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What Kind of Leadership for Tomorrow's Churches?*

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As surely as the minister must today be prepared for a changing social context, he or she must also come to terms with norms and expectations for leadership that differ from those employed by the church in the past. These norms and expectations are not often stated or explicitly taught. They are subtler than that. They are the proverbial water in which we swim, so much a part of our cultural attitudes that we rarely or never notice them. But every seminary and every church body as it deals with its ministers uses these assumptions about ministry all the time. Ministers themselves encounter such expectations daily. Anything that so persistently shapes the work of the church and theological education deserves our critical attention. Therefore this essay will examine how our images and expectations of ministerial leadership have been changing; it will then try to evaluate the effects of the change.

I. PAST IMAGES OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Ideas about church leadership have always been linked, of course, to convictions about what the church is. Images or metaphors often provide the best clues to people's convictions and feelings about an abstract notion like "the church." The vast literature about the Christian church contains hundreds of images. The church has been cast metaphorically as everything from a prostitute to a hippopotamus. But certain kinds of images have dominated in the past, giving a clue to ideas about the nature of the church and its ministry, and other images dominate now.

If one reads tracts, sermons, and especially hymns from the English and

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American nineteenth century, for instance, one is struck by the militarism and royalism of images of the church. The church is an army; in the inevitable great war of truth against falsehood, or of salvation against sin, God's foot soldiers look for leadership to the chief commander, Christ. In this church as fighting force, leaders are, of course, generals. Many of our predecessors in the ordained ministry conceived themselves in precisely such roles: officers in the army of the Lord. Almost equally prevalent is the language of kingdom. (Both of these images have, of course, plenty of biblical precedent.) Christ rules; we, his subjects, submit and obey. Leadership, in such a monarchical view of the church, is in the hands of the king's deputies and overlords, who enforce his justice and distribute the fruits of his peace.

In the Protestant generations before ours, these authoritarian images of church and ministry, one belligerent and the other juridical, were softened by more sentimental figures: the church as family, in which Christ and his surrogate, the minister—reflecting the social values of

the time—exercise authority as father; the church as body with interdependent parts and Christ and the line of apostolic leaders as the clearly preeminent head; and finally, the rural image of the church as flock of foolish, wandering, but beloved sheep, with care and leadership vested in the wise and loving shepherd.

This is a rich collection of images, extraordinarily varied. In their time, some of these images drew on immediate or contemporary experience (body, family, army) and others relied on myth or distant cultural memories (flock, feudal kingdom), but all had one feature in common: the authority of leadership was firmly established. Whether as military vicar, feudal overlord, father of the family, head of the members, or pastor, the religious leader (and this usually meant the clergyman) was clearly authorized and empowered as Christ's delegate. Further, the tasks of leadership, conceived according to these images, were extraordinarily demanding. The energies, gifts, and abilities required were prodigious for a job variously construed as military strategy, just and humane government, strict but loving parenthood, regulation of the members of the body, and the spiritual nourishment of the flock. In all these images the wisdom, fortitude, compassion, and forcefulness of the leader were critical to the welfare of the church.

Some of these images have lost their power for contemporary Christians. Most of us would go far out of our way to avoid military metaphors for church life and ministry. To the modern mind an organization which does its work by killing hardly seems to capture the spirit of one which claims its mission is to save and enhance human life. Royal imagery, too, makes us uncomfortable. It violates our democratic sensibilities. We do not believe that our leaders derive their authority solely by divine right, so the metaphor of kingdom does not help us make sense of our experience of Christ governing the church. We do use the language of shepherds and flocks, though I wonder how many of us urban Christians know anything at all about the behavior of sheep or work of shepherds. Such pastoral language is probably for us more a kind of incantation, a way of talking Christian, than it is a vivid image.

A few of the older images, on the other hand, still have real power for us. The church as family, for instance, is an image that continues to compel us, though we increasingly reject the notion that the father has automatic superior authority. Perhaps most enduring has been the portrayal of the church as human body or living thing. Our language about church life, about ministry, and indeed about much of human existence reflects the influence of the image of the body. We hear a great deal of talk in church settings about moral, emotional, and spiritual *growth*. We trace patterns of *development* in particular congregations and in the professional ministers who serve them. In both individuals and churches we identify *stages* or *cycles* of development. All these terms are metaphors, the result of comparison with living organisms which are born, grow in predictable directions, and die. The prevalence of such talk demonstrates the continuing influence of an image of the church as a living organism.

