



Models of Leadership for the Congregation

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I. LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A BURGEONING IN THE LITERATURE ON leadership across the disciplines. In late 1997, while researching a particular aspect of my doctoral work, I ran a keyword search one day on one religion and social science database using the word “leadership” and received 4,505 “hits.” In other words, it identified 4,505 articles, essays, reviews, or dissertations that had to do with leadership. More than 2,680 of them were written in the last ten years, 4,106 in the last twenty years, and 399 between the years 1895 and 1975. In the last two decades a plethora of information has been produced about leadership. Whether in the comic strip world of *Dilbert* or the world of politics; from Faith Popcorn’s monthly *The Popcorn Report* to “The Changing Church for a Changing World” conference sponsored by Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minnesota; in the corporation or the congregation, leadership is a “hot” issue. The Lead-

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Our changing culture calls forth new styles of leadership, not only in society but also in the church. Congregational pastoral leadership must be both evangelical and public, seeking to keep the community open to the challenges of a changing world while focused on the gospel.

ership Network of Tyler, Texas, focuses specifically on the issue of leadership in its service to the church community. Both large corporations and congregations devote staff and seminars to leadership development. Many major universities now have formed leadership institutes. Everybody seems interested.

An obvious question emerges: Why are so many people interested? Although a variety of reasons could be cited, I want to look briefly at three dynamics that seem to be driving the current interest in leadership. The first two, the nature of change and the implications of living in an “information age,” will be woven together, while the third, the church’s transition into a post-Christian setting, will be treated somewhat separately.

While history and human affairs arguably have always been intrigued with and influenced by leaders, there seems to be a re-emergence of keen interest in leadership—both in North American culture and in the church—perhaps precipitated by the massive and sudden changes taking place within the aforementioned primary domains of life. We are living in an era of unprecedented change, the “in-between” times, as human history is moving from one age to another: from the industrial age to the info-media age; from the modern world to the postmodern world. Futurist Alvin Toffler calls the period from 1950 to roughly 2025 a “hinge of history” as the old is dying and the new is being born. Others have referred to these times as trying to live in an age of “whitewater.”¹

One of the marks of an age of “whitewater,” as well as an information age, is the changing nature of change. Somewhere in the mid-twentieth century the nature of change itself changed. Change became random and episodic, often happening in quantum leaps. The primary symbol of the larger culture in which we live now is the microchip processor. We live in a world of “raplexity”—a combination of speed and complexity. In this kind of an environment, we have learned that one can hardly survive, let alone thrive, simply by working harder and harder. Doing things the “old way,” only faster, and continually seeking to improve communication are dead ends. Discontinuous change has had a particularly disastrous impact on established church leaders and institutions. Bill Easum contends that “nothing in our past has prepared us for ministry in today’s world.”²

Leonard Sweet suggests that those born after 1965 are the first generation in history that does not need authority figures to access information.

This new world gets information a 1,000 different ways. They want to know something more from their mentors than, “I have to come to you to get information.” They want to know how to perform that information, how to model it, in short they want to be “mentored” in using that information. The whole culture and the underpinnings of culture have shifted from a print culture whose em-

¹The image of living in an age of “whitewater” and the suggestions that precede it are gleaned from the Leadership Network, “Living In An Age Of Whitewater,” *NetFax*, 20 March 1995.

²The insights in the first part of this paragraph are a brief summary of William Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 19-29.

phasis was on representation to an electronic and soon bionomic culture whose emphasis is on participation.³

Change in an age of information affects other spheres of life as well. In the corporate world, people like Stephen Covey,⁴ with an emphasis on values in the business world and his notion of “principle-based leadership,” are suggesting significant changes in leadership models in the public, corporate sphere. Futurist and sociologist Peter Drucker alludes to yet another reason why leaders and leadership are in high demand: “Because the knowledge society perforce has to be a society of organizations, its central and distinctive organ is management.”⁵ Although one can make a distinction between “management” and “leadership,” implied in Drucker’s notion of management in this context is the importance of leadership.

