



## The 2005 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

With Imagination and Love: Leadership in Youth Ministry

### Introduction

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The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

The theme for the 2005 lectures is “With Energy, Intelligence, Imagination, and Love: Leadership in Youth Ministry.” The final question asked of elders and ministers at their ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is “Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?” It is a question that would well be asked of any persons called to work in youth ministry, be they volunteer leaders, parents, pastors, or youth directors. Ministry with young people certainly requires energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Energy for all night lock-ins, keeping up with middle school youth, and dealing with conflict; intelligence for theological reflection, education, and addressing complex issues raised by ministry; imagination for envisioning a future and helping young people to discern God’s call in their lives; and plenty of love to enfold youth and their families in God’s care. These four qualities are the marks of faithful leadership. The 2005 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore these qualities and offer Christian perspectives on leadership for youth ministry. What is the proper response to the question “Will you seek to serve the young people in your community with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” I will, with God’s help.

May these lectures feed your mind and renew your passion for ministry.

Amy Scott Vaughn  
Director of Leadership Development  
Institute for Youth Ministry  
Princeton Theological Seminary

## 2005 Lectures

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Reginald Blount

In Search of Living Waters: The Seven Spiritual Yearnings of Youth  
Journeying with Youth toward Living Waters

Stephanie Paulsell

Indoor Exploration: Reading as a Spiritual Practice for Children and  
Youth  
Tell Them Stories

Christian Smith

On “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” as U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De  
Facto Religious Faith  
Implications of National Study of Youth and Religion Findings for  
Religious Leaders

John W. Stewart

Leaders’ Proven Practices: Don’t Leave Home without Them



## Leaders' Proven Practices: Don't Leave Home without Them • *John W. Stewart*

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My purpose in these lectures is to outline how leaders of contemporary Protestant communities might implement a more enlightened, effective, and faith-filled leadership and to introduce youth leaders to some of the current thinking about leadership. I am eager to do so because, as one youth leaders' Web site puts it, "We believe that God's Plan in building His Kingdom requires fully developed student leaders ready to assume real leadership roles" [<http://www.leadertreks.com>]. To that bedrock conviction I would add another: when persons in leadership roles in Christian communities lead poorly, they unwittingly neutralize and even negate their other roles as preacher, teacher, and mentor. In the words of a wise James Wind, the president of the Alban Institute, "Congregations cannot rise above their leadership, and faith communities cannot develop without visionary leaders."

I intend to approach this lecture from the perspective of a Christian practical theologian. Practical theologians examine and interpret essential Christian practices from *within* a theological or normative perspective. *At the same time*, they appropriate (some say baptize!) insights derived from the social sciences to illuminate those practices. For example, the practice of preaching borrows insights from Scripture studies, communication theory, and rhetoric studies; counseling borrows insights from Christian affirmations of humanity as well as psychology; Christian educators who gear up disciples of Jesus integrate modern understandings of human development. Practical theologians like myself who focus on congregation-based ministries link ecclesiology (that is, beliefs about the nature and marks of the Christian church)

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with the insights derived from organizational theories and a subset of organizational studies, that of leadership theory. Practical theologians try to get two different dancing partners to swing together. Sometimes this dance is smooth like a waltz. At other times, it feels more like “dirty dancing.” In congregational studies, ecclesiology and organizational theories are partnered for good reasons: the Church of Jesus Christ is both transcendent to and embedded in a particular culture or society. While we believe the church is continuous over time, there is no such thing as a culture-less congregation. No congregation is hermetically sealed off from its cultural context. Furthermore, there is not a culture “out there” and an isolated church “in here.” The host culture’s language, values, aesthetics, social structures, and “habits of mind” are already embedded in any congregation. Churches are composed of red-blooded, culture-laden humans, not robots. At the same time, a local Christian congregation, in seeking to be faithful to its risen Lord, constantly struggles not to become captive to the norms of its host culture. Frank Burch Brown puts this struggle this way: “As religion develops, it must orient itself both in relation to the culture of its origin and in relation to the contemporary cultures it encounters—each of which presents alternative possibilities that religion may reject, modify, or eventually adopt.”<sup>1</sup> When we Christians are at our best, we are both in the world but, hopefully, not entirely of it.

My favorite illustration of this “Christ-and culture” interplay takes place every year on the first weekend of July in a little hamlet named Cedar, Michigan. For decades, the Polish immigrant folks of that area have sponsored a lively Polka Fest. From 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. one polka band plays after another. The local tennis courts are transformed into dance floors. Kielbasa and beer provide nourishment. On Sunday morning, however, the local Roman Catholic bishop comes to say Mass. Children, who danced with grandparents the night before, are now dressed up as acolytes. The same polka band that inspired the dancing now accompanies the liturgy. With joy and familiarity, hymns are sung in polka rhythms. The homily and the celebration of the Mass ensure that the gospel will be proclaimed and tasted. The polka music ensures that ordinary people will worship in a culturally meaningful way.

Current studies about leadership in modern organizations, such as businesses, educational institutions, or governmental bureaucracies, are now produced in mountainous proportions. However, most leadership studies by social scientists do not have volunteers in mind. In this light, many current leadership studies are of limited utility. Those who serve as pastors and lead-

ers in congregations must lead parishioners who are, first and unforgettably, volunteers. Pastors and youth leaders do not lead employees or subordinates or clients or grade-receiving students. These followers participate in explicit and well-defined power-based structures. They must abide by established processes, and their logic is foreign to congregations. If, for example, a volunteer fails to show up for a meeting or reneges at the last moment on a mission trip or refuses to prepare properly, pastors cannot dock his or her salary as a way of changing negligent or counterproductive behaviors. What is particularly challenging and problematic in congregations—and especially so in youth ministries—is that we must lead by persuasion and covenanting and sometimes (if the truth be known) by shame imposition. We know the technique: “Hey, Joe, we really missed you at the meeting last night.”

