
Leaders in the Missional Church

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Recently I had an occasion to spell out what kind of leaders I thought the church needed right now. The occasion was a process of curriculum revision at the seminary where I teach. The Dean's request – that each of us on the faculty prepare a statement about what kind of graduates our program ought to produce – pushed me beyond the immediate aims of the curriculum review. I began to realize that the perspectives that pushed their way forward in my response were those that had been nourished by many companions in the GOCN movement who see the “missionary encounter of the gospel with our culture” as the clue to the life and witness of the church. What began as an attempt to grasp the aim of theological education, I quickly recognized, has wider implications. To state the aim of seminary training is to state what you think leaders of the church – both clergy and lay – ought to be like. What I sent to the Dean was really an emerging sketch of a deep curriculum for the continued cultivation of leadership within a congregation as much as it was a description of the formation of pastoral character and action.

For me, the description which follows below represents an emerging vision of those in the church who lead well because they lead missionally. It is not a fixed recipe for any particular kind of success. It attempts a portrait of leaders living in faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That attempt sets a certain trajectory that cuts a different path from what has too easily been accepted as conventional wisdom. The leader is not an entrepreneur. Leadership is not about personal charisma. It does not have to do with surgical, technological precision. Rather, it has to do with being on the leading edge of the missional church's response to the calling and sending of God.

This list is still “on the way”. Perhaps that is best shown by adding to it the comments of a trusted and insightful friend, Laurie Baron. What she adds, deepens the vision and invites others to do the same. In that spirit, I offer these statements about the leaders we need.

- 1, Leaders who know what time it is.** They will be people who possess a discerning historical memory and an expectant future perspective, people who discern the signs of the times. They will recognize what is true of the current era and moment in the history of both the human circumstance and the presence of the church, and they will be able to interpret what makes this time significant within the mission of God.
- 2, Leaders who own shared responsibility for the church's calling.** A personal sense of call to ministry by itself will not be adequate. We will require pastoral leaders who know the church's calling, its missionary identity, and know that the calling includes them. The personal dimensions of their own calling will be oriented within that larger picture, and their calling will be pointed toward helping the church fulfil its own calling.
- 3, Leaders who read well.** They will be people who are able to and who do read what is around them, interpreting what is generally true for many people, and what is particularly true for the people of the most

immediate concrete context in which they find themselves. Along with hermeneutical skills for reading texts (especially the biblical texts) and for reading traditions (their own particular Christian tradition as well as other traditions), they will be readers of culture (and cultures), of social systems, and of the human person.

4. **Leaders with vision.** They will size up where things are and where they are heading if left unattended. They will possess dreams for the future that will be infectious. They will be able to see paths from the present to the approximations of dreams that are possible under the Holy Spirit. They will be always working on the edges of transformation and change for persons, for the Christian community, and for the broader society. They will possess capacities to help churches to welcome, navigate, negotiate and redeem necessary change.
5. **Leaders who envision.** They will be people who are always seeing new opportunities to forge pictures of the alternate which the gospel poses in our cultural settings – whether in worship, where a world is cast and the Bible reshapes our corporate way of envisioning what “reality” is, or in evangelism, where the gospel is said again in the tones and hues by which it comes to vivid expression in the life-worlds of varieties of people in contemporary circumstances.
6. **Leaders full of spirit, grace, wisdom, knowledge and power.** They will have a wide and generous spirit, with a far-ranging ecumenical urge for the unity of the church across confessional, structural and cultural lines that work to divide. They will be deeply passionate for the peace, justice and joy of the reign of God. They will care without bounds for persons as made in God’s image and for the entire created world as made for God’s joy.
7. **Leaders with a deeply-rooted curriculum.** Their vision for the essential ingredients of Christian growth and maturity will be pervasive influences on the personal “care of souls”, the nurture of discipleship, the preaching and teaching of the scriptures, the style of administrative work and the fashioning of the faithful community. Grand curricula such as Paul’s “faith, love and hope” or the covenantal structure of “dependence on God’s care and loyalty to God’s rule” will guide them.
8. **Leaders who believe.** They will believe God with, and sometimes for, the people of God. They will demonstrate and nurture the ability to believe within a secularized environment and nourish fresh ways of holding and commending belief in a pluralist social context. They will nourish faith into the warp and woof of daily life and vocation.

A postscript

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I find one particular point to celebrate, and also find one ingredient missing in this article.

#2: Leaders who “own shared responsibility for the church’s calling” will bring a powerful witness against the clergy/lay distinction that pervades the church. Currently we speak confidently of being “called” to ministry as really the sole and necessary legitimation of that choice. We talk some, but not much, about the church’s calling, and never as the primary call into which all of our personal callings fit. The minister’s calling, yes, but also my calling and everyone else’s, for no one who is called into the Kingdom is left without work to do. But to speak of being called to other work is often suspect. Instead of legitimizing a deep sense of vocation, it’s often perceived as aggrandizing personal preference. It has no “hold”. The sense in this paragraph that all our callings are part of the one mission and calling of Christ to the church on behalf of the world is moving – it clarifies a troublesome image and gives me hope. I’d add #9. **Leaders with humility.** In the push for leadership, I think we risk a kind of arrogance in our clergy that may take the form of over-control and love of power or, maybe just as harmful in the long run, the conviction that they are the ones who know what God is doing. So I would like to see leaders who understand that God’s intention is bigger than their vision – bigger than the church. Leaders who know that the heart of the gospel is a mystery in which we are invited to participate, and that the church’s role – and indeed their own role – in that mystery is a holy calling only partly available to our understanding. We need leaders who are well enough acquainted with sorrow and failure to have developed patience and who are wise enough to listen to critics, sceptics, the tired and the slow, even while pursuing the passion that grips their own ministry.

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