



## Leadership for Growth

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Kennon Callahan, arguably the most influential church analyst and consultant, declares in his latest book:

The day of the professional minister is over, the day of the missionary pastor has come. Some may protest and wonder out loud if this startling, bold prophecy will come true. I can assure you that it will not come true in the future—because it has already happened.

The professional minister movement did not end with a noisy bang. It ended quietly, suitably, and decently enough a few years ago as professional ministers experienced a gridlock of meetings, desks stacked high with papers, calendars filled with appointments, and declining worship attendances in their churches. There was no climactic event, no dramatic conclusion.

The professional minister movement, born in the church culture of the late 1940s, simply ceased to be functional on the mission field of the 1980s. That way of being a minister had worked for nearly forty years. But it became dysfunctional. It no longer worked.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking as a Lutheran, my denomination has been largely ambiguous concerning the professional minister model. When I attended seminary in the mid-'60s, very little attention was paid to any kind of parish leadership. Primarily we were equipped to be preachers and theologians, with the prevailing assumption that if we had proper theology we would be effective pastors.

In more recent times theological education has moved emphatically in the direction of equipping professional ministers. The model for this pastor, however, has been taken largely from the field of pastoral care and counseling. Clinical pastoral education is now required for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and rather extensive exposure to psychological methods of pastoral care is commonplace.

What this has done, according to Professor Patrick Keifert of Luther Northwestern Seminary, is to ensure that we are now preparing professional ministers

<sup>1</sup>Kennon Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 3.

who are primarily “private family chaplains.”<sup>2</sup> Steeped in the philosophy and skills of psychology, sensitivity, counseling, and crisis intervention, pastors have taken to themselves a

role similar to that of the hospital chaplain. With a handful of certification plaques to hang on the office walls, newly ordained clergy have gone off to become professional ministers.

Callahan's words about professional ministers speak directly to my Lutheran experience. Not only does the professional minister as private family chaplain not work very well in the average parish, such a model is even less equipped to function in the new unchurched culture. What is needed, says Keifert, is a radical change in theological education, where we must begin to train evangelical public leaders rather than private family chaplains.

## I. CHURCH GROWTH

The theme of this article, "leadership for growth," is almost a foreign language to Lutherans. Not only is it difficult to find much attention given to equipping pastors who can truly lead, when you add the component of growth you have heightened the ambiguity. Growth is one of those concepts that has by and large been blacklisted in Lutheran and other mainline churches. If you even wish to hint at the subject, you best use some common euphemisms: evangelism or outreach or leadership. Anyone who talks about church growth in such circles learns quickly to use politically correct qualifiers, "We want the church to grow, but...."

During the late 1940s and 1950s, the Lutheran church grew rapidly, as did other mainline churches. Growth was basically a part of our culture and was accepted and affirmed. But with the upheavals in the late 1960s and early 1970s, growth suddenly became irrelevant for many in the face of crushing social problems. Growth at that time even became linked with a kind of cultural or religious imperialism, or associated with the theology of glory. Pastors now desired to be faithful rather than successful, which at times becomes a rationale for decline. Favored theologians such as Douglas John Hall and Matthew Fox have tended to pillory any emphasis on growth.

Pat Keifert, in an analysis of the church growth movement among evangelicals, discovered, to no one's surprise, that such Christians truly believe that the New Testament presumes and encourages the growth of the church.<sup>3</sup> Leaders in the church growth movement have no doubt that Jesus and Paul and the book of Acts champion such growth. When Keifert asked some Lutheran colleagues the same question, "Does the New Testament presume the growth of the church?" he found a high degree of discomfort and even hostility toward the question.

Why do some Christians have such animosity toward growth? After all, doesn't the great commission talk about making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18)? Isn't there joy in heaven when one sinner repents (Luke 15:7)? Doesn't it

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<sup>2</sup>Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

mean anything that 3,000 people were baptized at Pentecost? Isn't that more impressive or more persuasive than if it were three? Or do we simply excise all scriptural passages that have to do with growth or evangelical outreach?