II. THE MODERN IMAGE: THE ORGANIZATION

If one reads very widely in the popular literature about the church and its ministry of the last 25 years, however, one quickly becomes aware that, whatever the residual power of family or organic images of church and ministry, they have been joined and overshadowed by a more powerful image, the image of the church as an organization, a system that works rather like a machine.

The idea of the machine is not, of course, new. Since the enlightenment, philosophers have argued that the universe is best understood as the working of rational principles established by science. The church resisted such ideas for a long time. The enlightenment bias against the supernatural was viewed as a challenge to many of Christianity's most cherished claims and especially the authority of the Bible. In American churches a major battle about enlightenment ideas was fought late in the last century and early in this one between liberal modernists who accepted such ideas and fundamentalists who opposed them.

The battle seemed to end in a kind of draw, but in the last few years we have seen a fascinating phenomenon. Though Christians of various theological stripes still do not agree about the relation of biblical faith and scientific learning, most have increasingly accepted a scientifically informed, technological view of the church. The church, in almost all recent liberal and conservative literature, is most often portrayed as an organization, a mechanical system which can be improved by careful attention to its dynamics—a term from physics—or to the effectiveness of its program, another way of talking about productivity or output.

Most manuals for local churches these days provide technologies—technologies to promote expansion, to solve problems, to promote smooth functioning, to improve effectiveness. To this end, the best techniques developed for production-oriented organizations are borrowed. The devices of modern management, of organization science, of sophisticated communications, are specifically tailored for churches. Not to take advantage of such technical, rational wisdom, most authors argue, is simply poor stewardship. The church has a great deal of work to do; it

would be wasteful and foolish, even sinful, for it to deny itself techniques that can make it a more powerful and effective human organization.

What is the job of the religious leader in a church which is understood as a mechanical system? It is much like that of a foreman in a factory or a manager in a corporation. Most important for leadership in such roles are an understanding of how the system works, the technical skill to make improvements or changes in the system, and, since the foreman or manager cannot run the system alone, the ability to motivate and enable others to keep the system operating smoothly and productively. A good enabling manager or minister, it should be noted, is one who gives service to the system a higher value than service to self. Systems, whether mechanical or human, also place a premium on replaceability. When a part, a manager or a minister breaks down, it should be relatively easy to make a replacement. Without this kind of interchangeability the system comes to a halt. Finally, all the elements of a system must be open to evaluation. How well does any one part of this system, including its manager or religious leader, serve the functioning of the whole? This must be regularly assessed, so that weak or inefficient elements in the system can be improved by training or, in dire circumstances, taken out of service.

Contemporary structures that regulate admission to and standards in the professions, including ministry, operate on the model of a corporate human system that is itself based on the model of a machine. At the admissions end the concern is to assure that those entering a professional system have a certain understanding of the system and its unique workings, the technical skill to manage and direct it, and enough loyalty to give it priority over service to self or to competing systems. After a minister or manager is incorporated into the system, those who

maintain the system must pay attention to the evaluation of productivity, retraining when necessary (note how often continuing education for clergy is referred to as "retooling," another telltale of the mechanical basis of our contemporary ideas about ministry), and to the replacement of worn parts. In a physical system, parts have problems like metal fatigue. In the church it is often failure to function or "burn-out" that causes a minister to leave a position, a vacancy to be declared, and the church's system for replacing ministers to go into action.

III. BLESSINGS AND CURSES

What are the advantages of this image of the church as a system, and what are the problems? Are we better off as a church than we were when the metaphors of kingdom, army, and flock of sheep dominated our thinking and influenced our criteria for religious leadership?

In at least one way we are very much better off. The systems model of the church brings with it a richly deserved judgment on the arrogant wastefulness and laziness for which church organizations have been famous over the centuries. Too often we have claimed that the church's illustrious origins and high purpose, founded by Christ to be a light to the world, make it exempt from ordinary requirements of efficiency and prudence in its use of resources. The systems image has shown us that such a view is foolish and selfish; it has helped in concrete ways

to *make* the church a better, more efficient, more responsible organization. To the extent that this has occurred, the image of the system has been a blessing for the church.

