

Preparing leaders: Wisdom via the Web?

by [Scott Cormode](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Each week pastors experience exhilarating opportunities and make agonizing decisions. Often the moments of decision erupt unexpectedly. There is no time to prepare. That was the case for Pastor Charlotte Robinson last fall at her church in Almond Springs, California.

Robinson was interrupted in her office by Ansel Richards, an elder in the congregation. "We're gonna have to leave the church," he barked as he banged through the door. "I don't see any other option after being stabbed in the back." He had once again started in mid-conversation and the pastor was trying to catch up.

"Hold on," Robinson said, "What's going on?"

"They've sold our future," Richards stammered. "Why didn't you tell me, Pastor? You had to know that I'd find out eventually."

The pastor tried again as Ansel commandeered a chair. "I can tell you're upset," she said soothingly, "but can you tell me what exactly has happened?"

Ansel sat jiggling his leg. Finally he said in his most detached teacher voice, "I'm talking about the housing tract." It was an accusation as much as a statement. And the pastor had no idea what he meant.

What was Robinson to do? What would you do if you were in her shoes?

It turns out that the second question is the germane one because Charlotte Robinson does not actually exist. She is the main character in a 22-episode drama called *Almond Springs*, part of a Web site for congregational leaders located at www.christianleaders.org.

The purpose of the Christian Leaders Web site is to help leaders prepare for that moment when leadership matters. The idea that motivated the site was the thought

of a parish pastor discovering that a controversy is likely to spring up at the evening's board meeting. What can such a pastor do right then—sitting in her office—to prepare for the controversy? She does not have time to attend a conference, or to take a continuing education class, or to drive to a seminary library. She cannot order a book and wait six weeks for delivery. Yet she is ready to learn. Her interest is piqued because she has a need. That is when the best learning takes place. And that is why www.christianleaders.org exists. It can deliver learning resources directly to a pastor's desktop at just the time when she is most interested in learning.

These learning resources come to the pastor's desktop wrapped in a story. Scholars have long known that leaders learn better through narratives than through lectures or articles. *Almond Springs* is a long, detailed story about a single congregation, a story with lots of places where one can enter and exit. It is constructed like a television show, with short, self-contained episodes. This way the leader who needs resources on a Tuesday afternoon can jump into the story at just the point where the Web-based story mirrors the leader's own story—and find a helpful perspective on her own situation.

Attached to each *Almond Springs* episode are “reflective resources.” Each has, first, a series of Web-available articles that relate to the topics found in the episode. For example, one episode has articles on “conflict” and readings on “staff relations.” Another connects the reader to places to learn about “volunteers” and “leadership.” The articles come from religious sources and from secular scholars. They are not, however, offered as “solutions” to Charlotte Robinson's dilemmas. Presenting the articles in the context of the story makes them, instead, invitations to think more deeply about one's own situation. They evoke creative reflection rather than hawking easy answers.

Besides the articles, the site provides the journal entry Charlotte Robinson writes after each episode. She tries to practice the very creative reflection that the articles are meant to evoke. She struggles to figure out how to prioritize the various layers of pastoral responsibility and how to minister to the conflicting needs of her diverse parishioners. Her journal thus becomes a model for how a pastor might do theological reflection about the work of ministry.

A third resource is labeled “experienced voices.” It contains interviews with pastors who have been asked what they would be thinking if they were in Charlotte's shoes.

These pastors tell stories from their own experiences and relate how the lessons apply to Charlotte's situation. It should be noted, however, that the voices do not always agree with each other. But then that is how wisdom often works. It can lead us in seemingly contradictory directions. Leadership often involves striking a balance between conflicting but credible voices. The Web site contains these voices for the same reasons it has the articles. It is not an attempt to provide simplistic answers to complicated questions, but rather to enable a person to ask deeper questions about one's own ministering situation.

Finally, some episodes have tutorials, because sometimes an episode brings up a learning opportunity that a leader might want to explore more deeply.

Leaders crave wisdom, and wisdom takes practice. Wisdom does not come from a book or lecture. And, contrary to what we might think, wisdom does not come from experience alone. We have all met foolish people who have years of experience, and young people with wisdom beyond their years. Wisdom comes from reflection, reflection that combines learning from articles, advice from colleagues, and experience. The Christian Leaders Web site offers a place for leaders to cultivate wisdom and to practice theological reflection.