Likewise, within the life of the church in a postmodern, post-Christendom era, there are futurists as well calling for a focus on and re-evaluation of the concept of leadership within the local congregation. This is also a day in which the church is seeking to rediscover and redefine its mission. It is clear to many that a new twenty-first-century church is emerging and that among its chief characteristics are both a clarified focus on its mission and a clear understanding of the cultural context in which it does its mission. Loren Mead’s thesis is that a new church is being born around us, and three things are happening simultaneously:

First, our present confusion about mission hides the fact that we are facing a fundamental change in how we understand the mission of the church. Beneath the confusion we are being stretched between a great vision of the past and a new vision that is not fully formed. Second, local congregations are now being challenged to move from a passive, responding role in support of mission to a front-line, active role. The familiar roles of laity, clergy, executive, bishop, church council, and denominational bureaucrat are in profound transition all around us. Third, institutional structures and forms developed to support one vision of our mission are rapidly collapsing. I argue that we are being called to invent or reinvent structure and forms that will serve the new mission....I believe that we are being called to be midwives for a new church.⁶

Carl George, in presenting his model of the “meta-church,” casts his vote for decentralized leadership, a bottom-up vision of ministry wherein “[t]he church leader of the future will look more like a music director than a bureaucratic leader.”⁷ Finally, Leonard Sweet speaks well to the kind of transition and paradigm shift confronting the church in terms of its understanding of leadership:

One of the most insidious distinctions ever developed by the church is this class

³Leonard Sweet, “The Movies, T-Rex and Vibrational Leadership,” *NetFax*, 17 March 1997, 3.

⁴Stephen Covey has collaborated with Rebecca Merrill and Roger Merrill in his most recent work on leadership and management in *First Things First* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). His previous works include *Principle-Centered Leadership* and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

⁵Peter F. Drucker, “The Age of Social Transformation,” *Atlantic*, November 1994, 72.

⁶Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991) 5.

⁷Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1992) 185.

distinction between clergy and laity—or in secular terms that really mean what we say, the professional and the amateur....The driving force of the church must be the “laity,” not the “clergy.” The pastoral leadership of baptized ministers is missing in the old-line church today....The postmodern church apparently will not tolerate the beloved “benefit of clergy”....This distinction between do-it-all clergy and do-nothing laity is evaporating in favor of new definitions of shared ministries and full-time ministry. Soon only two categories of leadership will be discussed in the church—“baptized ministers” and “ordained ministers.” In fact, if one is interested in actually doing ministry, one shouldn’t get ordained. Ordination authorizes a baptized minister to educate and train other baptized ministers in the art and science of ministry....All Christians are ministers.⁸

We are, particularly in the church, standing at the precipice—or perhaps in the midst—of a crisis in leadership.

In these few pages I want to propose a model of leadership: evangelical public leadership. As a warrant for doing that, however, I believe that it is necessary to identify the primary context from which this model of leadership emerges and in which it is located: the congregation.

II. THE CONGREGATION AS A WARRANT FOR LEADERSHIP

“One of the most enduring features of the American landscape is the steeple, a landmark signaling the presence of a congregation.” According to R. Stephen Warner, “The typical American congregation is a voluntary religious community.”¹⁰ It is my contention that the typical American congregation is a voluntary religious community *and* a public meeting place.¹¹ The authors of *Studying Congregations* begin this revised edition of the *Handbook for Congregational Studies* by asserting that congregations are important.¹² That assertion is a central premise in my understanding as well. As a matter of fact, I will go a step further and suggest that congregations are not only important but also indispensable in terms of understanding the human experience of religion, particularly in America.

After a period of neglect by scholars and denominational leaders, the *congregation*...has returned to the spotlight. Despite neglect, the congregation remains the bedrock of the American religious system. It is in congregations that religious commitment is nurtured and through them that most voluntary religious activity is channeled. Indeed, with due respect for pluralism and caution about overgeneralization, I would maintain that the significance of congregations is *increasing*.¹³

⁸Leonard Sweet, *FaithQuakes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 142-145.

⁹Nancy Ammerman et al., *Congregation & Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1997) 1.

¹⁰R. Stephen Warner, “The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration,” in *American Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 63.

¹¹For an excellent essay in support of this contention see Martin E. Marty, “Public and Private: Congregation as Meeting Place,” in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, 133-166.

¹²Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 7.

¹³Warner, “The Place of the Congregation,” 54.

Furthermore, as Robert Schreiter points out, there is a theological reason to support the assertion that congregations are important, if not indispensable, to the contemporary American religious landscape.

