

Leadership in the Church

by Peter Coutts. Taken from “Congregational Awareness Studies – Four Self-Directed Studies for Church Leaders”, produced by Evangelism, Church Growth and Worship, of the Life and Mission Agency (2002).

A recent search of the catalogue of the internet bookstore “amazon.com” for the keyword “leadership” produced more than 7,000 titles. This illustrates how leadership is a topic of growing concern within our society. In the face of increasing complexity and uncertainty, of rapid change in business, government, non-profit organizations... and churches... people in organizations everywhere yearn for authentic and meaningful leadership as a cure for their sense of insecurity in a changing world.

A basic definition of leadership is: “leadership is about helping change to happen effectively”. A leader helps people see things as they really are and helps people imagine things as they can be. A leader has influence on a group that helps that group choose to take a new direction. A leader helps a group live out its purpose and character more authentically. Leaders not only help people achieve goals, but also become better people along the way. Leaders provide a sense of security as people move from the comfort of the familiar to the uncertainty of the future. Leadership is an activity of the whole community, in which many people make their own unique contributions. Each aspect of leadership listed here deals with change in some way.

Helping people deal with change is the central responsibility of leaders. This is why leadership is so hard, for change is never easy. The simple summary of some definitions of leadership above illustrates the difficulty of its practice. Each congregation is a complex social and spiritual organization. How leaders approach one situation may have to be very different in another situation. Add to this the fact that every church is different. This means that leadership is always contextual. Sometimes the leader needs more of a task orientation – at other times more of a people orientation. Sometimes change requires a definite goal and solid planning – at other times change happens in an evolutionary way through trial and error. Sometimes leaders must hold up and champion a goal before their congregation, calling people to take it up. At other times leaders have to help people together discover what is needed for the future. While every leader has their own natural style, our situations call leaders to vary their approach, depending on the issue and the context.

The qualities and practices of leadership fall into three general dimensions: Vision, Character and Faithfulness. While these are universal to all people, as Christians we bring unique aspects to each of them.

1. Vision

If “leadership is about helping change to happen effectively,” the leader must have a sense of how see change. Most theories on how groups undergo change basically come down to three elements that a leader must be able to see:

- [1] appreciating your congregation’s current reality (that is, what is happening right now),
- [2] a sense of destination, goal or vision (that is, where should we go), and
- [3] a plan for getting from one to the other.

All these rest on how we see things.

Leadership writer Max DePree says, “the first task of the leader is to ask the question “what is really going on here?” Describing and understanding the current reality of one’s church and helping others appreciate this is the most crucial and difficult step of leadership. Church leadership begins with questions like “what is really going on”, “why do we do what we do?” and “How is God working in our midst?” Understanding this is important because we all function with a degree of short-sightedness that does not help us see clearly how things could be improved. People tend to find a great deal of security in the way things are now. We easily find our current reality comfortable, even if it is not helpful. Helping people clearly see “what is really going on here” is also important for motivation. People tend to feel a greater sense of urgency to change when they become convinced that the way things are now no longer serve them. Of the three elements of a change process, this is the element that is most neglected.

The Old Testament prophets were in the business of helping the Jewish people appreciate their current reality. That was an essential part of their message. Page after page of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and other books record the assessments and critiques of God’s people in the ways they lived their lives. These prophets of God tried to help the people of God understand how they fell short in their relationship with God and with each other. They spoke of most aspects of human life: religion, relationships, economics, politics, the legal system, and so on. For these prophets, helping people appreciate their current reality and the need for change was a vital step towards renewal as a people.

But a church also has to have a sense of what it could aspire to become. An old saying about ships and leadership illustrates this, “If you don’t know where you are going, any course will take you there”. Many congregations work on the presumption that the way they did things in the past will always serve them in the future. But a growing number of congregations are discovering that this is no longer the case.

The following analogy illustrates this. It is as if congregations have a toolbox filled with solutions, perspectives, traditions, and ways of behaving. These are the tools they use to manage church life. These tools are in our toolboxes because they have proven useful in the past for addressing and fixing the issues and problems congregations face. However, the situations which face our congregations have been slowly changing over the past

couple of decades: congregations are aging, finances can be tight, new and chronic conflicts can arise, volunteers can be harder to come by, neighbourhoods are changing, and so on. The old tools are taken out of our toolboxes and used, but more and more churches are finding that they no longer work as well as they used to. When this happens congregations are challenged to discern and take on new ways of being and behaving as a church. They have to find new tools.

