



To Lead or to Serve?

We used to know how leadership in the church should be exercised: the call to lead was a call to serve. The church leader was to be a servant of the word of God and a servant of the people of God. The leader was called to serve by others who recognized in him (or, less often in those days, her) the qualities of leadership.

Now, however, issues around leadership have become newly politicized. Would-be leaders began to put themselves forward for “call,” and others began to say that was alright or even desirable. Critics pointed out that there was a strong exercise of power in those “servant” positions, and that the power had not been evenly distributed. The whole notion of servanthood came under attack by liberationists and psychologists who saw in it a terrible potential for abuse, a way to keep victims victims. Both bureaucratic managers and evangelical strategists began to look much more directly to business and cultural models for effective leadership.

Now, of course, there was always politics in the church; there was always interdependence between church and culture; there was always criticism and change. So the new questions are neither totally new nor altogether wrong. Yet, of course, they might be wrong; or at least some of the proposed answers might be wrong or short-sighted or unbelieving—just as the solutions back in the days “when we knew some things” were sometimes wrong or unbelieving.

So, how are we to judge these matters? Amid all our attempts to get it right, to make leadership both effective and just, to keep it both innovative and faithful, what does the church know about these things? Of course we will borrow from the culture. Of course we will use the same criteria of judgment available to anyone to evaluate how things are going. But is there anything the church knows about leadership that nobody else knows? Only one thing, I think: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

So apparently back when we thought we knew something about leadership we did know something. Not that we always carried it out—or even believed it. Not that we did not use language of servanthood to hide oppression. But then we were (or should have been) called to account by these words which define leadership among the disciples of Jesus. No doubt, we know some things now, too, and among them is an uneasy sense about “servant” language. This may signal health, or it may hide unbelief. So now, too, we need to be called to account by the same

words of Jesus. It is the one thing we know for sure: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

This issue opens with three essays examining leadership from different points of view. First, *Marc Kolden* offers a Lutheran theological perspective on parish ministry, one which sees the pastoral office as a means to create and sustain faith through the working of the Spirit in word and sacraments. Kolden spells out what this traditional definition will mean for both pastors and

congregations as they work together to do ministry locally.

A feminist perspective on leadership for ministry is presented by *Lynn N. Rhodes*. She, too, is not content to stay with analytical observation, but offers specific goals and directions for developing new leadership patterns in Christian communities.

In a third perspective piece, *Mervin E. Thompson* reacts against the Lutheran caution about church growth and calls for new leadership styles. His interest is in developing a self-defined spiritual leadership with a clear vision for the future and a commitment to lay involvement.

John Koenig introduces the Articles section with an analysis of leadership in the New Testament. He offers the following definition: leaders are those led into prominence as servants of Christ and endowed with special gifts of discernment and boldness. Koenig suggests several ways this New Testament perspective might inform the contemporary church.

President *Barbara Wheeler* of Auburn Seminary urges us to examine both the advantages and disadvantages of the recent tendency to view the church as a system like other systems. The insistence on efficiency and productivity are important, she thinks, but the church also needs to promote creativity, initiative, originality, and courage—characteristics often not highly valued by a systems approach.

President *Darold H. Beekmann* of Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary pleads for a pastoral leadership that properly reflects the source and purpose of ministry. He fears the present “fixation” on leadership may actually undermine the gospel by emphasizing the personal skills and qualities of the leader.

Lee Snook has taken teaching in Africa as the occasion to think about how African church leadership can be exemplary for western churches. Western individualistic culture may not yield leadership in and with community as well as African tribal culture.

Mary Miller Brueggemann presents several concrete suggestions for those involved in ministry in conflicted congregations. To help return a parish from infighting to mission, the leader’s work will require care in listening and in planning worship and attention to integrity and boundaries.

In a thoughtful and personal account, Pastor *John H. Siefken* calls the church to faithful witness in its difficult ministry to the older (and often declining) suburbs. This ministry has neither the mystique of inner-city ministry nor the growth potential of newly developed areas, but the residents are no less in need of the gospel.

Word & World devoted an issue last year (12/2) to questions for the church emerging from the voyages of Columbus. Now, in the midst of the 500th year after his first visit, the Resources section begins with *Rod Maeker* and *Carl Volz* going Face to Face about how to think about what this all means.

Then, outside the theme of this issue but within an ongoing conversation regarding the place of Christian worship in evangelism, *Paul Westermeyer* argues for careful balance between tradition and innovation. What will it mean for our discussion, he wonders, to stress what God does in worship rather than what we do?

How do we preach on the hard texts? That is *Walter Sundberg*’s question in Texts in Context. He works through the story of Jephthah’s daughter as a model.