This generalization about volunteers works alongside another. Social scientists like Wade Clark Roof and Robert Putnam have helped us understand why leadership in congregations can be so fragile and baffling. Roof’s book *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* is indispensable for comprehending mainline Protestant congregations.<sup>2</sup> It substantiates what most of us already know. Most mainline Christians in North America participate in religious communities *on their own terms*. Church members attend when they choose; behave the way they feel; contribute what they choose; and believe what they prefer. This so-called postmodern socio-cultural milieu makes leadership roles and responsibilities for pastors and youth leaders peculiarly perplexing. Little wonder that many have quipped that leading volunteers is like herding cats.

In this lecture, I propose that church leaders in this contemporary North American society can lead more effectively if they will engage and perfect certain practices. I intend to center my attention on six leadership practices. While they are not definitive or exhaustive, they are, in my opinion and experience, proven and essential. They have grown out of my experience and reflections as a former youth pastor, a solo pastor, a senior pastor and, now, as a researcher on congregational life in North America. I confess up front that I am mostly familiar with “mainline” congregations and will concentrate my thoughts on these kinds of ecclesial communities. The leadership issues and practices in other Christian communities, such as megachurches, emergent churches, racial and ethnic churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox congregations, and an assortment of para-churches, are all worthy and important, but they usually exhibit leadership traditions that are stylistically diverse and often idiosyncratic. For my purposes, I want to focus on recognizable and

essential practices. I want to contend that these practices promote effective leadership in Christian congregations. Like any other skill, I believe they can be learned if given a fair trial and modeled by competent mentors. They are practices that leaders ought not to leave home without.

### **1. *Effective Leaders Voice a Faithful, Shared Vision***

No task is more important than that of the leader's responsibility to articulate a vision for his or her organization. Virtually every textbook about leadership, outside the church or inside it, underscores the urgency of this leadership assignment. The consensus of these texts is that any leader ought to be able to articulate the controlling purpose of his or her organization in clear, memorable language and do so in five minutes or less. In his enduringly influential book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge writes, "At its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question: 'What do we want to create?'... Just as personal visions are pictures or images of what people carry in their heads and hearts, so too are shared visions pictures that people throughout the organization carry. They create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities."<sup>3</sup> I once was in the audience where Stephen Covey (author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) proposed that a vision statement in an organization functions like the picture on the box of a jigsaw puzzle. It is easier to put the pieces together when the picture is known and much more efficient when everybody knows or gets the picture. Few maintain that this task of vision casting is an easy one. In fact, a premier figure in organizational leadership studies, Peter Drucker, says that most non-profit organizations (read congregations here) cannot answer two questions: "What business are you in?" and "How is business?"

The renowned cognitive psychologist at Harvard University, Howard Gardner, in his richly insightful book *Leading Minds* found that the effective leaders he studied excelled in the art of creating a narrative. Narratives unveil core moral convictions and promote purpose. They are the carriers of meaning and agents of solidarity. The speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., especially the "I Have a Dream" speech of August 1963, excel in this leadership artistry. Gardner acknowledges that the "cognitive intelligence" revealed in storytelling can be rooted in despicable convictions, as in his case study of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Others, however, like that of Pope John XIII (of the 1963 Vatican II fame), "took ideas and themes that had long existed within Christianity—indeed since the time of Christ—and gave them fresh expression and new

meaning.”<sup>4</sup> I reference Gardner’s work because it provides a grounding for our understanding why vision casting by leaders is so vital a practice. An appropriate vision embeds the group’s ultimate intentions. It tells *why* a group is doing what they are doing. It is not a description of *what* they are doing or *how* they are doing things. A vision is not the same as goal setting or program creation. A vision explains why goals and programs are worthy.

I love the title of Brian McClaren’s new book about Christian communities, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*.<sup>5</sup> Most of the thriving churches I encounter are driven by, forever talking about, and creatively programming within a corporate vision that brings hope and direction. The best of them are haunted by the question: “What is God wanting to do *through* us?” Rick Warren’s widely circulated book *The Purpose-Driven Church* is a notable example of this kind of envisioning.<sup>6</sup> Vital congregations “read off the same page.” They keep their “eye on the prize.” Yogi Berra had it right: “If you don’t know where you’re going, you could end up someplace else.”

But here is the rub: Christians are neither free nor entitled to make up our own vision for a Christian community. Christians are not free-wheeling entrepreneurs. It may be true, as the Scriptures claim, “Where there is no vision the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18 KJV). But it is also true, that the church can perish with the wrong vision. We Christians are called to gather into a community of disciples who affirm the lordship of Jesus and who live under the divine mandate to engage our world with faith, hope, and love. Most main-line denominations begin their governance documents by highlighting their vision of a Christian church. My denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), articulates its vision in its *Book of Order* by naming “the great ends of the church” (G-1.0200). Among the “ends” listed are, “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind;...the maintenance of divine worship;...and the promotion of social righteousness....” Presbyterians envision that a church will become “a provisional expression of the Kingdom of God.” In this light, congregations, and particular groups within them, are always adapting, realigning, reimagining, and reforming “according to the Word of God” (G-2.0200). In his seminal work on ecclesiology, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Jürgen Moltmann puts it this way: the churches of Jesus Christ are in continual transition “to something else, to the Kingdom of God.”<sup>7</sup> Out of such foundational convictions, and under the nudging and prodding of the Holy Spirit, Christian communities are constantly focusing and refocusing their programs, agendas, and structures in order to fulfill the

