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Changing Perspectives on Leadership During Four Decades

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The significance of leadership for the growth of the church has been a constant focus of attention throughout the history of the Church Growth movement in North America during the past four decades. During that time, different aspects of leadership have been explored in response to the challenges and pressures encountered by leaders. Increasing pressures have resulted in heightened levels of stress. The following represent the causes most frequently noted:

- *Questioning of authority* – It is no longer bestowed automatically by virtue of a leader's position and credentials. It has to be earned.
- *The availability of information through the Internet and search engines* – This cyberspace revolution has bypassed and disempowered controlling hierarchies.
- *Low commitment to institutions* – People are suspicious of institutions in general, and high mobility and multiple allegiances, places the church low down on people's scale of priorities. Their relationship of many churchgoers to the church is casual or contractual, rather than covenantal.
- *The pool of volunteers to run church programs is shrinking rapidly* – An increasing percentage of married women are now working outside of the home. Most middle-class families require two incomes in order to maintain their standard of living.
- *Single parenting and blended families* – This results in children being passed between parents at the weekends, which disrupts Sunday School programs and the availability of workers. Many parents cannot be depended on to attend or serve on a weekly basis.
- *Most people are working longer hours and enduring longer*

commute times – Suburban sprawl and the search for affordable housing means that people are traveling further, and freeways are more crowded. They are less likely to commute to church for mid-week programs.

- *Unrealistic Expectations are placed on pastors by churches struggling to survive* – Many congregations are in denial, while some are dysfunctional or even toxic.
- *Facing an uncertain Future in a culture of chaos* – The 21st century represents a culture of discontinuous change in which it is difficult to predict the future. This impacts the planning process in a profound way. Long-term strategic planning must give way to long-term strategic thinking that must allow for alternative scenarios and contingent short term planning.

In the process of endeavoring to learn new leadership skills Church leaders are not alone. The cultural turmoil in which we all find ourselves has a profound impact on leaders in most institutions of government, business, healthcare, education, and even the military. Jean Lipman-Blumen writes in, *Connective Leadership,* "Like early morning fog, the changing demands upon leaders seep through every cranny of society: families, schools, churches, grassroots political movements, corporations, and governments."[1]

The need to rethink and redefine leadership is not simply a preoccupation within our present context, but with the church growth movement we have seen a succession of concerns expressed and insights developed. This shifting focus is not sequential but rather represents the surfacing of aspects of leadership according to changing circumstances, both institutional and cultural.

The Self-Sacrificing Servant

The self-sacrificing style of leadership in part represents a reaction against the dictatorial style of leadership the governments and armies opposed in WWII. A war-weary North America was looking for an alternative to the control and command model of military leadership. Rather than leadership imposed from above, leadership from below was seen as a model both taught and demonstrated by Jesus. The servant's position is one of humility and responsiveness to his Lord's commands. Yet the Lord takes his servants into his confidence despite the fact that a servant always serves a master whose goals and purposes are inscrutable to a certain extent *(Jn 15:15).*[2]

In response to James' and John's attempts to secure the most

influential positions in the coming kingdom, Jesus draws a sharp contrast between his understanding of leadership and that of the rulers of the Gentiles. The one who desires to become great must become the servant of all (Mark 10:42-45). The early church demonstrated the servant leadership model. The apostle Paul referred to co-workers as "brethren" (1 Cor 3:9; Phil 2:25; 4:3; 1 Thess 3:2; Phm 24). The New Testament uses *diakonia* more times than any other term in referring to leadership in the church.

