Equipping Leaders Conference explores valuable leadership lessons through childhood toys

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What does Slinky Dog have to do with church leadership? How do Little Green Army Men, Play-Doh, and Lego bricks relate to adult discipleship?
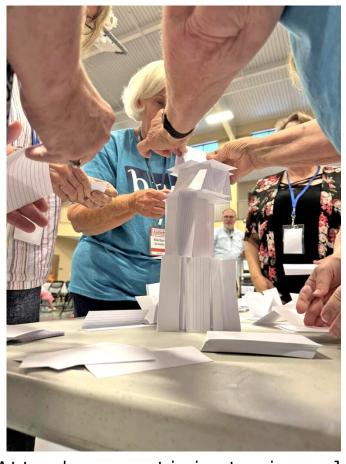
August 16 – 17, the Equipping Leaders conference and WMU Annual Meeting trained 200 leaders in men's, women's, multicultural, and WMU (all age-level) ministries. Dr. Ron Hunter Jr., Executive Director and CEO of D6 Family Ministry, led the general sessions in lessons through his book, "Toy Box Leadership,"in which the toys of childhood illustrate important examples of healthy leadership.

Hunter earned his PhD from the Cook School of Leadership at Dallas Baptist University, where he is also an adjunct professor teaching family ministry and leadership. Walking through a few of the examples in his book, Hunter included interactive illustrations inspired by Jesus' own use of visuals throughout His teachings.

Demonstrated through a "Game of Mercy," in which two players grip one another's hands until one surrenders under the tight pressure, Hunter emphasized that threatening or insistent force is *not* leadership. "Leadership," explained Hunter, "casts a vision and causes people to *want* to do it.

"Firstly, what we're trying to do for our churches is help them to identify and face problems in order to find and adopt

a solution. Secondly, what we want to do as leaders in the church is help our congregation see what happens if we don't follow Christ. In most parts of the country, our congregations are aging. We're suffering from pastoral shortages. People are not living out their faith because the culture is influencing them more than they are influencing the culture, because we have not talked on the base problems that we have."

Through the imagery of Little Green Army Men, each toy soldier holding a special purpose, Hunter encouraged leaders "to know their people" and invite them into roles which engage with their personalities and skillsets. With Slinky Dog, he showed the audience how a driven leader with great intentions may "overstretch" his team by chasing a vision too quickly, resulting in a congregation dragging behind and unwilling to move forward without a similar fervor. Similarly, a Slinky can be permanently broken and bent out-of-shape if one side overextends ahead of the other.

Hunter also tasked four artists around

Attendees participate in a leadership exercise at the th

Equipping Leaders conference Aug. 17 at Brandon Church, Brandon. (Photo credit: Tammy Anderson)

e room to create a Play-Doh picture in a matter of minutes, then used this illustra

tion as an example for mentors to remain moldable, and not become hardened and th

us unusable. Finally, with Lego bricks, Hunter displayed the importance of connec

tion within a group, that so much more can be built together than singularly.

"If we want a strong church, we need strong families in our church," said Hunter. "If you want to see discipleship really

occur, take time to train parents and the adults in the church to practice discipleship when they're not in church. I call that your ministry multiplier. In your leadership position, you may sometimes feel the pressure and responsibility to do it all. Your job is *not* to do it all. Your job is to equip others to help do it with you, shoulder to shoulder. You should be challenging yourself to do *less* ministry by helping others do *more* ministry, by modeling it with them."

Hosting the conference was Terrie Harwood, President of the Mississippi WMU; Tammy Anderson, MBCB Executive Director-Treasurer of the Mississippi Women's Ministries/WMU; Paula Smith, MBCB Director of Multicultural Ministries; Dwayne Parker, MBCB Director of Discipleship/Sunday School; and Brandon Baptist Church.

Breakout sessions included cultivating an authentic generation of men's leaders, learning biblical insight into discipleship, growing a multigenerational women's ministry, crossing cultural borders, raising children on mission, and more.

Church leaders also learned about the National WMU's challenge for all churches to participate in building a houseboat out of 47,000 craft stick units, with each stick representing a church in the Southern Baptist Convention. The interactive craft is intended to teach children and church members about the Cooperative Program.

Guests explored missions and ministry exhibits located around the church, including the WorldCrafts Market, a WMU compassion ministry which meets the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of impoverished people around the globe. Mission-minded teamwork was put to the test with the collaborative escape room experience, "Escape to the GREAT PURSUIT," hosted by IMB missionaries.

Not only did guests enjoy the delicious lunch provided by MS Baptist Disaster Relief workers, but they also had the

opportunity to tour the equipment which MS Baptists use to help our communities in times of crisis.

At the WMU Annual Meeting, Harwood introduced the new missional theme, "What Joy!" followed by a joyful time of worship led by Kris Smith, MBCB's Worship Ministries Director. Marilyn Graves, Executive Director-Treasurer of the Baptist Nursing Fellowship, and Libby Panter, missionary to Kenya, shared their passion for God's work and encouraged attendees to "live sent." The WMU business meeting was called to order, nominating Harwood as WMU President, Ann Stone as Vice President, and Ann Rials as Secretary for 2025. The meeting concluded with a challenging message from Brian Crawford, Pastor of City Light Church, Vicksburg.

The Mississippi Baptist Convention and Mississippi WMU want to thank Brandon Baptist Church for hosting the conference and tirelessly serving their brothers and sisters in Christ so they could enjoy an easy and effective weekend.