mission that Jesus inaugurated and expects his followers to complete. Again, as Moltmann puts it, “Every statement [read vision] about the church is a statement [read vision] about Christ. Every statement about Christ also implies a statement about the church.”<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate this practice of leaders who articulate a shared vision, let me turn to a concrete experience in one congregation, a church that I deeply respect. The new pastor of this congregation decided to lead a group of selected lay leaders through a close reading of the book of Acts. They convened weekly for seven months to discern what the Spirit of God was calling them to become and do. They asked, quite simply, what God was doing through those earliest Christian communities that would be instructive for them. They wanted to examine the church before it became “muscle bound” with committees and bureaucracies. As the end of their consultations neared, they concluded that their primary focus ought to be developing disciples rather than detailing the duties of membership. Inspired by Jesus’ mandate to be his witnesses and buoyed by his promise of the Spirit’s empowerment (Acts 1:8), they resolved to put three questions to every aspect or program of the congregation’s ministries: (1) “What kind of disciples are you intending to deploy into the world?” (2) “What kind of communities are necessary to deploy these disciples into the world?” and (3) “What kinds of leaders are necessary to lead those communities who are deploying disciples into the world?” These three questions were prompted by a vision of a congregation wedded to disciple making and disciple sending. Their questions implied that it would require well-led supportive communities (read small groups) to accomplish their mission. This team of church leaders dreamed of a congregation whose members would be equipped to act faithfully as Christian witnesses in the worlds of businesses, trades, schools, clubs, social structures, and governmental offices. Their questions simultaneously provided a framework to address three persistent organizational needs: (1) the need to clarify the overarching purpose of their community’s activities and structures; (2) the need to help prioritize their limited financial and personnel resources; and (3) the need to “market” (if I dare use the term!) their church’s purpose for seekers outside their membership circle. Finally, the three questions provided a measuring index by which leaders could determine whether they were moving, in the Spirit’s timing, forward or losing ground. Those three questions would help focus the basic vision and intentions for any youth ministry. They also go a long way in answering Drucker’s questions: “What business you are in?” and “How is business?”

## 2. *Effective Leaders Work Through Teams*

If my memory serves me right, it was in the 1970s that Lee Iacocco, the mind and marketer of the Ford Motor Company's famed Mustang automobile, appeared nightly on TV. With swagger and gusto he announced that you "lead, follow, or get out of the way." This "command and control" style of charismatic leadership was already headed for the same obsolescence as the Ford Edsel and for good reasons. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the civil rights crises, and the Watergate fiasco, Americans indulged a deep distrust of governmental and institutional leaders. At the same time, a galloping globalization thrust America's political, business, and educational leaders into new and uncharted waters of Asian markets, the Middle Eastern oil crises, African impoverishment and racism, Latin American revolutions, and strange worlds of religious pluralism. While working amid this baffling cultural milieu, scholars who studied American organizations uncovered a new paradigm of leadership decidedly different from the Iacocco style. This newer group of executives intentionally operated in teams and emphasized decision making via small groups. Influenced by the social psychology of Abraham Maslow and his "hierarchy of needs" theory, these executives employed a style of leadership that was more collaborative and collegial. As one scholar put it recently, it was "leading from the middle."

In 1978 James McGregor Burns published the immensely influential treatise on "transformational" leadership, a term that was quickly adopted by leaders in a wide variety of American organizations. The aim of leadership, wrote Burns, is to "generate a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and converts leaders into moral agents."<sup>9</sup> The key idea here is turning "followers into leaders." Many of you will recognize that this lingo has been adopted by many church leaders. Many other scholars adapted and augmented this "collaborative model" of leading, but I'll mention just one. In 1990 Judy Rosner published an influential article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled "Ways Women Lead." Rosner found that women's strategies of leadership were inherently "interactive." Unlike many of their male counterparts in businesses and universities, women "encourage participation, share power and information, enhance other people's self-worth, and get others excited about their work."<sup>10</sup> The women leaders she and her colleagues interviewed wanted the people around them "to feel that they are contributing to a higher purpose and that they have an opportunity to learn and grow."<sup>11</sup> Much of the current leadership literature generally assumes the

insights of Burns and the “wisdom of teams.” We can pretty much conclude that there remains a broad consensus that teams do make better, more creative, and more responsible decisions than solitary individuals.

It is worth a small excursion to note that another stream of ideas flow through and around the territories of transformational and collaborative theories of leadership. Social scientists, such as Robert Greenleaf, argued in the early 1980s that effective leadership hinges on whether or not a leader intends to serve. Even though some feminist authors were unimpressed, the “servant leader” model has attracted a wide following in the last decades of the twentieth century. Max De Pree, a devout Christian, a one-time president of the board of trustees of Fuller Theological Seminary, and the former CEO of Herman Miller Furniture company in little Zeeland, Michigan, insists that leaders are called to act as “servants” on behalf of their followers. He believed deeply in the rule: “Abandon yourself to the strengths of others.”<sup>12</sup> It may be less well known that the metaphor of the leader as servant has a distinctly Christian lineage. In a masterful study of leadership in the earliest Christian communities, Andrew Clarke has highlighted that language and titles for the early church’s leaders as servants or ministers that were decidedly different from their contemporaries in businesses and governmental bureaucracies of the Roman Empire. That early church ideal was, in turn, rooted and modeled in Jesus. Every one of the gospel accounts picks up this theme: “I am among you,” he said to the disciples, as “one who serves” (Luke 22:27). Or, as Matthew has it, Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matthew 23:11). Or “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). The earliest Christian reflections about Jesus that designate him as God’s “suffering servant” were incorporated into the designations and titles for church leaders. This “servant leader” theme continues to permeate many popular studies of religious leaders, such as Henri Nouwen’s *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*<sup>13</sup> and J. Richard Love’s *Liberating Leaders from the Superman Syndrome*.<sup>14</sup> The well-known Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., has recently developed the “Servant Leadership School” that many of its members attend (for more information, see its Web site at [www.slschool.org](http://www.slschool.org)). But I need to return to the more particular practice of leadership through teams.