We must also be aware of the perils in misapplying the servant model. When Jesus wore the towel and washed his disciples' feet in the upper room on the occasion of the Last Supper he demonstrated his preparedness to do anything in anticipation of the Cross. But he only did it once, instructing his disciples to do to each other what he had done for them (John 13:13). Servant leadership means being prepared to do anything, not succumbing to pressures to do everything. Herein lies the difference between wearing a towel (the only uniform Jesus ever wore) and becoming a doormat (Jn 13:4). Shirley Roels raises the following question in, *Moving Beyond Servant Leadership*: "Is it really an accurate representation of Jesus as portrayed in the Bible? Frequently, we use servant leadership to mean leaders should simply absorb and carry out the ideas of others. That model is attributed to Jesus. It seems to me that Jesus wasn't just a servant of people. His example of servanthood was defined very differently because of his unique connection to the will of God"

Servant leadership needs to be redefined from the insights and models of scripture. It represents self-giving not self-serving. It does not signify servitude. As we see servant leadership in the context of the Servant passages in Isaiah, and as exemplified in the life of Jesus, we come to appreciate that it is not a demeaning term, but one of honor. Jesus' agenda was not determined by the demands and expectations of either the crowds or his closest followers but was first and foremost servant of his heavenly father with whom he was in constant communication. It signified his complete dependence, and his obedient unto death (Philippians 2:5-11).

In summery we see that the true servant leader is primarily a servant of God, who is ready to take the initiative. He or she is prepared to do anything, while resolutely refusing to be pressured into doing everything. The servant leader is still a leader. It does not signify an abdication of leadership responsibility

The Competent Visionary

The Competent Visionary was the dominant model of the 1970s, which represent the buoyant can-do CEO model epito-

mized in the larger-than-life individual who can make things happen. Management by objectives becomes the dominant management philosophy. The widely taught acronym for leadership and management was PLOCK (Plan Lead Organize Control)

In order to appreciate the power of this leadership model in the 1970s we need to appreciate that all of the mainline denominations at that time had experienced a decade of decline in church membership and attendance after the boom years following WWII. From the late 1940s until the mid 1960s, new community churches were being established in the suburbs then under construction. But by the mid '60s that growth phase had passed. The percentage of Americans attending church had plateaued, and the historic denominations were losing out to the independent churches. In order to reverse a decade of decline a new style of leadership with fresh insights needed to be developed. Church Growth Principles offered those insights. The Home Mission Boards of major denominations sent their directors and senior staff for training along with the hundreds of pastors who attended seminars. In 1973 Win Arn established the Institute for American Church Growth. In 1976 Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth was born under the leadership of C. Peter Wagner, followed by John Wimber and Carl George.

Seminaries, for their part, were still educating the next generation of pastors on the assumption that if their theology was biblical and their preaching expository, people would come and the church would grow. Many seminary academics looked askance at leadership and management training much as Victorian aristocracy looked down upon people "in trade."

Perhaps those of us with the Church Growth Movement were more influence by the assumptions of modernity and secular thinking than we realized at the time. Rather than starts by illustrating business models and insights from the Bible (*isogesis*), we needed to start with Biblical understandings of leadership from a kingdom perspective, and seeing how these are expressed in a variety of settings. David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveway* writes, "For Christians, and Jesus makes possible a different reality that supersedes sociology's laws of "cause and effect." Human effectiveness is not what we seek. The kingdom of God is not ours to control. [In the NT it comes as gift and surprise. We do not "build" the kingdom.] Some things can be learned from American business, government, and what it means to be human. But the direction of our learning must go from finding who we are in Christ as his body to seeing to seeing if there is anything we can learn from American business and government that we can brig into the captivity of the Lordship of Christ."[3]

In recent decades leadership exerts in the business world have reacted against elitist theories of leadership. For instance, James Kouzes and Barry Posner comment, "Leadership is not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. It is a process ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others. Leadership is your capacity to guide others to places they (and you) have never been before."[4] And Steven M. Bornstein and Anthony F. Smith maintain, "Leadership is now understood by many to imply collective action, orchestrated in such a way as to bring about significant change while raising the competencies and motivation of all those involved–that is, action where more than one individual influences the process."[5]

Unfortunately, there are many pastors today still wedded to the outmoded, elitist understanding of leadership. Sometimes they justify their stance theologically, and placed on a pedestal by their congregations as "the anointed of the Lord!'