Loren Mead highlights three sets of polarities with which the church is struggling.<sup>4</sup> They include parish vs. congregation, servanthood vs. conversion, and exclusive vs. inclusive. Each of

these has to do with issues of growth, and Mead's thesis is that mainline churches are still operating under the illusion that we live in a churched culture, that Christendom is still operative. Unless we are willing to change, to find new paradigms, we will find our future is one of death and decline.

For me, the Lutheran response toward growth is not merely academic or philosophical. As I pastored a congregation which grew from 1,000 to 8,000 in twenty years, I found such growth under a constant barrage of attack from various quarters within the Lutheran church. As one church bureaucrat told me, "If a congregation is growing, then many assume there must be something heretical taking place."

Why such hostility to church growth? Four theories:

1. Mainline churches react negatively to evangelical Christians, to much of what they stand for and defend. As the 1992 Republican convention highlighted, there is something about the religious right which elicits a visceral reaction in most Lutherans. (We have no such passion against even the most extreme from the religious left.) So if evangelicals are the champions of church growth, then we must, for our own integrity, be staunchly in opposition.<sup>5</sup>

Lutherans tend to cozy up to Episcopalians (who seem to be in a free fall of membership decline) and run away from the Reformed. We make alliances with the National Council and World Council of Churches, and avoid the National Association of Evangelicals. Adlai Stevenson once said about Norman Vincent Peale, "As far as evangelists go, I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling." Even though the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America took to itself the designation "evangelical," we have antipathy to much of what is found in evangelical circles; we find it appalling.

2. There is most assuredly an underlying current of universalism throughout Lutheranism, and sometimes not even underlying. Theologically and biblically, we find all sorts of problems with the concept of universal salvation, but as a kinder and gentler denomination with an inclusive mindset, universalism often becomes operative for us. "Those folks who live next door are such nice people, even though happy pagans, how could they ever be 'lost'? How archaic!"

Strategies to reach unchurched people with the good news of Jesus Christ seem to be far down the priority ladder from the important issues of peace and justice. In fact, if conventions are any guide, such issues as church structures or clergy pensions give rise to far more passion and conviction than that of evangelical outreach.

3. Lutheran seminaries have been anti-growth (not regarding students or

<sup>4</sup>Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>For a fascinating discussion of the culture war now taking place, read James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

their own budget, but in the prevailing attitude toward church growth). Theological journals often trash church growth, Lutheran pastors who promote such growth are often held up to ridicule. Perhaps this is why a strong percentage of Lutheran pastors who wish to do advanced studies in evangelism and church growth pursue such work at Fuller Seminary. Luther Northwestern Seminary's new mission statement on equipping "evangelical public leaders for mission" is a radical shift in Lutheran theological understanding about a new role for pastors; it may even lead to a renewed emphasis on "leadership for growth."

4. The prevailing view of power in most mainline denominations is that power is a finite commodity, in short supply, with not enough to go around. Hierarchical structures seem by nature to have this common perception, and Lutherans tend to be hierarchical. The basic assumption is that if someone else has power, then that diminishes my power. We would generally assume that anyone who has a strong sense of the third article of the Apostles Creed might see power as unlimited, infinite, blowing where it wills, but that is not the operating principle of most institutions. "Power is in short supply," says this mindset, "if you have it, then I do not."

In the ELCA, both theological professors and senior pastors of larger churches have been systematically excluded from national decision making.<sup>6</sup> Not surprising, for any other power center is seen as a threat rather than as a resource. Of course the danger is that theological faculties and large churches can also fall into this trap, jealously guarding their own power and believing the power of others disempowers rather than empowers them.

If indeed such a limited view of power is commonplace, growing churches can easily become suspect. In fact, a system that has a finite view of power seems to be more comfortable with churches which are declining and failing, perhaps because of a dependent relationship that is forged.

