

It's Not About Leadership

I've got a shelf full of books about leadership. In fact it is now about 50 years since I took my first leadership training to become a counsellor at YMCA Camp Stephens. Since then I've done dozens of other trainings, including a Masters degree.

And maybe it's just because I'm such a thick-headed, slow learning failure, but I've come to the conclusion that what ails us is **NOT** leadership. Or at least, its not about having new, improved leaders.

I've lived long enough to see our church rightly reject the "old boys" hierarchical power and discover that the "whole people of God" sharing-power-through-consensus is vulnerable to its own chaos of including every option, and tyranny of the steadfast dissenting voice.

"Leader" and "Leadership" are becoming respectable again.

Which is a good thing. But there are a couple of significant problems with the way I hear leadership being talked about.

For one thing, I never hear much talk about how long, painful and costly the path of leadership is. Leadership is presented as a skill set that can be learned from a book, or painlessly practiced in a workshop or two.

But when I reflect on my own life experience and the little I know of colleagues whose leadership I respect, all of them will tell stories of making deep, personal, inner changes. Personal work that often has taken decades and always has involved learning from failures - of our own or of others.

Even though I am profoundly grateful - after the fact - for the learning, growth and health I have gained, let's not be glib about the cost, and lets not forget the many good people who have been chewed up, scarred, and lost along the way. We are significantly weaker and poorer because of their absence.

For another thing, the focus on "leaders" as the answer to what ails us is doomed to failure. This approach completely overlooks the broader social / economic / cultural context that is the real source of what ails many congregations.

No amount of "leadership" is going to bring a dead parrot back to life - Jesus notwithstanding. Pretending that all any congregation needs is the right, "effective," leader is just a set up for the poor clergy to personally fail one more time.

For a third thing, there is no such thing as "leaders." That is, what we call "leadership" doesn't exist within any individual. Leadership is a relationship. Lets all say that again:

Leadership is a relationship.

In fact, I'd say that "leadership" exists only as a relationship. A shepherd without sheep is not a leader. And neither is a shepherd who happens to be standing in a pasture full of sheep a leader. The shepherd becomes the "leader" only when a relationship is established with the sheep such that the sheep become "followers." "Leadership" cannot exist without "followership." Lets all say that again:

Leadership cannot exist without followership.

I wonder what would happen if our Presbyteries had a clear way of measuring the level of healthy, effective, fruitful "followership" in our congregations? I'd be willing to bet it would explain a lot of the dynamics we are having to deal with these days.

Because leadership is a voluntary, consensual relationship, there is no guarantee that even the most highly trained, "effective" "leader" will in fact be able to facilitate the development of the leadership relationship. Especially if the leadership that is needed is to change habits. Sheep have minds of their own. Habits and power are difficult to change. The "leader" can invite the relationship, but the sheep can say, "No."

I came away from our recent Conference General Meeting moved by many inspiring moments. But also troubled by the strange disconnect with the turbulence that is happening with so many congregations and Presbyteries. Conference may not be the place for it, but somewhere, we need to start having a deeper, more truthful conversation with each other.

Perhaps we need to add a fourth aim. In addition to:

- Healthy congregations and ministries,
- Effective leadership, and
- Faithful public witness - we should add,
- **Truthful systemic analysis**

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