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Leadership and Authority in Digital Culture

Jeffrey H. Mahan¹

Who leads and where do they get the authority to do so? Denominations trust processes of discernment, socialization, and ordination to determine who should lead. The literature treats leadership as a professional skill. Yet ordained clergy and other trained religious professionals are hardly the only ones forming the Christian life. People without formal credentials, ordination, or education are not waiting to be authorized by the institutional church to lead. Digital culture's emphasis on charisma and voice encourages this shift away from role authority. Leadership is increasingly relational. People follow those they trust. Those who hold role authority are well advised to use it sparingly. It costs you to say, "Do it because I am the priest."

In digital culture, individuals also claim the authority to integrate or reject beliefs and practices and to set a personal spiritual trajectory. They network with each other, connecting and "following" those to whom they grant authority. The more you prove yourself a reliable, useful, and caring leader the more naturally people will—to use key words from digital culture—"like" and "follow" you.

The biblical account of the Exodus provides a lens through which to see our contemporary situation. Moses led the early Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Emboldened by direct encounters with God, Moses challenged the Pharaoh and laid out a vision of "a land of milk and honey." People were motivated to follow him into unknown places and to build a new social order.

Contemporary Christian leaders must also help people find a land they haven't seen and can only imperfectly imagine. As with the Exodus, some people feel lost and frightened and want to return to an idealized past. Like Moses, contemporary leaders must help their community turn from nostalgia and look toward what they might become.

Leadership, particularly in times of change, requires vision. Surely the ancient Hebrews said, "Where are you taking us? Tell us more about this land of milk and honey." They must have been frustrated when Moses replied, "Well, I haven't actually been there yet; it's a long journey, and we will have to invent it as we go along."

It is likely that you will also be frustrated when you ask about my vision of a church in digital culture. Like the ancient Hebrews, we have to invent it as we go along. Though there is no clear map, we can say some things. We journey toward a fluid and adaptive network. There, people and communities communicate about how God is with us in the world through their messages, their embodied practices, and in the online and offline spaces and connections they construct. The church in digital culture is a network of contextual conversations about our experience of the sacred, our individual constructions of the religious self, and our shared practice. In its ebbs and flows we will find connections that bear us up and others that challenge our understanding and practice.

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This seems new, insubstantial, and unsettling. Yet I take comfort in the assertion of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, that this is how it was in early Christianity.² I quoted him in the first lecture to suggest that the nature of the church is most fully revealed in its ongoing conversation rather than in the conclusions of a key leader or council. Professor Thompson clarifies this when she wittily suggests that studying the epistles is a matter of “reading other people’s mail.” That is to say, they are not a unified message but instead a set of contextual reflections. In this way of thinking, the church is not an accomplishment, a project that can ever be finished, but rather a process.

AfterHours Denver and the House for All Sinners and Saints are two quite different efforts to reimagine the ongoing congregation. The church as network also exists in online conversations and fellowships, blog posts, and drop-in spaces like theology pub or coffee house gatherings. It is being created in dinner church groups, among people of faith who strive to decolonialize their thinking and work for justice for the people of the First Nations. Sometimes it comes together and subsides like a flash mob, as we see in gatherings to ritualize grief in the face of public tragedy. It is found when chaplains and spiritual directors listen to people’s deep wounding and help them find resources to reimagine their religious self. It is messy because we are still finding our way through the wilderness. Not all of these experiments will succeed, but be patient—it took the ancient Hebrews 40 years to get there!

Much of this work is being done outside of, or on the margins of, traditional congregations. Not all who lead are, or want to be, credentialed by denominations. When authority is not equated so directly to a role, or institutional authorization, or to traditional cultural markers like gender, age, or race, there is more room for new leaders. They are followed by people who recognize and admire their charisma, vision, and skills. This challenges existing hierarchies. Lay folks who trust their own perceptions are less likely to wait for clergy to set the vision. They may step forward to reshape their congregations and denominations, but they are also likely to build alternative networks outside congregational structures.