Incidentally, part of the reason for our limited view of power is that we are by nature a male hierarchical system, and we act accordingly. Sally Helgesen says that the best way to understand such male systems is to understand either the military or high school football.<sup>7</sup>

I remember what I learned in high school football: that competition was king, that winning was the only thing. We were trained to do anything to win, as President Bush claimed regarding the recent election. Our task was to intimidate, dominate, hit the opponent so hard that he would not get up. The truly committed gave up everything for the fight: body, time, relationships, studies. Power was finite; if the other team had it, then we did not.

In short, the Lutheran community has had great ambiguity about church growth, with negative attitudes prevailing for the past generation. I believe we need a paradigm shift, a new understanding of evangelism and leadership. As Callahan asserts, we need missionary pastors and leaders.

<sup>6</sup>See the editorials by Carl Braaten and Robert Benne in *dialog* 28 (1989) 243-246.

<sup>7</sup>Sally Helgesen, *Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

## II. A NEW KIND OF LEADERSHIP

What kinds of changes in leadership do we need for such a shift?

Four ideas:

1. Mainline churches need to rediscover spiritual leadership. A spiritual leader is not the same as other leaders, not just a manager with spiritual sensitivity. Instead, a spiritual leader is one who is first led, who is in touch with the Spirit of God, who is connected to the resources of the faith. Spiritual leaders, those who have an unlimited view of power, find ways to experience God.

Many traditional Lutherans tend to be left-brained, afraid of anything which moves toward the right brain, such as experience, emotion, intuition. Morton Kelsey suggests that during the first 500-600 years of Christianity it was thought perfectly natural for a Christian to

have an encounter with Jesus, a spiritual experience, an indwelling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> But in recent years the major emphasis is on knowing God only through the intellect and the study of history, not through personal experience.

Perhaps we need to emulate Jesus' forays into the wilderness, where we can find a place to be alone, to listen, to pray, to meditate, to be open to God. Perhaps we need to find ways to empty ourselves, so that God can fill us up again. We talk about being saved by grace, but we work as though we are redeemed through work.

David Ramey suggests that the most effective leaders are those who know how to go out into the wilderness, to disconnect, to be away.<sup>9</sup> In our modern culture of frantic activity, this is far easier said than done. In my own life I have found it almost impossible to disengage from the church. Even when not working, I was still there—in daydreams, thoughts, nightdreams. Vacations were often a time of study, reading about church matters, thinking of new strategies, writing sermon outlines. Most friendships centered around pastors and church.

Only when I went into the wilderness on a sabbatical leave, only when I learned I could be emptied, did I begin to find a sense of grace, of God's presence. And then, finally, in a place of quiet and peace, I heard, over my well-rehearsed objections, that it was time for me to disengage from that which had become so powerful, to find a new place where the Spirit might move in me more freely. Leadership for growth needs to be led, to be open to the emptying and the quiet, to listen to the Spirit, to affirm experience.

2. In order to provide leadership for growth, we need to understand what is taking place in leadership development today. Old models such as the enabler, the professional pastor, or the private family chaplain will no longer suffice. Both theory and practice of leadership must be reexamined.

One of the most helpful understandings of pastoral leadership comes from

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<sup>8</sup>Morton Kelsey, *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1972).

<sup>9</sup>David Ramey, *Empowering Leadership* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1991).

Edwin Friedman, who concludes that two styles of leadership predominate within the church today.<sup>10</sup>

The first style is that of charismatic leadership. A charismatic leader tries to use a magnetic personality, a compelling vision, a passionate voice to lead. Such leadership is often very effective, bringing about dramatic change in a system, creating enthusiasm and passion, galvanizing people into rapid action. Most new and creative ideas come from charismatic leaders, most innovation and imagination flows from their influence.

The second style is that of consensus leadership. Here the focus is not on the persona of the pastor, but on the will of the people. Process is more important than progress; unity, ownership, and agreement are the goals. The strong emphasis today on the private family chaplain certainly fits this style.

