as strategic planning, systematic administration, and proper goal setting. The final trait Macchia includes as necessary to form a healthy team is that of service. Here Macchia follows Paul's teaching about the body of Christ in 1 Cor 12 in its description of a believer's rightful motivation for service. He emphasizes the biblical teaching of love as the sole source of motivation for a believer's service.

The chief strength of the book is found in the manner in which Macchia makes his case that a ministry team is merely the body of Christ at work. He paraphrases 1 Cor 12:12, replacing the word *body* with *team*: "The *team* is a unit though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one *team*" (31). Though a formal change of translation may not in order, the team concept appears consistent with the biblical author's use of *soma*.

Macchia describes how the environment of ministry team experience can be the very arena in which the Spirit does a transformative work within each team member. Macchia has taken the business end of things, the administrative duties, staff meetings, budget reports, things so often compartmentalized in a "non-spiritual" category and brought them into an integrated whole of ministry within the body of Christ. Macchia describes the way he concretely practices this on one particular team:

The first priority of our team is to maintain the discipline of sharing our spiritual lives with one another. When we meet as a team, our first order of business is to hear about our spiritual journeys...We tend to spend between 30 to 50 percent of our meeting time caring for the health

of each other's soul...Without parallel, this single decision has become the glue that helps our team experience unprecedented unity...We have recognized that everything of value will come out of these shared experiences (60, 61).

He explains how even tedious business tasks can be carried out in an environment where team members experience significant spiritual growth as a result. He shows how all aspects of ministry work can serve to deepen intimacy with God and with the community of believers.

Another strength of Macchia's work is its simplicity and practicality. Macchia avoids unnecessary abstractions, rhetorical flare and church jargon as he speaks with clarity and authenticity. His writing gives every indication that his primary audience is comprised of those serving "in the trenches." Macchia claims that since teams are an extension of the body of Christ, spiritual formation can penetrate every aspect of ministry work. With this in mind, he offers a clear structure for staff meetings that includes group devotional readings as well as plans for staff retreats. While maintaining this emphasis however, Macchia recognizes that in order to provide for both the care of souls and an efficient discharge of the shared ministry work, at some point during the meeting there must be a shift toward procedural guidelines such as *Robert's Rules of Order* that enable excellence in organization (62).

Macchia underscores his points regarding healthy team practice by providing several practical tools. For help in discerning each team member's most effective role in ministry Macchia offers the *DESIGN* tool from New Hope Christian Fellowship that helps to identify each team member's giftings. In the closing chapters, he gives a detailed description of a team covenant he implemented at Gordon-Conwell that includes the responsibilities of the team member to the team as well as what the individual team member can expect from the entire team and leadership.

In addition to its clarity and practicality, Macchia's work has great relevancy for ministry teams operating in North America and elsewhere in view of current cultural realities. His guiding principles address various needs identified by church growth experts as largely unmet by the church in the twenty-first century. In a discussion of ways church leadership must respond to address recent cultural shifts, professor of church growth, Eddie Gibbs echoes Macchia's sentiments:

Leadership is about connecting, not controlling. It's

about bringing people together for the purpose of creative synergy. Because the information age is fast paced and knowledge and experience are highly diversified, leaders of the emerging church recognize their need to operate in a team context. Team based ministry allows them to draw strength from each other and to contribute to the common good from their God-endowed gifts and life experience. Discipling doesn't occur in isolation but in communities where there is encouragement and mutual accountability. The same is true in ministry; it flows from authentic community.¹

Macchia claims that those living in this present culture desire community, "authentic, holistic, loving, we-need-each-other community" (97). He explains that the team grows healthier as it becomes a community of people assimilated by love and not just a group brought together to perform a duty" (98). Furthermore, Macchia connects with the predominate culture by incorporating insights gleaned from the field of team research.

While Macchia's work is supported by a sound biblical basis, it may benefit from greater clarity in some of its theological and missiological implications. One such example is the point at which Macchia establishes the chief mission of every believer and thus of the ministry team: "Our priority mission is intimacy with God, and our secondary mission is intimacy and authenticity in community with the family of God. When each team member keeps intimacy with God in the forefront, the end result will be a spiritually healthy team" (24). Given the context of the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ there is surprisingly little clear mention of the Great Commission. Macchia specifically refers to the Great Commission once and this only in a series following "the Great Commandment" (love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength) and "the Great Compassion" (love your neighbor as yourself) (104).

In the introduction of his book, Macchia poses the question, "What is the glue that holds the team together?" answering with the statement: "It is the calling of teams to a particular missional purpose" (19). Yet he never specifically articulates the Church's well-defined missional purpose that takes precedence over and informs all other objectives. The same biblical witness recording the words, "This is eternal life that they may know you and Jesus Christ whom you have sent," also states, "This is love for God: obey his commands" (Joh 17:3, I Joh 5:3). Macchia's context is one of ministry work and ministry mission. Scripture is clear that the *mission* of the church and thus of every ministry team is found in Christ's mandate for the church to go into all the world

and make disciples (Matt 28.18-20). Obedience to this mandate is one of the most fundamental ways we demonstrate our love for God and is inseparable from pursuit of intimacy with him. If there is any merit to the claim that healthy teams accomplish their purpose, Macchia's book would benefit by his including a clear statement as to the biblical purpose of a ministry team followed by discussion of how obedience to this purpose relates to the health of a team. In my view, this would further validate and provide a clearer context for his five indicators of health.

Reviewer

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NOTES

1. Eddie Gibbs. *LeadershipNext*. Downers Grove, (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2005), p. 106.