What makes congregations the special places they are is that they are focused on God, in whom they live, move, and have their being. Their members congregate to remember how God has acted in the history of the world and in their own lives. They congregate to discern what is happening to them and to the world today, and to listen for where God is leading them.¹⁴

One quickly notices that for Schreiter, God is the central agent in congregational life. I am committed to seeing the congregation as a public meeting space as well as a public space in and through which God's gospel can and will happen. I, too, believe that God is the central agent—not only in congregations but in the life of God's world as well. At the heart of the presence and activity of God in God's world is the proclamation and embodied presentation of God's word as the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the gospel. It is the power of this gospel that creates openings for the work of God's Spirit, thus potentially opening private life to the public. Insofar as the gospel is the proclamation of Jesus as God's way of being for and living in God's world, and because the church in context-laden, local cultures is the happening of the gospel in and through community for the world, therefore the congregation is public meeting space for the event of the gospel. *The church is necessarily called to be public in nature because the gospel is inherently public in nature.*

Given this understanding of the congregation, there are, of course, a variety of ways in which one can think about and imagine leadership. In the literature one can trace the evolution of thinking about leadership along four basic contours, represented by at least four primary theories regarding leadership and leaders. I want to survey these theories in more cursory manner before proposing another imagination for congregational leadership.¹⁵

III. THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP

Arguably the first theory of leadership, and the one that continues to be deeply entrenched in American culture, is the "great man" theory. This theory grew out of the nineteenth-century notion that history is the story of great men (sadly, women were not even considered candidates for greatness!) and their impact on the world around them. This theory reflects a trait approach to understanding leadership and continues to frame the conversation in terms of public debate, although it is discounted by most scientific study. Thomas Carlyle (*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 1841) is a leading theorist in this school of thought. Trait theorists examine the personality characteristics of the

¹⁴Robert J. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing," in *Studying Congregations*, 23.

¹⁵By and large this survey comes from Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1994) 13-27.

“great ones,” and locate their influence and rise to power in a “heroic” set of personal talents, skills, or physical characteristics. Generally speaking, the three defining characteristics often named are courage, conviction, and character. This theory is illustrated well in the book *Certain Trumpets* by Garry Wills.¹⁶

In reaction to the great-man theory, the situationalists argue that history is much greater than the effects of these persons on the world around them. For instance, social theorist Herbert Spencer (1884) suggested that the times produce the person and not vice versa. Situationalists are less interested in leadership per se and more interested in leaders because of the critical moment at which they lived—a time when a combination of powerful social, political, economic, and religious forces came together. Instead of focusing on a common set of traits, situationalists pay attention to the critical time in history at which various people are called forth to lead. Hence, “What an individual actually does when acting as a leader is in large part dependent upon characteristics of the situation in which he [*sic*] functions.”¹⁷ Abraham Lincoln is a prime example of a leader defined by historical situation and circumstances.

Heifetz notes that somewhere around the 1950s there was a synthesizing of the aforementioned two theories, the primary expression of which is contingency theory. Contingency theory suggests that the appropriate style of leadership is contingent on the requirements of the particular situation.

Transactional theory represents a third theory of leadership. The essential argument here is that one earns the capacity to lead, often by handling the little things well. These theorists focus on the transactions or interactions by which an individual gains influence and sustains it over time. One presupposition is that leaders not only influence followers but are under their influence as well; thus, leaders earn influence by adjusting to the expectations of followers. This was, and in many cases still is, a predominant theory of leadership in the modern corporate setting. Although each of the above three theories is generally considered to be “value-free,” their values, Heifetz strongly contends, are in fact simply hidden.

Eldership is a fourth theory of leadership. Simply put, one lives long enough to lead. In many cultures (sadly enough, and for the most part, not American culture) one lives long enough, becomes an elder, and thus leads. Perhaps the most profound impact that is felt from this type of leadership arises out of the deep and rich wisdom possessed by elders. It is the wisdom imparted by Zaida Zinsmeister, a matriarch and trustee of the vision at St. Peters Lutheran Church in Lancaster, Ohio, during my first week of internship: “I will be your mentor, sir, because what you don’t know *can* hurt you.” I heard it in the Oglala Lakota nation, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in June of 1994 as I listened to Evelyn Garnier respond to my awkward question, “So, what did you used to do?” “My job,” she replied, “if that’s what you want to call it, was and still is to remind my people who they are.” Or finally

¹⁶Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

¹⁷Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, 17.

the 83-year-old grandmother from India who, upon hearing about the fragmentation of the extended family in highly mobile American culture, asked: “But who will tell the children their stories?”

IV. THE JONAH NARRATIVE AS A BIBLICAL WARRANT FOR LEADERSHIP

Before presenting my imagination for congregational leadership, I want to mention a particular model of leadership found in the Bible. Although perhaps not properly a theory of leadership in the more contemporary sense, the historical narrative about the prophet Jonah opens a perspective that I find congruent with what I am trying to say here about congregations and leadership.