However, Friedman says that both styles have serious problems. Both of them are unhealthy for both the leader and the led. Such styles tend to build dysfunction, giving far too much power to dependent people, to extremists, to the very needy. In addition, such systems take far too much energy by the leader, and so pastors tend to overfunction. This is especially true in a

hierarchical system where the pastor tends to be a hero. Two major problems for such leaders are that they tend to give away personal power and tend to overfunction.

Friedman suggests a new leadership paradigm; he says a leader must do two things: self-define and stay in touch. Sometimes this style looks charismatic, at other times it comes close to consensus. But it is intrinsically different. When a pastor self-defines and stays in touch, the emphasis shifts from the personality to the position, a leader remains a self while still a part of the whole.

Friedman says that while many leaders know how to stay in touch, far fewer have the capacity to differentiate themselves, and by far the fewest have the ability to remain connected while self-defining. The size of the parish has little impact on this model: an elephant's head has as much influence on its body as that of a cat. Self-defining means stating goals, setting standards, naming what the leader will do and will not do. It is by far a healthier model than either of the other options.

3. To provide leadership for growth, a pastor must help create a vision for growth. Obviously a pastor does not shape the vision alone; a charismatic leader will work with a few in this enterprise, a consensus leader will try to work with everyone. But it is the pastor who needs to articulate the vision, to help create the climate for growth. A pastor gives the theological and philosophical underpinnings for such growth, and this can only happen if there is vision. A pastor is not the only force for growth, but in the present system a pastor can veto such growth.

Whenever you talk about growth, the dynamic of change is never very far away. Growth leads to change, and all change brings resistance. Congregations often fear change, build roadblocks, create sabotaging techniques. When we wax eloquent about the new wine of the gospel, people enthusiastically offer support,

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<sup>10</sup>Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

but when we talk about new wineskins, they often respond with a sense of grief and loss.

A congregation with one worship service wishes to expand to two, the second with an alternative format. A church with a private family chaplain history calls an evangelical public leader. A church with a facility that stands empty much of the week begins a child care center. A neighborhood that has been largely white and middle class begins to attract a much wider racial and cultural mix. Change happens, and how a congregation handles change will largely determine its future.

Leadership for growth helps shape a vision which can facilitate growth and manage change. Futurists predict that we will have more change in the 1990s than we have experienced in the past three decades. What this means is that we are facing insistent, dizzying, accelerating change. A leader must know how to understand and interpret change.

4. A leader is best known by what happens to the led. The litmus test of effective leadership is how much the followers are empowered. Loren Mead documents how lay leadership has been fundamentally ignored within Christianity: the first major book on the subject was not written until the late 1950s. Today just about everyone talks about empowering laity, but as yet little is being done. As Mead says, we are basically a clergy-dominated church.

Max De Pree says that the measure of leadership is not the quality of the head but the tone

of the body.<sup>11</sup> Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving?

Jim Krile, the director of the Community Leadership Program for the Blandin Foundation, asserts that the major leadership task of the 1990s is to create healthy communities.<sup>12</sup> The foundation will not admit individuals to its program; people must come as a group so that an entire community will be impacted. They have come to the realization that most continuing education for leaders does very little good. The key is to empower a much wider group of people and thus change the community.

The Lutheran Leadership Institute, which I direct, will have as its most important task the empowerment of lay leadership. Once this goal has been established, then a key question will be what kind of clergy we need to carry out this mission. What kind of theological education is essential? What kind of leaders must be equipped so that we can empower the congregation?

Leadership for growth is a crying need within the Christian community. The day of the professional minister, the private family chaplain, is over; the day of the missionary pastor has come. The day of the clergy-dominated church is over; the day of lay leadership has arrived. The future of the church will be determined largely by how well we respond to these changes in our midst.

<sup>11</sup>Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup>Personal communication.