Practical theologians like myself are especially impressed with these insights about the collaborative leadership styles highlighted by the social scientists. One reason for our endorsement is the long, though not uncontested, tradi-

tion that Protestant communities are best guided by a council of wise persons. In fact, this governance paradigm or polity style was one of the revolutionary issues of the Reformation era. Many Protestant reformers were uneasy with putting church decisions in the hands of one leader, usually a pastor or bishop. The Reformers often referred to the witness and precedents of New Testament communities. They remembered passages like Matthew 18:20 where Jesus promises that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” The Reformers often appealed to the book of Acts, chapter 15, that describes the early Christian community addressing a perplexing dilemma: must a Gentile become a Jew before he or she could become a Christian? To discern and decide, they assembled in Jerusalem the best and wisest heads they knew. They listened to testimonies, consulted the wisdom of Hebrew Scriptures, debated openly and fairly, and prayed for the Spirit’s guidance. In the end, they made the best decision they could and notified the outlying churches. Luke T. Johnson’s pivotal book *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* details how this collaborative process worked in the communities of the New Testament era and suggests how it can operate in ours.<sup>15</sup>

A large reservoir of resources is now available to help any current church leader in his or her commissioning and nurturing of a leadership team. One of my very favorites comes from a gifted pastor, E. Stanley Ott, now located in the Pittsburgh area. Ott is a rare bird in contemporary mainline congregations. He carries in his pocket a doctorate in organizational theory, in his head a fine-tuned theological perspective, and in his pastor’s heart an evangelist’s passion. His most recent book, *Transform Your Church with Ministry Teams*, is a gold mine of ideas and insights about team-based ministry. And they are all congregation-tested and congregation-proven. He calls leaders to minister *with* others rather than minister *to* them. If I were in the pastorate again, I would make his book required reading for all lay leaders! Ott explains why teams are much more than the “guiding coalitions,” as sociologists tend to call them. Ministry teams are the “confluence of a purpose driven ministry and small group life.”<sup>16</sup> Effective ministry teams *do* have programmatic responsibilities, but they are also called to nurture deep human needs for *koinonia* or fellowship, to foster discipleship, and to encourage accountability by covenanting with one another.

Before closing out this practice of leading through teams, I must underscore one important observation. It takes a team to generate substantive

changes in volunteer organizations like congregations. It is highly unlikely that a single personality can alter the direction of an entrenched voluntary organization. If you are thinking about making significant changes, you also need to recruit a team of colleagues who will help navigate through the storms.

### ***3. Effective Leaders Equip Others to Lead***

I want to introduce this third practice with two illustrations. I was once in a gathering with Richard Nelson Bolles, the author of the influential job-hunting book, *What Color Is Your Parachute?*<sup>27</sup> Bolles, at one time an Episcopal priest, said the most important question that an interviewer can ask a candidate for any job is this: “What significant thing have you accomplished through others?” The implication of this question is that leaders are neither “lone ranger” operators nor control geeks who micro-manage everything. Rather, significant leaders work effectively with and through others to accomplish significant and demanding tasks. And that leadership style requires the training of all other colleagues.

My second illustration comes from my daughter-in-law. She is an upcoming young executive with Johnson and Johnson, the pharmaceutical giant. Four times in the last four years she has been selected to help plan how her company’s sales force will introduce a new medication. Her superiors required that she come to the Hyatt Hotel in Princeton, New Jersey, for two weeks of training. From 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. she was taught how to teach others to market one lonely pill. She was given only one Saturday afternoon for free time. The leaders at J & J would not dare market a new product without extensive training and preparation of their sales personnel.

Virtually every textbook on leadership that I know quotes Harvey Firestone’s dictum, that “The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.” Many texts cite the Xerox corporation’s “Leadership Through Quality” program. This program began with training the highest levels of management and moved through each level until every employee was trained in the company’s philosophy and problem-solving processes.<sup>18</sup> This modus operandi is repeated hundreds of times in businesses and most other organizations. I continue to be puzzled why church leaders would ever think that they could recruit others for important and complex tasks and then neglect to prepare and empower them to succeed.

When practical theologians begin to reflect on what it means and requires to train others, a flood of biblically grounded ideas rush in. The New Testament testifies that Jesus spent much of his time in the “training of the twelve.” Someone once said that the disciples were on a three-year camping trip with Jesus. At one point he teaches them how to read Scripture (Luke 24). On another occasion he teaches them how to pray (Matthew 6). In a poignant moment, in the midst of a discourse about leadership and service, Jesus put a towel over his arm, washed the disciples’ feet, and thereby demonstrated how the greatest must be the servant (John 13). When he alerts the disciples to his coming separation from them, he reassures them that the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, will “teach you all things” and they need not “to be afraid” (John 14). According to Jesus’ way, leading others involves a divine summons to prepare, encourage, and empower.