The Empowering Delegator

Every Competent Visionary needs to be surrounded by experienced and skilled managers. But the church is heavily dependent on volunteers to run its programs. As we have noted, at this time more and more families became reliant on two incomes in order to maintain and enhance their standard of living. Churches find themselves reliant on a shrinking of the pool of volunteers.

The ministry load had to be shared and diversified throughout the body so the *Competent Visionary* became the *Empowering Delegator.* The need to broaden the scope of ministry and leadership led to the recognition of the diversity of Spirit gifts distributed throughout the Body of Christ, including leadership and organizational abilities (Rom 12:3). During the decade of the '70s there was a spate of books and seminars emphasizing the ministry of the whole people of God through the recognition and activation of gift-based ministries. One of the most influential books of the period was that of C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, published by Regal Press in 1979. But it soon became evident that the preaching of series of sermons and seminars on gifts did not translate readily into the burgeoning of gift-initiated ministries. For such diverse ministries do not emerge in highly controlled environments. Furthermore, the gifts we identified were described almost exclusively in terms of the internal agendas and programs of the local church. We did not explore their significance for the manifold ministries of the people of God in the world.

Insecure leaders are threatened by those more gifted or gifted in other areas. Consequently they tend to surround themselves with individuals who aspire to be like them, and by people of lesser ability. Spiritual gifts do not primarily emerge as by means of individuals completing gift identification questionnaires, but in the context of community participation. In other words ministry flows from relationships.

The controlling and delegating modes of leadership are giving way to more collaborative and empowering styles, partly as a consequence of the advent of the information age and a move from hierarchies and controls to networks and empowerment. We are experiencing today what Harlan Cleveland has described as the twilight of the hierarchies. "The shift is now more than obvious: from top-down vertical relationships towards horizontal, consensual, collaborative modes of getting people together to make something different happen."[6]

The Person of Character With Integrity and Resilience

We are constantly faced by the disturbing frequency of pastors leaving the ministry due to burnout, depression and moral failure. This is a consequence of the mistaken assumption that pastors can maintain their own moral character all on their own.[7] In many churches there is a perilous lack of accountability structures that require the pastor to routinely evaluate his or her life and ministry, as distinct from crisis intervention.

Increasingly, pastors face the relentless pressure of trying to meet the unrealistic expectations placed upon them by their board of elders and congregations, or which they place upon themselves. When there is no escape, there develops a strong temptation to retreat into a fantasy world, and then live out those fantasies, resulting in sexual or financial scandals.

In response to these challenges has come an increasing emphasis on the importance of character over charisma. It is significant that the Pastoral Epistles in listing the qualifications for a presbyter or deacon places the emphasis on character (2 Tim 3:1-10; Tit 1:6-8). Some expositors have downplayed the significance of charisma on the basis of these passages. But this conclusion represents a misunderstanding of the dynamics of leadership emergence in the first generation churches in the New Testament. These household-based churches represented faith communities in which there were no passive consumers. Leadership emerged by a spontaneous process as individuals exercised their gifts and gained influence. They question then became as to who should be formally recognized as having authority with the group. It is here that the character criteria assumed great impor-

tance.

The development of character depends on the practice of spiritual disciplines and the establishing of mutually accountable relationships. In a cultural climate of cynicism and suspicion, the leader must be above reproach. Those whom we serve as well as those we seek to attract into the faith community pose the following questions: Are we authentic? Do we know God? What difference does knowing God make in our lives? Seminaries are increasingly aware that they need to emphasize spiritual formation, not just professional competence in their preparing of the next generation of leaders for the church. They need to move beyond offering courses to providing community.

The Missional Leader

Churches in the Western world are experiencing a loss of a sense of direction. For sixteen hundred years the churches of Europe have been shaped by Christendom, in which they functioned as a central pillar of society. In this process we have come to recognize that the Christendom that blessed us also conspired to subvert the witness of the church. We are now in the throes of attempting to re-imagine the church for a post-Christendom era. Just as the churches of the Global South had to re-imagine themselves in a post-colonial world, and in so doing generate a vitality that challenges the churches of the West, so we dare to hope for a similar revitalization for the Western churches, with the assistance of those to whom we took the gospel in the previous two centuries.

