

# **TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL**

## **Connecting Resources with Ministry**

### **Church Development Discussion Papers**

**TITLE:** Reflections on Leadership

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We human beings and church people tend to be ambivalent about leadership. Congregations want leadership and they don't want it. Pastors want to provide leadership and yet sometimes find the cost of being leaders too high. Some pastors think of themselves as congregational leaders and function that way, but others do not. They may think of themselves as chaplains, who provide for the pastoral needs of individuals; or scholars who study and conserve a tradition; or civic activists who are engaged with concerns of the larger community. Today, as mainline Protestant churches face daunting challenges, pastors must be effective in leading congregations. Effective leadership includes building leadership teams as well as the capacity to share leadership.

When pastors abdicate their leadership role and responsibility two things tend to happen, and neither is good. Congregations will typically experience themselves as lacking direction and unable to deal with important challenges before them. Second, people who may not be right for the job will insert themselves into leadership because congregations, like nature, abhor a vacuum. The result is an erosion of energy and a loss of congregational vitality.

Not only are pastors sometimes ambivalent about being leaders, congregations can be ambivalent about receiving and supporting leadership. One form this takes is lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. Is the pastor to be a congregational leader or not? Is the person in that position a primary leader, or part of a team? If the latter, who leads or heads the team? Does the pastor lead in some areas of church life, and not in others? What is the relationship between elected lay leaders and called pastors? Who makes personnel decisions and has hire/fire powers in relationship to church employees? If pastors are entrusted with responsibility for aspects of church life, do they have the power and resources to fulfill their responsibilities? How do congregations empower those they call to leadership, and how do they disempower them? How are pastoral leaders to be evaluated and held accountable? These are complex questions and they will be answered differently depending on a congregation's history and denominational polity. Answers may not come easily and will require revisiting. But the worst thing is for congregations to simply avoid facing such questions. When that happens confusion abounds and pastors find that they are juggling an impossible variety of expectations.

What accounts for our frequent ambivalence about leadership? Author and teacher Ron Heifetz of Harvard's Kennedy School provides an answer. "Leadership is dangerous," Heifetz says: "You [leaders] appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain." Heifetz is right; leadership is dangerous, costly, and absolutely necessary, particularly if congregations are to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the present time.

Several years ago I was teaching a class on pastoral leadership at a seminary in Canada. We were discussing themes of power and influence. The 40 pastors seemed to agree, power is suspect; attempts to influence others dubious. Then a younger clergy woman spoke up. "I am not surprised by this discussion, after all our denomination (United Church of Canada) has been telling us for years that power is bad. No wonder few of us will admit to any interest in power or influence." Silence followed; the kind of silence that happens when truth has been spoken. Then another person, also a clergy woman added, "And just because power is not talked about doesn't mean power issues go away; they go underground and come out in unhealthy ways." The two had challenged the conventional wisdom that power is bad, process is good; leaders are suspect, teams and consensus are always to be preferred.

To be sure, there is basis for this. Leadership and its powers have sometimes been abused. But are we, in the church, also prepared to doubt our doubts about the importance of able leadership? Are we prepared to consider the costs to the church when we do not encourage and support good leadership? A wise elder once commented to me, "You only need leadership if you're trying to accomplish something." Perhaps our contemporary ambivalence, even suspicion, of leadership in many congregations is because the church has too often ceased to try to accomplish something great for God?

I now turn to seven strategies for leading congregations. Two introductory caveats: though these seven strategies are listed sequentially and may be utilized in that way, congregational life and leadership is seldom so tidy or sequential. Moreover, there are some things like the first strategy, "building trust" that pastoral leaders never stop doing. The second caveat is that the description of each strategy is necessarily brief. There is not space here for elaboration. More is found in my book, *Leadership for a Vital Congregation* published by Pilgrim Press.

Trust is the currency of leadership and so the first strategy for leaders is to "build trust." The building blocks of trust include character, relationships and competence. Pastors need to be mindful of all three and work at them intentionally, and especially in the first years of a new pastorate. Some congregations are more inclined to be trusting of their leadership than others. This is a variable to be factored in.

Second, leaders need to ask, "What's going on?" For people shaped by the Bible, the first question is not, "What should I or we do?" It is "What's going on?" What is God up to here and now? Getting at what is going on not only requires theological reflection, but anthropological curiosity. Leaders can put on their "anthropologist hat" and study the culture of the congregation.

Third, leading a congregation requires a reasonably clear and shared understanding of the purpose of the church. Often congregations try to develop plans (vision) without considering purpose. The result is a laundry list of a hundred good ideas, but without strategic focus. The purpose question is, as management guru Peter Drucker puts it, "What is your business?" "Why are you here?" This is an urgent question because congregations had one set of purposes in the era of American Christendom and modernity. That era is over now and "new occasions teach new duties." Today many congregations need to return to the drawing boards and to the Scriptures to gain clarity and passion regarding core purpose. I explore this question at greater length in my book *Transforming Congregational Culture*. Other helpful books on this include Kirk Hadaway's, *Behold I Do a New Thing*, and Michael Foss's book, *PowerSurge*.

Strategy number four is, "write the vision." Given our purpose, what is God calling us to do in the near future? That is the vision. Vision serves and advances purpose. Vision means taking on and making progress on a congregation's toughest (and most exciting) challenges. It means, "What are the vital few things our congregation needs to focus on to better fulfill and advance its purpose?" As a guideline for congregations and leaders who would work on purpose and vision, it is my conviction that a purpose statement should be quite brief, one to three sentences, and a vision should also be brief, preferably one page. If your vision is three pages or more you're not serious.

I call strategy five, following Ron Heifetz, "managing distress." I didn't say fixing distress, but managing it. The truth is that you need some distress to motivate adaptive work, but if you have too much distress in the congregational system people will shut down. Heifetz uses the image of a pressure cooker. Without heat the food doesn't cook, too much heat and you blow the lid off. Often churches make everybody being happy the measure of health, which is pretty much a recipe for maintaining status quo. Leaders have to expect some distress if they want learning and growth to happen.

Because of this, strategy six is "Persistence, Persistence, Persistence." Many pastors give up too soon. Congregations change and respond slowly. It takes time for people to become focused. Moreover, many congregations wonder, and justifiably so, if their pastoral leader means what she or he says, and if that person will stick around to see the work through. Smaller congregations, particularly, become used to short pastoral tenure, three to five years and out.

Seventh and finally, congregations need to become learning organizations. As we work to advance our purpose and vision, what are we learning? What are we learning about ourselves, about God, about the community in which we are set,

about being disciples of Jesus? Few congregations have mechanisms in place for gathering and reflecting on learning, but all need to.

Leading congregations is good work, but it is tough work. For years, many mainline congregations have not had to be very intentional about their purpose or vision. To exist was enough. Leadership was hardly necessary. Those days, however, are over and if congregations are to survive and thrive, faithful and effective leadership is crucial.

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