But there is more to this biblical wisdom. In the letter to the Ephesians, leaders of a congregation (like pastors and teachers) are instructed “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12–13). I know of no clearer mandate for contemporary church. And I know of no better unpacking of this demanding text than Greg Ogden’s *The New Reformation*. To implement this mandate “to equip the saints” Ogden draws up three interrelated responsibilities. First, saints will need to be continually mended. The Greek word for “equipping” sometimes means mending. That is the original word the gospel writer used when Jesus comes upon Peter and John who were “mending” their nets in order to fish more successfully. To equip the saints in this sense is to attend to the mending of emotional, physical, and spiritual human needs. Second, to ensure a growing maturity, saints will need to be continually taught. In this second sense, “to equip” means to make sure that faith claims and wisdom for living are well established. And third, “to equip” implies the need to provide ordinary Christians with the tools and skills training necessary for accomplishing their ministries. If church leaders would keep those three activities—mending, teaching, and providing—in their minds and agendas, they would go a long way toward practicing and perfecting a more effective leadership.<sup>19</sup> Let me put it more bluntly. Church leaders are not called to recruit others merely to help with “the family chores” like painting the nursery or raking leaves. Rather,

leaders are responsible for equipping disciples *of all ages* for their witness and mission in an apathetic and debased culture.

I know of several Presbyterian congregations that now ask newly elected elders to commit to a four-year term, rather than the normal three. Before they ever step foot in an official meeting, the electees are guided through a year-long curriculum that includes such topics as the biblical and theological foundations for the church and its mission, the wisdom involved in making decisions via teams, and the strategies for handling conflicts constructively. Have your youth leaders ever thought of writing a training curriculum for your volunteer youth leaders? The Protestant church is in desperate need of such a syllabus.

Sue Mallory, a gifted writer and experienced trainer of contemporary church leaders, has written such a resource. I would encourage you all to secure a copy of her wise and practical book *The Equipping Church*.<sup>20</sup> She will help you step by step to design ways to become an empowering and equipping leader. It is hard but fulfilling work.

#### ***4. Effective Leaders Handle Conflict Constructively***

Handling conflict is a daunting topic. I learned recently that you can pursue a doctorate in “Conflict Resolution.” And there are good reasons for this enormous attention. Conflict in organizations, including congregations, is multifaceted, multilayered, and probably inevitable. I recognize that some conflict can be as brutal as two persons butting heads, like ram-sheep on a mountainside. Jockeying for domination and protecting turfs seem generic to organizations. I was recently called into a congregation where the pastor and the associate pastor had not spoken to each other in four months. They communicated with each other via e-mails. But there is more to conflict in organizations than personal animosities and jealousies. One reason for conflict in organizations is that they must cope with limited resources of personnel and finances, limited time, limited energies, and limited imaginations.

These limitations are especially present in voluntary organizations like congregations. But another reason for conflict is that many organizations, and especially congregations, are unnerved by competing priorities. A feature writer of the *New York Times* (*NYT*) is a member of the congregation that we attend. Recently, while teaching a class on the ethical issues that confront newspaper editors, he related that even a newspaper like the *NYT* is caught between printing “all the news that is fit to print” with journalistic excellence

and the need to keep the *NYT* profitable. The newspaper's editors argue and scrap over which of these priorities ought to prevail. The issue is not whether organizations will have conflict. The ever-present challenge for leaders is how conflicts will be acknowledged and managed.

Most every text on leadership studies about conflict delineates the difference between negotiating conflicts in an atmosphere of cooperation *or* an environment of competition. The former features open communication, emphasis on similarities, trust building with an end goal of mutual problem solving. Such a process requires mutual trust, courage to acknowledge the conflict, and some consensus about measures of accountability. The latter usually features minimal communication, unbending suspicion, secretive lobbying, and, too often, the demeaning of opponents. To say this another way, there is a distinction between "fighting fair" and "fighting dirty." To fight fair is to concentrate on the divisive issue but to do so with good faith and with an intent at arriving at a negotiated resolution. To fight dirty is to win by attacking the personality or personal traits of the other. Once, when I was trying to moderate an intense debate about a controversial congregational issue, a woman elder said to a male elder, "What kind of a man are you that would want that?" And he replied, "What do women like you know about any of this?" That meeting, of course, disintegrated.

Scholars at the Alban Institute located outside of Washington, D.C. have worked out measuring devices and indexes to identify the levels of severity of conflict in congregations. These scholars, such as Speed B. Leas, are reliable resources for helping church organizations alleviate paralyzing dissension. More recently, however, a sociologist with a deep love for churches, Penny Edgell Becker of Cornell University, studied closely the conflicts in several different Protestant congregations. Her research discovered that lasting and debilitating conflicts in congregations were ultimately grounded in competitive visions and variant core purposes. What really chafes and divides are the differing assumptions (Senge calls these "mental modes") or core values of influential members. In some ways, this is why my first-mentioned practice of leaders—voicing a shared vision—is potentially divisive if not addressed gracefully and openly.

With this in the background, let me illustrate how one congregation I served tried to become proactive in "heading off at the pass" petty and hefty conflicts. The pastoral staff, support staff, and the elders initiated this homespun process by covenanting with each other. We laid out just four

“understandings,” and I would commend them to any leader in any congregation with any ministry:

1. We covenanted that when any conflict arose (e.g. a perceived slight, a misunderstanding, a boundary crossing, et. al.), the involved persons would address that issue privately within forty-eight hours. “Owning up” and “going public” sooner rather than later is better than repressing or denying. This covenant also implied that the appropriate parties would first try to resolve the conflict together *before* they widened the controversy to involve others.