We find them, in part, by developing new goals, a new mission, or a new vision for our congregation. As Christians we are well guided by scripture's callings to the church. We think of the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all people (Matthew 28: 19, 20). We think of Jesus' call to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned (Matthew 25: 31-46). We think of Paul's hope that people would grow deeper in their relationship with God (Ephesians 3:14-21) or for the church to become more fully the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1-16). We use these callings as lenses for seeing, appreciating and evaluating our current congregational life as it is, helping us understand how things can be improved. These and the other great callings to the church can also become the inspiration for us to discern what our own congregations might aspire to become in brand new ways. They can help us ask questions like, "How can our church, given the unique make-up, giftedness and interests of our people, uniquely fulfill the Great Commission?" Envisioning a future helps a church find focus and energy for its congregational life. This is not the solitary work of one leader. Rather, the leader helps the congregation discern its future. As a general rule, the more diverse and pluralistic the people in your congregation are the more determined leaders must be to make discerning a future a corporate adventure.

Finally, with the starting point and destination clear in view, leaders can help their church see the path from one point to another. This path is called planning. With a desire to move towards a new vision for one's church, with an acceptance that it will be helpful to move away from the congregation's current reality, with an appropriate and realistic plan for making the journey, people will feel a greater sense of conviction and confidence to face changes in their church life. Leaders help their congregations evolve into new ways of being a church by helping people see this journey of change as clearly as they can. Leaders don't necessarily provide all that needs to be envisioned – assessments of the current reality, proposals for the future goal, the planned path between them – but leaders do have to ensure that the people come to see them.

2. Character

Personal character has always been important in the Christian life. Who we are as brothers and sisters of Christ is to make a difference in how we live, whether it is the simple living out of the Golden Rule, or the shape the Holy Spirit gives the Christian life called the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26), to the lists of character qualities we are to strive for (such as Colossians 3:12-17). This truth is even more pertinent for Christian leaders.

Paul pointed this out to Timothy in Paul's first letter to his young apprentice church leader. In talking about the character qualities desired in elders and leaders, Paul wrote that they "must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money.... must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace... set for believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 3:2,3,7; 4:12). Paul holds these qualities up because they lead to integrity, respect, care and trust. These character qualities are the currency of leadership.

Christian leaders such as Billy Graham, Henri Nouwen, Charles Colson and Mother Theresa are admired because of their integrity – they "walk the talk". The consequence of this is that their voices have been listened to throughout our generation. Next, if a leader has the respect of people, it means that the leader's perceptions of the current reality, their sense of an envisioned future, their understanding of the path from here to there, will be given consideration by those who listen. When people respect leaders, those leaders have influence. But this respect only comes by earning it through what the leader says and does.

Trust is important because change always breeds feelings of insecurity. Leaders are called to help shoulder the insecurity of the led: to help people feel less anxious about the new directions and more confident about their journey to the future. Finally, care is vital. In the end people have to believe that their leaders are looking out for their interests and needs.

Many adjectives have been used to define how leadership can be expressed. We have heard of "dictatorial" leaders, "transformational" leaders and "charismatic" leaders. Each adjective describes something fundamental about how a person can express leadership. Within the church there are two qualifying adjectives which we tend to use more than any other: "servant" leadership and leaders as "stewards". These two words describe the character of the Christian leader.

Servant leaders do indeed lead, but they lead from a unique starting point. As "servants" they are called to serve God, the congregation and the wider community. They appreciate and seek to fulfill God's callings to the Church. They commit to and help their church fulfill the congregation's goals and visions. They understand the needs of the surrounding community and desire to help there. Servant leaders help their churches hear the callings of God, formulate visions for the future and appreciate the needs of the community. Servant leaders then assume these agendas as their own agenda, guiding and encouraging the people of the church to realize these goals. Servant leaders appreciate that talk of change creates insecurities, and so they offer support as the people together go somewhere they have never been before.