But the mechanistic understanding of the church has also become a curse, or at least a very big problem. One danger of any powerful image is that, at the height of its power, people confuse the image and the thing that is being compared to it. This has happened over and over in the church's history. In times past, for instance, the church convinced itself not only that it was *like* a kingdom, but that it *was* a royal or imperial organization. We are in danger of doing the same with the image of system—forgetting that it is only a metaphor. When this happens, when we convince ourselves that the church is primarily or even entirely a system, not just that it is *like* one, we are in great danger of suppressing the church's unique identity. We then ignore or overlook or devalue features of the church that do not fit the image of the system.

Here is an example: A systems view emphasizes productivity and effectiveness, and we give clergy, congregations, and denominational bodies high marks if they produce growth—both new members and new, more effective programs of mission. A church that shrinks in size or does less work is said to be dysfunctional. You can find biblical support, though, for the idea that one of the roles of the church is just to continue to exist, even to remain static, in testimony and witness to the persistence of certain truths about God and human nature. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes, the church's call is to be as much as it is to do. When judgments about the merits of church leaders and communities are made solely on the basis of production, growth, and organizational effectiveness, we have to suspect that the idea of the system may have overtaken the idea of the church.

I want to point to another, more specific danger in our systems view of the church and its ministry: it may lead us to seek and select the wrong kind of leaders. A system works best when it knows what its product is. The training of foremen and managers equips them best to produce and market something after it is decided what that thing should be. That is what corporate,

systematic efforts are good for: production and distribution. For the tricky creative work of deciding *what* to produce, most systems still rely on unpredictable, unsystematic, but creative individuals who are often loners or even oddballs and who do not fit into any system very easily.

What is our situation as mainline Protestants? What do our congregations and denominations need these days? Bigger, better, and more efficient production and distribution of their products? Or a more creative product? The wrenching changes mainline Protestantism is now experiencing raise radical questions about what its "products" should be. It seems unlikely that the same religious goods and services that met the needs of the mostly white, middle-to-upper-middle class, family-oriented churches through most of their American history meet today's demands for inclusiveness, for ethnic pluralism, for attention to changing social roles and structures. Even to figure out the range of possibilities—the combinations of old and new messages demanded by the present time—will take enormous

creativity, initiative, originality, and courage from ministerial leadership of the future.

The systems approach is not designed to uncover and promote these qualities of leadership. The systems way of thinking prompts us to ask of the applicants or candidates for ministry: Will she fit into the system? Does she know enough of its history, polity and programs, and values? Will she be loyal to it? Is she enough like our other professional leaders, in knowledge, skills, and outlook, so that she will fit with them and be able to be promoted into the positions they now hold without causing too much disruption? The systems approach does *not* prompt us to ask—indeed it discourages us from asking—How original and creative is this person? What is unique about him? What will he bring to the church that it not only lacks but doesn't even know it lacks? What can he provide that no one else can? What are his special personal qualities? Does he have the courage to shake the rest of us up a little, to call into question some of our operating routines? Can he discern when it is worth taking a risk?

Similarly, systems thinking prompts us to ask about the fit between ministers and the congregational systems they currently lead and to push for retraining or replacement where the fit is uncomfortable. Systems thinking is not supportive of either clergy or congregations that offer new ideas that are extremely disruptive in their newness; and it discourages loners among clergy and maverick congregations that have a distinctive or unique profile. It even looks askance at rapid church growth when it is unplanned or explosive. At the same time, of course, it judges negatively churches and clergy persons that show no signs of growth, productivity, and change. The systems view gives pride of place to planning and discipline. It favors a middle course, orderly, decorous, and measured.

IV. BEYOND SYSTEMS THINKING

But we live in a time when tradition, order, and systems thinking will not supply all that the church needs. The challenge to us is to reap the best of the systems thinking about organizations and their leadership but not to be limited to that image alone. This means raising to prominence some of the values that systems suppress: diversity, individuality, variety, originality, distinctiveness, courage, creativity, and the propensity to take risks. How can that be done? Here are some specific suggestions.