Western church leaders are aware that we were not trained to meet the challenges we are now facing. Australian missional thinkers David Frost and Alan Hirsch highlight this point. "This issue of the development of a new kind of leadership is possibly the single most important question of strategy in this decade, and whether the church responds correctly or not will determine to some extent its survival as a viable expression of the gospel in the years to come."[8]

As North America rapidly move towards becoming a post-Christendom nation in which the churches are increasingly marginalized and facing ideological and religious pluralism, they must restructure in order to operate as rapid response and low maintenance, decentralized organizations. The old hierarchies are too controlling and ponderous. The churches must move from functioning as hierarchies to generating networks. Thomas A Stewart writes, "Networks, by definition, connect everyone to everyone. Hierarchical organizations, by definition, don't do that–they create formal channels of communication, and you're

expected to follow them."[9]

A recent book on *The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* is by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, and is entitled *The Starfish and the Spider.* You kill a spider by destroying its head. But the starfish is a different organism. Cut off the leg of a starfish and it will grow a new a leg. Furthermore, the amputated leg becomes a new starfish. The early church was an unstoppable movement because it was more starfish than spider! The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

Missional churches develop their own leadership. It is by definition situation as God's mission is both contextual and communal. The leader is not an isolated individual with the expertise to control the whole operation. As Max DePree has argued, today's leader is not like the conductor of an orchestra, a non-playing member. Instead, he more closely resembled the leader of a jazz band. He writes, "Jazz-band leaders must choose the music, find the right musicians, and perform–in public. But the effect of the performance depends on so many things–the environment, the volunteers playing in the band, the need for everybody to perform as individuals and as a group, the absolute dependence of the leader on the members of the band, the need of the leader for the followers to play well."[10] The jazz-band leader provides the chemistry whereby the other members follow his lead by adding their creative improvisation.

Given the turbulence and complexity of our times we need to transition from controlling to connective leadership. More than that, we need to recapture the diversity of leadership roles identified in Paul's letter to the Ephesians and reinterpret them for our times.

In Ephesians 4:11-16-13 we find the family five spheres of leadership. No single individual can hope to fulfill all of these roles. Paul makes clear that these gifts are distributed. Furthermore, this passage is not primarily concerned with leaders, but with the equipping of the entire body in these essential areas of ministry. But in order for these gifts to be identified and fostered competent leadership will be required for each area.

The *Pastor* is the soul healer who comes alongside hurting and vulnerable people so that they might find wholeness in Christ and within a supportive environment. The *Teacher* is the light giver who assists people to understand and apply the scriptures to their daily life. In this day and age with so many human casualties and biblical illiteracy, their need remains as high as ever. But they represent leadership for existing congregations. Here we see the influence of the Christendom mindset in which the exclusive focus it to provide leadership for existing congre-

gations. Our seminaries focus on the training of such leaders.

But, especially in our post-Christendom, missional context, there is an urgent need to identify the other leadership and ministry functions that Paul identifies, names the apostle, prophet and evangelist. Whereas in Luke's writing the Apostles always refer to the Twelve, in Paul they refer to other than the Twelve. In making this distinction, the first group consists of the apostles of Christ, the foundation pillars of the new people of God, whereas the second, larger group represents the apostles of the Church.

In this latter sense the *Apostle* is the groundbreaker who operates beyond the frontiers of the church to establish new faith communities. Frost and Hirsch highlight the importance of apostolic ministry for the church as it emerges in its post-Christendom context. "Apostolic leadership provides an essential element for the new emerging church… This issue of the development of a new kind of leadership is possibly the single most important question of strategy in this decade, and whether the church responds correctly or not will determine to some extent its survival as a viable expression of the gospel in the years to come."[11]

Alongside the apostles works the *Prophet* as a truth revealer who keeps the leaders and their faith communities sensitive to the word of God and to the Spirit's leading. The *Evangelist* also contributes, not as an independent entity, but as the voice within and beyond the faith community as the storytellers that winsomely unfold the Grand Story of God's redemptive involvement in human affairs, and how the personal story of individuals can be linked to and transformed by that grand narrative.