2. We covenanted to challenge all “triangled” criticisms. The classic maneuver of “triangulation” emerges when “A” complains to “B” about “C.” Usually in this drill, “A” wants or expects “B” to “straighten out” person “C.” We covenanted that we would encourage complainer (“A”) to address his/her complaint directly to “C.” This is no easy discipline, but it does work. The key to this particular covenant, however, is accountability. After insisting that “A” needs to approach “C,” *then* “B” *must add*, “And I’ll check with you in a few days to see that you two guys got together.” Unless this accountability tactic is faithfully pursued in voluntary organizations, the virus of “triangulation” will abound.

3. We covenanted that when we anticipated that a proposal or program would be controversial, we would put in writing for distribution (a) how the proposal endorsed the congregation’s basic vision and (b) what challenges were anticipated. The strategy here should be obvious: keeping a written document in front of a decision-making group helps to keep the group centered on the issue rather than on the personalities presenting and dissenting from the issue.

4. We covenanted that those leaders responsible for a program would be given center stage to announce, recruit, advertise, defend, and administer that program. In volunteer associations, leaders are rewarded, enabled, and held accountable by public affirmation and up-front visibility. A public announcement of a youth group program, for example, needs to be made by those who lead that ministry.

In intersecting ways, all four leadership practices outlined above encroach on the topic of how organizations face change.

### **5. *Effective Leaders Initiate Appropriate Change***

There is an old jest that goes, “How many seminary professors does it take to change a light bulb?” “Ah...Ch...Change?” Few topics in contemporary organizational theory—or current surveys of the meanderings of Protestant churches—can compete with the enormous attention now given to how and why organizations, and congregations, must change. Arguably, leading change in an organization is the premier topic in current leadership studies. And for good reason: environments—cultural, social, political, economical—change, often radically so, and organizations must adapt or face atrophy. “Retool or retire,” the saying goes. In a helpful survey of this topic, W. Warner Burke writes that “organizations are created and developed on an assumption of continuity, to continue surviving, and to last...[However] factors and forces in an organization’s external environment are discontinuous, do not fit in a pattern,...[and] are not homoeostatic...or highly predictable.”<sup>21</sup> Robert Quinn of the University of Michigan once generalized what happens when an organization meets a challenge that threatens its survival. One of two responses, he maintained, usually occurs. Either its leader will assess the challenge realistically, reconfigure its resources, and initiate a strategy for adaption *or* its leader will allow the organization to drift backward into “comfort zones.” The first move has promise and a future; the second is the first step on the slippery slope to entropy and irrelevance. And it is the leader who is responsible for supervising the one move or the other.

Protestants, meanwhile, are awash with literature that seeks to appraise and resuscitate contemporary mainline Protestant congregations. Sociologists Carl Dudley and Nancy Ammerman write that, “Congregations simply cannot count on stable communities, stable people, or denominational loyalties to keep their flocks in place.”<sup>22</sup> A popular treatment is William Easum’s *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*.<sup>23</sup> More serious attention has been offered by well-known sociologist Donald E. Miller, in his *Reinventing American Protestantism*.<sup>24</sup> A group of savvy theologians argue in the *Missional Church* that too many congregations have abandoned their divine call to witness in a society that is no longer congenial to the gospel’s truth claims.<sup>25</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey in *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry*

outline the “storm centers” through which churches must navigate and what changes are now unavoidably imposed from the “outside” on most Protestant communities.<sup>26</sup> Further listing of this literature would be tedious. Rather, I am eager to try to explore a theological affirmation that undergirds many of these appraisals. Unless leaders of congregations appreciate this principle, their renewal efforts may well become skewed and fizzle out.

The imaginative and quotable theologian, Leonard Sweet, writes in *AquaChurch*, “I am a virtual fundamentalist about the content [of the gospel]. I am a virtual libertarian about the containers [for that same gospel].... Many churches are languishing because they won’t trust the gospel to fit and fill containers with handles they don’t like.”<sup>27</sup> Sweet’s metaphor trades on the image spun out by the Apostle Paul. “We have this treasure [gospel] in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us...so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:410b). Sweet interprets this verse by maintaining that while the content of the gospel remains the same, the gospel’s containers or vehicles are always changing and adapting. Paradoxically, for the gospel’s content or message to remain the same, the containers or messengers *must* change. Or to say this in another way, the gospel is *transcultural*, but it is always communicated in language and modes that are meaningful to particular persons in particular sociocultural contexts. This organizational reality is implicit in, and an extension of, the Christian affirmation of the Incarnation, when the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” ordinary humans. The seductive temptation is—and has always been—that Christian communities tend to absolutize the containers and relativize the gospel’s content. The insight of organizational theorists like Robert Quinn offer major clues why churches can end up preferring and massaging the “comfort zones” of their cultic behaviors rather than engaging the missional risks and responsibilities mandated for the people of God. I once worked with a doctoral student who analyzed the merging of Presbyterian congregations over the last thirty years. She discovered that nearly 70 percent of them faltered. One of the primary reasons for the failures was that people in one congregation could not forsake meeting in their former “sacred space” or building. Organizational theorists call this “the tyranny of custom.” Jeremiah said that God’s people had forsaken God, “the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13). Revelation said, “you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Revelation 2:4).

So when do leaders in a congregation's ministries step up their calling to initiate changes in their ministry and how do they identify what changes are appropriate and constructive? A fulsome answer to these important questions would take us beyond the boundaries of this lecture. But I am willing to offer two very preliminary comments.

First, initiating and executing change is an exercise in discernment. By discernment I mean the interplay between the "givens" of the gospel and the realities of a congregation's sociocultural context. Under the Holy Spirit's tutoring, a group's mission is named, brooded over, and reimagined. In the Protestant tradition, such a discernment process requires a team effort. Group discernment is difficult work, but well-led teams make more faithful and more creative decisions than solitary individuals. This discernment can often be triggered when teams of leaders in one congregation visit and explore comparable ministries in other congregations. For many congregations, this interactive networking process has proven more useful than simply reading another book or hiring a consultant.