Here are two examples:

- I was part of a research project that interviewed Muslim and Christian community leaders.³ When we asked the Muslims how they were developing uniquely American and modern forms of Islamic identity and practice, they were respectful of the role of the *imam* within the mosque. Yet they didn’t assume that their mostly foreign-born and traditionally educated clergy could guide their community into practices that made sense in the modern digital American culture. They expected conversation about what it meant to be Muslim and American to primarily happen outside the mosque. Therefore, they followed online and offline voices that explored what modern Muslim lives might look like. We found that Christian leaders were less aware than their Muslim neighbors that they inhabited a culture that their clergy had not been trained for.
 - “Mom bloggers” are another example of the democratization of religious leadership. They offer confessional and advice-giving reflections on their experience

² Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

³ This research was organized by the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture at the College of Media, Communications, and Information at the University of Colorado Boulder, <http://www.colorado.edu/cmrc>.

as stay-at-home or working parents. Though often blogging about their religious identity and practice, they function outside the boundaries of congregation or denomination. They are not ordained, and don't hold degrees in child development, but millions of women follow them. Glennon Doyle is one highly successful mom blogger with a progressive Christian perspective. Her blog is called the *Momastery*. There, her confessional reflection on her experience as a parent and spouse, and on her divorce and subsequent marriage to soccer star Abby Wambach, invites an online conversation that has grown into what Doyle calls the "Momastery community." She doesn't present herself as an expert; Doyle is a fellow traveler with other women embedded in family systems and inspired and supported by a vision of a loving and grace-filled God.

Observing the mom bloggers phenomenon lets us see how command of new media gives people with a provocative perspective and voice religious authority and presence. Their followers may also be involved in congregations, but in the mom blogs they find an alternative space where women have voice and can imagine together what it means to practice faith in daily life.

When we ask who forms people's religious identity, practice, and communities, we can no longer think only about traditional faith leaders. The mom bloggers and the Muslim community leaders model the way community grows around shared experience. Here authority is not based on credentials; it is given in response to an authentic and creative reflection that affirms the community's experience and helps them find their way in the world.

These shifts in who leads and how they shape religious lives provide important clues to how the culture is changing, and help us understand the stresses many congregations are feeling. Those of us who hold institutional titles have things to learn about leading as a relational skill from the range of religious leaders that people are listening to. But the role of seminary-trained, denominationally ordained, clergy and lay professionals remains important. I also want to think about their role in transforming the congregations they serve.

Media-savvy clergy learn from their own experiences of digital culture and from observing the often uncredentialed leaders who emerge there. Networked society encourages quite different personal/professional boundaries, leadership styles, and public presence than most clergy were taught in seminary or saw modeled by earlier generations of faith leaders. More democratic styles of shared leadership lead them to treat their theological education and Christian formation as preparation to be curators of traditions and coaches of religious individuals and communities.

Clergy with a fluid sense of their calling also seek to have a broader presence in networked society. They create blogs, Twitter accounts, podcasts, and Facebook pages that reach beyond their congregations. By combining an online and offline presence and adopting a leadership style that invites discussion, they create alternative channels of relationship that connect them to people inside and outside the boundaries of their congregations. Together, they envision Christian practice in a culture shaped by its experience of interactive digital communications.

There are tensions for clergy who adopt the fluid networked assumptions of digital culture. Pre-networked ways of thinking are baked into the DNA of most of the congregations who pay their salaries and the denominations who ordain and credential them. Stressed

institutions reward efforts to reproduce the old structures of congregational life. These pastors must simultaneously provide pastoral care for those who grieve the cultural change, work to make the congregation's boundaries porous and its practices welcoming, and create new forms of Christian community that may not draw people into congregations as we have known them. It is a challenging calling!

One year, folks from AfterHours carried a banner in Denver's Gay Pride Parade. It proclaimed: "AfterHours, Denver, it's like church without the parts that suck!" They were reaching out to people who had been wounded by the church and were suspicious of its ability to change, yet who wanted spiritual companions and conversation. To build networks with these folks, congregations have to take them on their own terms, make room for their doubts and questions, address what sucks, and provide resources for their spiritual work.