The image of the steward is the most important for church leaders today. The story of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 40 & 41) provides a good example of leadership as a steward. He helped Pharaoh understand the current reality of Egypt with the coming famine. He sensed what God wanted the people to do. He envisioned a solution and provided a plan

to fulfill it. He was then entrusted with something which was not his – the leadership and administration of the land. He invested his life into something that mattered – the saving of a nation. He was entrusted with the future of the people he was responsible for. Church leaders are stewards of the future of their congregation. A goal of leadership is to see that our congregations become stronger and more secure as a consequence of a leader's efforts. It is interesting how we appreciate this and forget this all at the same time. Many of our congregations love to honour their past. When we celebrate those high moments in our church histories... when we remember those events and actions which made a difference for the future of our church... we are really expressing appreciation for those leaders in the past who imagined a future for their church and helped the congregation commit to that future and achieve it. From today's perspective we can now look back and be appreciative for what these people did which strengthened our congregation for the sake of its future. Knowing how important this has been in our past can spark our awareness of how important it still is today. Today our congregations have been entrusted into the hands of its leaders. Today church leaders are stewards of the future of their congregations. I ask you: in the year 2020 will the people of your congregation as they celebrate their history say "thank you" to you for what you did here and now in 2006 which provided your church with that better future in 2020? Steward leaders work so this will be the case.

3. Faithfulness

Faithfulness is the final dimension of leadership. And it is faithfulness to several things. First and foremost, leaders need to be faithful in their Christian faith. Within the church our leaders are Christian leaders. This means they should be embarked on their own journeys of growth in faith. Paul calls everyone to "be transformed by the ongoing renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12.2). When people see their leaders maturing in the Christian life, they can be led in turn by this example to grow in discipleship as well. This alone is an important form of leadership.

Leaders need to be faithful to the congregation's vision of the future, to see its fulfillment. Over 80% of organizations fail to realize the goals, plans and visions they conceive because they fail in the implementation stage. Implementing change is the tough work of the leader. Nothing is more demoralizing for a church than to see the newly forged excitement about the future dissolve in the difficulties of trying to make it a reality. Leaders need to assume the responsibility for seeing the work through, be willing to be accountable for how the plans are unfolding, and have the determination to deal with the unexpected surprises and difficulties that will inevitably arise.

Leaders need to be faithful in trusting others to share in the work of change. One person cannot do it all. As Paul affirms, "there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6). Leadership shares the task of change, enabling and supporting those with the gifts and abilities to fulfill elements

of the work. People not only have to trust their leaders, but leaders need to trust the people. The more the work is shared the greater the sense of shared reward as the future is realized.

Finally, leaders need to be faithful to the congregation's past. This may strike you as being out of place since leaders are "about helping change to happen effectively". You may ask, "isn't the whole idea to move away from what congregations did in the past?" Well, not quite. Change is always built on the foundation of the past. Who a congregation is – its beliefs, values, priorities, goals, and ways of behaving – have developed over time. You could say that a congregation's character is produced by the church's past success. Building up the church, then, more often than not means finding the stories of history and the strengths of today to be the footings for the structure of the future. By tying the new vision into what the church has valued in the past, a people can find strength for moving forward. It helps a congregation feel that what it is striving for is a continuation of who they've always been, rather than a new goal standing as a criticism of their past.

Summary

The easy trap for congregations today is to focus on maintenance: to perpetuate the life of the congregation just as it has been over time by concentrating solely on the needs and comfort of its members. When a congregation does this it loses its sense of mission. Mission is a big part of what a church is to be about. A maintenance focus can also stunt the development of congregational ministry for building up disciples of Christ and strengthening the care and fellowship within the church. Churches need to begin by challenging people's perceptions of the church and why it exists. For that to happen, the church needs leaders.

For Further Articles and Resources:

More information on the nature and practice of leadership can be found on the Presbyterian Leadership website. You can access it two ways:

1] Visit the website of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (www.presbyterian.ca), look under the "Resources" links on the left side of the page for "Leadership".

2] Go directly to the site at: www.coutts.name

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July 2006
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