Second, I believe there are some telltale signs that signal when substantive changes are called for. Obviously, they are neither definitive nor exhaustive. Change is called for when some or all of the following can be identified:

- *When testimonies reveal too many driving purposes.* Testimonies are personal stories that unveil *why* people belong and participate. Such narratives comprise a database for leaders who are shaping a group's direction and priorities. Multiple and competing core purposes, however, usually generate weariness, blandness, high drop-out rates, and subtle conflicts.
- *When communities or groups have morphed into sameness.* Demographics and statistical data are useful indicators for church leaders. They are one (though only one) indicator of reality. When a congregation or group is the same in age, class, race and ethnicity, aesthetic preferences (yes, think music here!), and routines, something is probably awry. For starters, growth usually requires reorientation in the practices of hospitality. Jesus goes out of his way to engage, teach, and incorporate a marginalized woman of Samaria. He shatters one social protocol after another when he stays and eats with the Samaritans for two days (see John

4). The Apostle Paul scolds the Christians at Ephesus because of their reluctance to welcome the stranger and the different (see Ephesians 2).

- *When membership chores displace the practices of discipleship.* All communities have membership chores. Committee assignments are probably inevitable. The great challenge in contemporary Protestant mainline churches, however, is the competition between issues of membership and the practices of discipleship. Church leaders are called to identify the difference between the good and the best. Churches and youth groups, generally, do not sponsor debased activities. But we are susceptible to allowing good things—entertainment, “hanging out,” and making endless accommodations—to usurp the best that the church has to offer humans, namely, an encounter with a transcendent, gracious, empowering God and a summons to a lifestyle of grace and generosity.

## ***6. Effective Leaders Are Good Stewards of Their Own Christian Identities***

I come now to the sixth proposition. In many ways, this practice is the heart and lungs to all the others. Without it, trying to lead is like trying to run without breathing. It is also a practice that has drawn the attention of many contemporary social scientists. A large body of literature is currently emerging about the ethical behaviors and commitments of America’s leaders. But let me offer briefly three interrelated ideas that practical theologians can borrow for framing this discourse about church leaders and their personal identities.

One way to understand this sixth practice is to affirm what is highlighted in most contemporary leadership studies. These studies insist that virtues commonly found in mature and responsible humans—integrity, truth-telling, faithfulness, industry, modesty, to name a few—are indispensable for effective leadership in any kind of an organization.

A second avenue of understanding emphasizes why leaders need to be self-differentiated from their organization. I remember a bumper sticker I once saw on the back of a pick-up truck: “Who am I when I am not working?” I also remember another: “Work is for those who don’t know how to fish.” When one’s identity as a human being is equated with one’s work and one’s performance at work more than burnout occurs. Something of a consuming

idolatry arises. I once studied under a history professor whose children had to make appointments through a secretary to see him. My wife and I recently took in Brian Dennehy's performance as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. The closing scene at the graveyard is deeply pathetic. Charley, Willy's only friend, eulogizes that Willy was a true salesman. Unfortunately, Charley added, "salesmen have no rock bottom" other than selling.

And still a third way this practice has been framed revolves around the engagement of personal risk. Robert Quinn, to whom I have already referred, heads a major research program on institutional change at the University of Michigan. His *Deep Change* is a work I admire. In it Quinn outlines why promoting basic changes in an organization usually entails personal risk for the leader. "Excellence in leadership is a form of deviance," he writes. "You choose a path that is risky and painful, a path that is not appealing to others.... You do it because it is right."<sup>28</sup> He says there is usually pain and struggle for those who carry responsibility. But here is his key insight: the leader when following the "the right thing to do" must draw on the deep wells of his or her character, values, and courage to survive. I was tired when I put down this book. He does not use the language of "suffering servant," but I think he could.

While these three ways of framing identity issues by social scientists are insightful for church leaders, I believe there is something deeper at stake. Our Christian identity is not, finally, determined solely by what we do. Our "rock bottom" identity is formed in relation to the One to whom, by grace, we belong. Church leaders are called to be "in Christ" long before and long after they are called to a particular ministry in or outside of the institutional church. Ministry, professionalized or otherwise, always begins at baptism, not at some particular appointment or even ordination. We are Christian disciples first and then, maybe, leaders of the people of God. Our faith in Jesus Christ and our discipleship under the Holy Spirit predates, nourishes, and critiques our roles and responsibilities of leadership whether we are situated in a congregation or business or even, pray tell, a seminary. In this light, the ordinary and century-proven disciplines or practices of discipleship—prayer, Scripture emersion, Eucharistic celebration, and companionship with other Christians—inevitably shape and resource the styles and risks of Christian leaders. In a moving autobiographical revelation by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, he told a reporter of the *U.S. Catholic* that:

People sometimes find it difficult to believe that I really can't stand confrontation and strife, because they think of my ministry of standing up to injustice and oppression. But it actually goes against the grain for me. I have a very big weakness of wanting to be loved. I can't bear being unloved, and one of the greatest pains for me in South Africa during the dark days of our struggle was knowing that I was being seen as an ogre of the white people, someone they really hated.... [But] I was supported a great deal by the deep sense of belonging to this incredible body, the Church of Christ and by knowing that people were praying for me.... I come out of a tradition of daily Eucharist, of silence and meditation, and of retreats.... If I stopped praying, if I stopped taking the Eucharist, it would be almost a physical thing, like not brushing your teeth. And I just think that without that we would not have been able to survive the awfulness of apartheid and the struggle.<sup>29</sup>