Many of us know the somewhat comical story of Jonah only too well. Jonah is called by God to deliver a prophetic message to the people of Nineveh. However, it was difficult for Jonah to imagine preaching to that great Assyrian city. Nineveh’s sin was that they had flaunted their great power, before God and the world, through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. Jonah, we learn, is a reluctant prophet: he found his mission distasteful. In response to God’s call, Jonah decides to run away from, rather than obey, God. God judges Jonah’s disobedience. The result is the strange story of Jonah ending up in the belly of a whale. After much soul searching and some nudging from God, Jonah gives in. God issues the call a second time, and Jonah is obedient. He responds by proclaiming God’s prophetic word to the people of Nineveh. The message was terse, simple in content, and difficult to pronounce, let alone hear: “forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jon 3:4). The result, to Jonah’s surprise, is that the people of Nineveh hear, believe, and repent. God decides not to destroy the city.

What captures my imagination and invites me to take seriously the Jonah narrative as an analogy for leadership are not some of the usual suspects—Jonah the reluctant, recalcitrant prophet or the fact that God’s mind was changed. Rather, it is the manner in and through which leadership was exercised. Look at the third chapter of the book of Jonah: Jonah proclaimed God’s word. The *people* of Nineveh believed God, and in turn they made a proclamation to which the king listened and responded. In other words, the people led and the “leader” followed, all in response to the opening created by the public leadership of God through God’s word. It is, I believe, an analogy for the kind of leadership needed in congregations and communities within our emerging postmodern, post-Christian context.

The first reformation returned the word of God to the people of God. A second reformation, underway at this present moment, is returning the work of God to the people of God as more and more believers come to understand and act on the belief that they are called, gifted, and empowered as ministers of the gospel. Here is the wrong question, I think: “How can we employ more laity as church workers?” There is an underlying assumption here—that all viable ministry happens inside the church walls. The tough question is perhaps the better one: “How can the people of God be deployed by God as apostles to impact God’s world for

Christ?” The challenge before us is to develop on-mission Christians who see their primary ministry assignments to be wherever God has placed them: their homes, schools, workplaces, communities, marketplaces, civic clubs, etc. It is my contention that evangelical public leadership supports the work of God to which the people of God are publicly called.

V. EVANGELICAL PUBLIC LEADERSHIP AS A MODEL FOR THE CONGREGATION

I have yet another imagination for leadership that emerges both from the particular understanding of the congregation proffered here and from the biblical analogy of Jonah, one which I believe to be particularly well-suited for congregations. Central to this model are some core commitments or governing values that will help define the phrase “evangelical public leadership.” They include, but are not necessarily limited to, those that follow.

1. The evangelical public leader understands that the Christian gospel and culture cannot be separated, although they are deeply distinguishable. The evangelical public leader as theologian must maintain this creative tension, yet continually do the hard work of deeply distinguishing through critical, communal theological reflection.
2. The evangelical public leader joins the work of theology as a servant of God’s story, the story of the Triune God of the Scriptures, the “story of Israel and its Jesus, told as a message of final destiny.” This is not only the “God who raised Israel’s Jesus from the dead,” but also God as the One who in the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus bears death into God’s very being.¹⁸
3. The evangelical public leader has a sense of vision, both personally and corporately, yet understands vision as a particular, contextual response to God’s mission, both in the church and in the world. Mission belongs to God—the God who is for people and for the world—and is intrinsic to the Christian faith.¹⁹
4. The evangelical public leader intentionally practices faithful modeling and effective mentoring that is grounded in core theological commitments and governing values, such as those listed above. One models and mentors characteristic marks of leadership that grow out of one’s core theological commitments and governing values that include, but are not limited to, those that follow.
5. The evangelical public leader understands and practices the concept of differentiation as a person living and leading in systems (congregations), and is not only self-defined but also “God-defined” as a person of faith.
6. The evangelical public leader is proactive in encouraging civil, reciprocal, public conversation about issues that matter, and fosters the use of healthy, mature faith language. There is an openness and willingness publicly to engage the issues

¹⁸The reference for the two quotes here is Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 23.

¹⁹See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); Robert Schrieter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

of God's world on behalf of God and a conviction that the local congregation is a key context for this kind of deliberation and dialogue.²⁰

7. The evangelical public leader focuses a process and ongoing exercise of congregational discernment and discovery that seeks to unleash the gifts of the Spirit and the giftedness of the people of God. Leadership is about coaching people in discovering, identifying, affirming, and using the gifts that God has given them; and equipping and empowering others to use those gifts "for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12).
8. The evangelical public leader is realistic about both the possibilities and the limitations involved in using and sharing power, believing in the healthy, benevolent use of power. One is committed to collegiality, effective communication, and collaboration with others in leadership, and finds expression, simply put, through working together and "teaming."²¹

The theory of leadership that is being generated and proposed here—evangelical public leadership—suggests, perhaps, more than anything else that the context of leadership has changed because of the complex and pervasive effect of the changing nature of change itself. The culture of American society, broadly understood, as well as the many and various cultures that comprise it, has changed. The nature and shape of organizations have changed. Structures are becoming less and less hierarchical, mechanical, and institutional and more and more decentralized, organic, and fluid in organizing to accomplish their mission. Therefore, the role of the leader is changing as well.

