

The Leaderful Church

I would like to suggest a new paradigm for leadership in the Mennonite church. It is, I believe, consistent with Anabaptist teaching if not its practice. This new way is about collective leadership, about the priesthood of all believers. This new way holds up footwashing as a value greater than charismatic leadership. This new way develops common values over knowledge. This new way seeks to develop leaderful churches rather than great leaders for churches.

Traditional leadership has hierarchy with rules which are made by people of position and that are followed by people who are made to respect position. Traditional leadership views people as human resources that have needs which, when met, will provide services as required. Leadership has been a term used to describe better ways in which to exercise control over these resources. Traditional leadership may well be exemplified in this statement by American General H. Norman Schwarzkopf: “To be an effective leader, you have to have a manipulative streak - you have to figure out the people working for you and give each tasks that will take advantage of his strengths? That part of the job isn’t fun, unless you’re a real Machiavellian.”

A leaderful church builds on the strengths of its members, placing great importance on community, and seeks to develop all the gifts of that community. A leaderful church seeks common vision based on clearly agreed upon values. The leadership in this church is defined by its collective action over the actions of its formal leadership structure. Being leaderful is not only an ideal practised by the early church or our Anabaptist forebears. It is today seen in leading management theory as the quality of a progressive organization with a strategic advantage over its competition.

A leaderful church has dynamic energy, which is not controlled but rather focussed on shared values and beliefs. It is a living system, which creates dynamic action that is constant. Its strategic advantage is a collective will to be the best they can be in every situation. They do not need leaders to define their worth or their future; these each member defines for him/herself based on common values and vision.

If observed, what would we see happening in a leaderful church. I suggest there are six

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things which would happen constantly in a leaderful situation. Doug Bowie, former vice-president of Petro Canada and past president of the Niagara Institute, now at the University of Calgary, describes them as: doing; organizing; contexting (see the current reality); symbolizing (modelling); purposing; exploring.

I think we can all understand the doing and organizing part, given that this is most of what we observe in churches today. These are skills that can be learned at most professional schools, including our seminaries.

To build leaderful churches we must assist the membership to do and organize in the context of the current reality. We teach context by ensuring we are present in the current reality, rather than cloistered in our parochial schools and church communities or, even worse, judgmental of the current reality at the expense of distancing ourselves from it. If Mennonite young people are not trusted to be ‘in the world but not of the world’ we have mistrusted our ability to pass on our values.

In doing this we are also symbolizing or modelling our beliefs and values. The consistency between action and word are critical in a leaderful church. We teach this by helping people to understand themselves and to embrace their strengths and weaknesses.

Leaderful churches are purposeful, bringing meaning to their doing and organizing, rather than seeking conformity to rules or tradition. We develop purposing by teaching critical thought and analysis and by encouraging open and constant communication.

Leaderful churches are exploring as they grow in their desire to be more and better. This is the desire of all living organisms, including leaderful organizations.

A leaderful church is a living system, doing, organizing, contexting, symbolizing, purposing, and exploring.

A leaderful Church would embrace servant leadership for all of its members. Such a church builds community and emphasizes the personal growth of its members. It embraces stewardship, awareness, persuasion, foresight and conceptualization. It teaches listening, empathy and healing.

There is a consistency between leaderful organisations and the ideal of church exemplified in the early church, one longed for by our Anabaptist forebears.

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My hope is that that our discussion of power and authority can move beyond leadership development that is individualistic or institutional. And that this discussion moves toward collective or community leadership to the creation of a leaderful church.

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