Now when you and I need to reinvigorate these proven spiritual practices we need to gather with a group of friends and work our way through a text like Marjorie Thompson's sublime book, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*.<sup>30</sup>

In closing, I hope you will indulge a personal reference. I grew up in a southwestern Pennsylvania community of devout Scottish Presbyterian coal miners. I went to a college and seminary where a Scottish heritage, rather than a German or English one, was lively and winsome. During the last class of my senior year in seminary, my beloved Old Testament professor, a Scot named James Kelso, read to my class, as he did to every graduating class, a paragraph from a Scottish author, William Malcolm Macgregor, who died in 1944. I pass it along, as I do to most every class that I teach here at Princeton Seminary. Over the years, this admonition has never been very far from my consciousness. We need a forgiving and generous spirit while reading this antiquated male-dominated language. Some day, I am sure, our grandchildren will also find our language quaint.

There are conditions in a minister's work which put him at a real disadvantage as compared with his people. In the exercise of his call he has, for example, continually to lead them in prayer; he may be depressed, irritated, anxious, secular and yet he must give appropri-

ate utterance to sentiments of a different level. He has to ascribe high praise to God in moments when his real view of life is sordid; he has to pour forth confident petitions for divine grace and assistance, though he never once has had the experience of prayer as heard. As he grows expert in his profession he acquires an increased facility in the use of suitable phrases; but words thus used without an awe-struck sense of their reality are bound to work mischief...and thus for the mere professional, the prayer in which his neighbors find expansion of soul may become an active means of hardening. The same is true of Bible reading which, for the common folk, in all generations, has proved a source of comfort and refreshment, but for the professional the Bible tends to become a hunting ground for [preaching] texts. He does not deliberately explore its richness for his own profit but makes incursions here and there, catching at what his ingenuity can employ for pulpit purposes. From old, Scripture has proved itself a means of communion with God who speaks in it, but for the merely expert craftsman it has no such dignity. And thus, far from devotion being easier for the minister, it tends to be greatly harder, for in trafficking with the externals of religion he may readily delude himself that is devotion [when it] is little more than the dexterity of a trade. It is not safe for him to fall back on his ordination, with prayers and the laying on of hands, as if automatically a gift has been conferred. *Cucullus non facit monachum*—the cowl does not make the monk; the most regular and dignified ordination may leave a man exactly where it found him, a creature with a heart unopened, a mere outsider in the things of God. The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and is discovered through dwelling with God, not through talking about him.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

So I am back to where I began as a practical theologian with a deep respect for many scholars in the social sciences and a deep appreciation for those who lead in congregations. I do believe that these six leadership practices are not only practical but essential for leading congregations in their becoming better “provisional expressions of the kingdom, or reign, of God.”

## Notes

1. Frank B. Brown, "Christian Theology's Dialogue with Culture" in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (New York: Routledge, 1995), 314.
2. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
3. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 206.
4. Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 176.
5. Brian McClaren, *The Stories We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures in a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
6. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 1995).
7. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 25.
8. Ibid.
9. James M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 16.
10. Judy Rosner, "Ways Women Lead," *Harvard Business Review* (November–December, 1990): 125.
11. Ibid., 119–25.
12. Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).
13. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
14. J. Richard Love, *Liberating Leaders from the Superman Syndrome* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).
15. Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).
16. E. Stanley Ott, *Transform Your Church with Ministry Teams* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 9.
17. Richard Nelson Bolles, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1978).
18. N. H. Snyder, J. J. Dowd, and D. M. Houghton. *Vision, Values and Courage: Leadership for Quality Management* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
19. See Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990).
20. Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001).
21. W. Warner Burke, *Organization Change: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), xiv.
22. Carl S. Dudley and Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Congregations* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 3.
23. William M. Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere by Anyone* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).
24. Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

25. Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series, ed. Lois Barrett (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).
26. Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
27. Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 1999), 29.
28. Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within*, Jossey-Bass Business and Management Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 176.
29. Meinrad Scherer-Emunds, "No Forgiveness, No Future: An Interview with Archbishop Desmond TuTu," *U.S. Catholic* 65, no.8 (August 2000).
30. Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
31. William M. MacGregor, *For Christ and the Kingdom: Some Chapters on the Christian Ministry and the Call to It* (New York: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932), 77.

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## **Recommended Web Sites and Journals**

www. Leadertrek.com

A Web site that focuses on leadership in youth ministries.

www.pulpitanpew.duke.edu

This is the Web site for a massive study of pastoral leadership centered at Duke University.

www.alban.org

The Alban Institute is one of the premier “think tanks” in the study of American religious communities. They address many leadership issues in the voluminous publications.

www.leadnet.org

This excellent organization, located in Dallas, tends to address leadership issues in larger congregations.

www.christianleaders.org

This is a new Web site offered by Professor Scott Cormode of the Claremont School of Religion. See especially a section titled “Articles for Christian Leaders,” which reproduces many scholarly articles and reviews about church leadership.

www.hirr.hartsem.edu

The Hartford Institute for Religious Research is one of the premier centers for the study of congregations in North America. Their research, including matters of church leadership, is easily accessed online.

Among the many journals about leadership in America society, the following three are especially appropriate for Protestant congregations:

*Leadership* is a well-known journal sponsored by *Christianity Today* that address grassroots responsibilities of church leaders.

*Journal of Religious Leadership* is edited by Scott Cormode of Claremont School of Religion. It is especially appropriate for linking leadership research in the social sciences with the needs of church leaders.

*Leader to Leader* is a wide-ranging journal that summarizes the research of major voices in leadership studies, especially those related to business enterprises.