Some expressions of the so-called emerging church are led by apostles, prophets and evangelists, and demonstrate the energy and engagement of such leadership. But their leaders tend to develop itchy feet after five to seven years, and when they move on, their work disintegrates. Why is this so? Usually, it is a consequence of a failure to have the pastors and teachers in place to provide continuity and maturity. The more traditional denominations have pastors and teachers but suffer from an absence of the entrepreneurial apostolic presence o lead them in new directions and establish new faith communities. Whereas the church of New Testament times consisted of reproducible units (starfishlike), most churches today are not reproducible. It is an unrealistic expectation for church multiplication, and not just growth, to result from sterile churches. We need to see the restoration of the five-fold ministry in every expression of church.

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As I have interacted with younger missional leaders in the course of writing "Emerging Churches" with my colleague Ryan Bolger, I have noted the following typical characteristics. They adopt a *low profile* determined to take center stage. This is partly in reaction to the controlling and celebrity driven styles of leadership they have previously experienced. They operate with a *low budget* having to make do with limited financial resources. Most of them are *bi-vocational*, which places traditional seminary courses beyond their reach.

They operate on a philosophy of *low maintenance*. People are trusted to get on with the job, and not to expect an injection of capital of personnel. They are *risk takers* who recognize we learn more from our failures than our successes. You can fail with dignity because it is an essential part of being on a steep learning curve. Low control is balanced by *high accountability* that flows from a relationship of trust and vulnerability. They *celebrate diversity* recognizing that conformity excludes individuals and inhibits creativity.

They are *highly flexible* because, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they are making it up as they go along, much like the early church. Also, flexibility enables them to switch roles from leader to follower, depending on the tasks in which they are engaged. They are *resilient* living with hope and anticipation in the midst of setbacks, and they are committed to *empower others* to learn as they themselves have learned. They also frequently express the desire for older mentors. Many of the Generation-X grew up as latchkey children. Consequently, they did not get on very well with their parents but they have a high regard for their grandparents!

Summary

Leadership can be best summarized, not by a length list of qualities representing an ideal that no individual could match, but by four basic requirements:

Character, for which charisma is no substitute. The mark of authenticity in any Christian leader is the presence of the fruit of the Spirit as identified in Galatians 5:22-26. Taken together they provide us with a character description of Christ himself.

Call, indicating that a person has been set apart and goes before them, instructing them as they obediently follow. Bill Easum declares they are "obedient to a call greater than their own lives."

Charisma, signifying not personal charm as it is popularly defined but appropriate gifting bestowed prior to, or at times, subsequent to the call.

Context, signifying the presence of the right person in the right place at the right time. Often, this element is overlooked, resulting in frustration by those who attempt to emulate a leader and reproduce his or her success.

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NOTES

1. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *Connective Leadership.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

2. David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveway*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005, p. 87.

3. David E. Fitch, op cit., p. 79.

4. James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

5. Steven M. Bornstein and Anthony F. Smith, 'The Puzzles of Leadership,' in Frances Hesselbein, et al, *The Leader of the Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

6. Harlan Cleveland, *Nobody in Charge.* San Francisco: Josssey-Bass, 2002, p. 44.

7. David E. Fitch, op cit, p. 84.

8. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come.* Peabody: Henrickson, 2003.

9. Thomas A. Stewart in Warren Bennis, et al., *The Future of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001, p.68.

10. Max De Pree, *Leadership Jazz*. DTP, 1993. pp. 8, 9

11. See also Martin Garner, *A Call for Apostles Today.* Cambridge, England: Grove Books Limited, Ridley Hall Rd., Cambridge, CB3 9HU, 2007.