It is not only those outside congregations who question old ways of being church. Individuals of the first digital generation are now in their late forties, and many older folks have already adapted. It is likely that there are people in your congregation who see their religious identity as a personal construction, desire looser and more networked ways of relating, and respond better to less hierarchical, more informal models of leadership. Listening to these folks and drawing them into leadership can shift the congregation's conversation.

"What sucks about congregations?" Is it that the boundaries and rigidity that tie congregations to a fading culture distract them from the search for a faith experience that transforms people and communities? If so, we must embrace the fluidity and construction that is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in a time of change.

I want to conclude by briefly identifying five areas where leaders might help their congregations to move toward a more networked life:

- First, revise your expectations of the people you are trying to reach. We all think we are welcoming, but newcomers consistently report that our welcome is conditional. People who might be willing to "like" you, that is to make you a part of their loose web of faith connections, feel expected to fall quickly into old patterns of church membership. Whether this is true or their projection, it's a real barrier. Work on a consistent message of welcome without expectation. Your goal is to be useful to them, not for them to solve your institutional problems.
- Secondly, clarify who you are striving to serve and evaluate your programs in light of your vision. It's easy to hear the invitation to adapt to digital culture as a call to offer something for everyone. But that is not at all my point. Digital communication makes it easier than ever to look for a congregation that is a good match. Clarify who you are. Strive to be visibly good at a few things and share them.
- Third, move beyond using digital communications to jazz up your one-way messaging. The network invites conversation and response. Work to widen your conversation. "Friend" leaders you admire, like-minded congregations, and community groups whose work you respect. Include links to them on your own and the congregation's websites. Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "to build a network you have to 'like' a lot of people and hope they will 'like' you back."⁴

⁴ Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Nadia Bolz-Weber on Hope and Abundance*. <https://youtu.be/a62BCP5rVTA>

- Fourth, create programs and organizational systems that support networked relations. Evaluate whether your process serves or impedes your mission and provide places for people to become involved without being overwhelmed. Programmatically, our models of religious education and formation tend to assume we are going to have people for 50 minutes a week over a very long time. But people looking for a less structured relationship with the church don't show up that regularly. The church has a long history of shorter-term intense formational experiences like spiritual retreats and summer camp that might make better sense. Ongoing classes seem more inviting if the invitation is to come for four weeks on a particular topic. Your congregation has formal and informal organizational systems. To function more like a network, you want to allow people into the conversation and, as much as possible, give permission to people who want to try new things. An approach sometimes called "adhocracy" limits the size and number of standing committees in order to give permission to innovate to small, short-term groups who gather around particular programs, missional projects, or fellowship opportunities. Of course, you need some structure through which to develop vision and make decisions. The question is how much? If it feels like you spend more time in meetings than in ministry, ask which elements no longer serve you well and create more shorter-term opportunities for a wider web of people to participate, serve, and lead.
- Finally, think about how and where you meet. One sign that congregations are pretty boundaried is that we make people come to us. To lower the boundaries some congregations sponsor pub theology gatherings in bars or coffee shops. The invitation is, "Come, grab a drink, listen to a discussion starter, and join the conversation." They often include some version of sharing joys and concerns and prayer. The barriers to participation are low and people are comfortable coming once, erratically, or regularly. Other congregations open their buildings to widen their community network. They host community organizations, voter information events, food banks, and so forth. Honestly, some congregations find that their mission narrows as they focus on supporting an aging building designed for a different era. Being free of those buildings might allow the congregations to think more creatively about how they want to worship and how they serve their community.

My seminary theology professor once compared two church buildings. One was a European cathedral that had stood for a thousand years. The other was a midwestern sanctuary designed so that, if the congregation failed, it could easily be converted into a warehouse. He contrasted the vision and theological conviction of the people who built a sanctuary to stand for millennia with what he saw as the pragmatism and anxiety of those who saw the church as an experiment that might not work out. We might frame this differently. Perhaps the midwestern congregation was not so much planning for failure as living out a theology of fluidity and change, in which the Holy Spirit is always ready to do a new thing among God's people.

I hope you will embrace what the Spirit is doing in your communities, articulate a vision, expand your networks to become spaces where people explore and articulate Christian identity, and find new ways of serving with them. Welcome to the journey!