First, church bodies should examine the rules and policies that affect admission to the

ministry. Increasingly, the mainline Protestant denominations have moved to restrict the seminary attendance of their candidates for ministry to their own denominational schools. The reason often given for this policy shift is quality control: the denominational schools can be expected, at a minimum, to turn out a product of uniform quality, with no major gaps or irregularities of preparation. Quality assurance is a good systems goal, but perhaps church bodies facing the challenge of change need diversity as much as uniformity. Rules about seminary attendance should be shaped to foster both. Similarly, requirements for the content of ministerial preparation should be flexibly constructed. A long list of require-

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ments means that every candidate will get well-rounded general preparation, but opportunities to specialize will be few. Probably most clergy *should* be generalists. A changing church, though, may well need a few specialists with unique gifts. The rules should permit some students to deepen their preparation in one area at the expense of another.

Second, church bodies should take great care in their communications with candidates for ministry. Too often, we seminary educators hear from our students, the church groups that supervise them and denominational offices that send them materials focus entirely on rules, requirements, procedures, and tests of adequacy. This sends a message: that the needs of the system for a certain type of leadership take precedence over their value as individual persons. What students generally do not hear is any acknowledgement of the sacrifices they are making to attend seminary, any gratitude for their unselfishness in choosing this difficult, often unrewarding, profession, and especially any excitement at what they may bring to the church, once ordained. As a result, some of the most talented become discouraged and turn to other pursuits. The loss to the church is very great.

Last, examinations and tests of candidates for ministry as well as evaluations of practicing ministers should be reshaped. Currently these trials are oriented to one of two purposes: to test theological soundness or to evaluate functional competence. Tests of candidates should include something more: questions and exercises designed to prompt original and critical thinking. Candidates should be asked about their criticisms of current church policy and practice as well as required to demonstrate their mastery of them. This would signal to candidates something that is now often smothered under various needs of the church system: the fact that the church in difficult times stands in constant need of reform and requires leaders who have the wit, courage, and originality to conceive and conduct reform.

The ways that churches test and evaluate their practicing clergy should also be revamped. In the systems view, an organization's leaders are simply instruments for getting the job done. If the instrument wears out, it is replaced, since it has no intrinsic but only instrumental value to the system. This view of people as dispensable, replaceable parts makes leadership jobs in systems difficult and risky. Corporations compensate their managers for the risk and impersonality of their jobs by paying huge salaries. Ministers, too, must constantly prove their instrumental worth, and thus like managers they are in difficult and risky positions, always in danger of wearing out, or malfunctioning, and being disposed of. Unlike corporate managers, though, they do not have cushions like large salaries and stock options. Thus it is not surprising that stress in the ministry has become a major problem. There is no security in the role; there is constant pressure on the job; there is no financial safety net if things go wrong. Many people cannot survive long with that

much uncertainty.

These are obviously deep problems that require complex solutions. Revising current approaches to evaluation is only one element of the solution, but it is an important one. Personnel evaluation has become common in churches. It was

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adopted from corporations and other large systems. Useful and helpful as personnel evaluation has been, it has increasingly been employed in unfair and punitive ways. Too often, it focuses on narrow, functional criteria, when the goals of leadership are (or should be) much broader; too often, it leans heavily on popularity measures; too often, it is used cynically, to collect reasons to dispose of worn-out ministers. Where these increasingly common abuses are present, leadership is stifled rather than supported.

Evaluation properly conducted should be complemented by affirmative action on behalf of clergy: employment contracts that include ample time for renewal and rest, and fair salaries. If the church wants leaders for the future, it is going to have to learn to take better care of them. Further, creativity should be encouraged, even where it shakes up the system a little. Continuing education policies should allow creative pursuits, not just job-related training. And congregations at the time of vacancies should be encouraged to look beyond maintaining their present systems to new challenges down the road and the possibility of new leaders who do not look exactly like the old ones.

Church life takes place today against a fast-changing social and religious landscape. As this essay has tried to show, the ideas about church and ministry that regulate our current standards and practices have also changed. Sometimes this change has been to the good. We must continue to be grateful for the advantages that scientific ideas and techniques have conferred on both church and world, and to be energetic in adopting the best modern theory and technique for the church's use. We must also, however, be critical, discriminating, and self-conscious in our use and understanding of the church as organizational system, so that we do not end up idolizing the idea instead of loving the church. We must lift up some of the qualities that a systems view discourages or excludes, especially creativity, daring, fresh insight, and independence. These are chief among the qualities of religious leadership that will be required in the future for the transformation of God's changing communities.