The time has passed for leadership to be characterized by a "command and control" approach, the goal of which is to be in charge. The emerging role of evangelical public leaders is characterized by different dimensions: articulating, communicating, and modeling the mission, vision, commitments, and values of the congregation; aligning the structure of the congregation—its staff and systems—with the congregation's vision for mission; implementing appropriate mechanisms, processes, and methods that will serve and accomplish the particular vision for mission; gift-based identification and development of leaders at all levels of Christian life, practice, and ministry; and, simply put, leading the change and transition.

As one might expect, there are major implications of this change in the context of leadership and the role of the leader. The how of the leadership that is emerging is based first on being, not doing. Evangelical public leadership is grounded in the *missio Dei*, guided by the Spirit, and focused on the missional vision and values of the congregation rather than gaining warrant by virtue of a hierarchical position. Authenticity in relationships and communication is a fundamental requirement. Leadership grows out of the leaders' self-critical understanding of their Christian identity, gifts, and passion; it is exercised within the context of a

²⁰Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

²¹See Martha Ellen Stortz, *Pastorpower* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

leadership team, wherein the individual roles are determined by one's personal calling and the gifts of others on the team.

In the final analysis, leadership must always fit the cultural setting in which it exists. Thus evangelical public leadership involves being an extractor (and not sole creator) of the vision for mission. Leaders draw out and articulate the collective, context-laden vision of the congregation and then both serve and protect that vision through an ongoing process of open conversation and Spirit-guided discernment. In this process leaders ask questions like "What are the needs, gifts, abilities, and passions in and of this congregation?" and "How do we serve the mission of the Christian gospel in this time and place?"

Evangelical public leadership also involves interpreting experiences along with imparting knowledge. The relationship between knowledge and experience has shifted. In the emerging culture, experience now precedes and validates knowledge. In this experience economy, people generally experience something first, and their experience creates the context for learning. No longer are Christian leaders in congregations mere ecclesiastical information gurus. More importantly, they are guides and interpreters of the experience of the faithful—experience in which they also participate. Specifically, evangelical public leaders do this in the narrative context of God's story and their own particular tradition.

Finally, evangelical public leadership involves being an apostle who leads the community of faith in openly engaging, critically embracing, and mutually transforming the culture. The task no longer is to supply religious goods and services. Rather, evangelical public leadership helps the congregation critically interpret and understand, connect with, and, guided by the Spirit, transform the surrounding culture. Furthermore, leading in this way requires a different set of leadership skills. One must be able to listen deeply and translate in order to help the community of faith discern how it is uniquely able to minister in the surrounding community and culture. One must be able to extract and synthesize, which means discerning the embedded passions, gifts, and abilities of the community and identifying ways in which they can be expressed in concrete, usable forms of ministry. Lastly, an evangelical public leader must be a teller of God's story, which means helping members of the congregation see themselves in light of what God has done, is doing, and has promised to do. The experience of the faithful and their stories are interpreted and understood within the context of the overarching story of God's redemptive history.

I am proposing here a fifth, or at least another, understanding of leadership. Evangelical public leadership is an activity, a theologically grounded, context-laden exercise in Christian life and practice. It is value-laden leadership that names and owns a tradition with a core set of beliefs. Hence the focus becomes clarity of role (public) and faithful exercise of that role (evangelical).

In terms of role, evangelical public leaders are those who actively participate in the corporate conversation and worship of the congregation. A necessary as-

sumption is that the Christian community is to some degree aware of and committed to the mission of the Christian gospel in God's world as well as the congregation's context-laden vision for that mission. Given this key assumption, there emerges both a crucial role and critical task in evangelical public leadership. The crucial role of an evangelical public leader is to participate in mutually critical conversation that is both theological and public—modeling and mentoring a differentiated presence, honoring the gifts and voices of all other participants, carefully attending to the way in which power circulates—always seeking to remain open to others as well as to the Other in the conversation. The critical task of evangelical public leaders is to keep the congregation's conversation and ministry focused on their vision for mission. Evangelical public leadership seeks to keep the community aware of and open to the ever-present challenges of a changing world while centered in and focused on a continual process of discerning the mission of the Christian gospel in a context-laden congregation. ⊕