Identifying and developing church leaders is as old as Ephesians 4 and as new as a Starbucks barista helping laypeople embrace new ministries.

A growing contingent of United Methodist clergy and laity cite Paul’s declaration in Ephesians to guide their ministry with others in the congregations.

The apostle wrote, “The gifts (Christ) gave were that some would be apostles, some pastors, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Ephesians 4:11-12 (NRSV)

“We are attempting to equip pastors for equipping,” says the Rev. Sharon Schwab, superintendent of the Indiana District in the Western Pennsylvania Conference, “That’s not really what pastors are trained to do.” Schwab cites Ken Blanchard’s leadership and management material as a major influence.

“Equipping” is also heard frequently in conversations about leadership with the Rev. Derek Jacobs and the Rev. Troy Bowers.

“Our staff has really bought into this vision of moving from being a pastored-centered or staff-centered church to being an equipping-centered church,” said Bowers, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Salina, Kan. “At staff meetings we challenge each other: ‘Are you being a doer of tasks or a developer of people?’”

Equipping begins early

One key way to ingrain an “equipping” mindset throughout the congregation is to plant leadership seeds—grounded in a deep awareness of one’s spiritual gifts—as soon as people show up.

The Rev. James Pond, who serves in Schwab’s district as pastor of First United Methodist Church of Punxsutawney, observes, “The business of developing and nurturing and training leaders really begins with people as they come into the church. Every time we do a new members’ class we invite existing members to walk alongside them. This is giving us better insights into the gifts that people have, where they can fit into the ministry of the church or inspire the church to do some new things.”

In this same spirit, all new members at Salina First work through the S.H.A.P.E. (Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality and Experiences) process pioneered by the Rev. Rick Warren at Saddleback Church in California. They then meet with a “consultant” — essentially, a layperson trained by a core equipping team of other laypeople — who helps them find a best-fit ministry. The consultants apply principles from a book by Sue Mallory, book The Equipping Church (Zondervan).

Jacobs, who serves the recently launched South Campus of St. Luke Community United Methodist Church in Dallas, uses a spiritual partners ministry to equip new members to become leaders in the church. A team of laypeople helps people plug in where they perceive God is leading them. Formal gift inventories are only a small part of the process. Jacobs contends, “Most people know where God has gifted them.”

Sang Kim, a member of Chicago’s Journey Community Church (a new United Methodist congregation composed primarily of young Korean-Americans), co-facilitates a small group of 20-somethings. He became involved in leadership when the Rev. Daniel Park, co-pastor with his wife, the Rev. Isaiah Park, “just kind of asked me. He saw some qualities in me. (Park) tries to figure out what our talents are, what our passions in life basically are.”

In her Western Pennsylvania district, Schwab uses four Bible passages that address spiritual gifts in depth to begin exploring the topic. “We work on what gifts are listed in the Bible. How are they visible in our world...
today? Which ones do you see in the people around you?” Schwab says she will sometimes use an inventory to confirm others’ gifts, and is particularly fond of “The Spiritual Gifts Profile with DISC Personality Overview” (The Institute for Motivational Living).

**Teach, train, trust**

Formal training and on-the-job learning further equip the new leaders after they have discerned and embraced their gifts.

The Rev. Brittany Isaac embraces experiences as she plants the Andersonville congregation of Chicago’s Urban Village Church, a new United Methodist congregation. Working with a core of 15 individuals, Isaac and the team brainstormed their mission and potential partners. One team member, Scott, showed an interest in learning more. Isaac took him on a tour of several organizations and had him present his findings to the full core. Two other members, Aiden and Maggie, have organized community events, such as a food pantry fundraiser.

Isaac’s passion and talent for developing leaders were brewed as a manager at Starbucks, where she empowered her assistant managers to run the store.

“All I got to do what I loved, which was talking to customers and looking at the big picture view of what’s going on. As a result, I had a very good track record of promoting assistant managers to store managers and shift managers to assistant managers,” says Isaac, who moved from manager back to part-time barista once she began serving the Andersonville plant.

Park notes leaders such as Kim “might need help figuring out certain things. They ask a whole bunch of questions. I don’t just throw them in the water and say ‘sink or swim.’” However, Journey Church also gathers...