Leadership that matters: Lessons from and for the parish

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

A year ago my wife took a leave from teaching middle school to enter a graduate program in school administration. I soon noticed that she and her colleagues were being assigned lots of reading on the topic of leadership, especially on the role of a leader in times of institutional change. A fair amount of this material was literature to which I also had paid attention over the years, including the work of such scholars as James MacGregor Burns, Ronald Heifetz and Margaret Wheatley. One thing was clear: the directors of her program thought that leadership mattered—that a principal made a difference in a school.

I don't see much evidence that churches take a similarly high view of leadership. I don't see material on leadership being read or discussed by clergy, denominational executives or seminary teachers. More ominous is the fact that church leaders often seem ambivalent about leadership itself, uncertain whether it is even appropriate to speak of leaders and leadership.

Why this silence on leadership? I know some of the reasons. Many people are suspicious of leadership because they are suspicious of power and the way it has been abused in the church. But abuse does not rule out proper use.

Another reason is that mainline seminaries and churches have emphasized the minister as an enabler or facilitator. In its extreme form, this approach calls for clergy who claim to have no ideas or direction of their own. "I am here only to facilitate what you want to do." Of course, a leader does serve as facilitator and enabler, allowing and encouraging others to realize their gifts and leadership capacities. But the enabler-facilitator model can also be a smokescreen for a deficit of leadership.

A third factor contributing to silence or ambivalence about leadership is suggested by this cryptic observation of a friend: "You only need leaders if you are trying to accomplish something." The implication of this remark is that church leaders are not

flourishing because churches are no longer trying to accomplish much—except, perhaps, survive.

My own modest reading in the area of leadership theory and practice has provided some insights that are applicable to church life. One seminal work is James MacGregor Burns's 1978 study, *Leadership*. Burns, a scholar of the presidency, brings the tools of the political scientist and the historian to the subject.

Burns distinguishes between transactional and transformational styles of leadership. "The relations of most leaders and followers," Burns writes, "are transactional—leaders approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another: jobs for votes, subsidies for campaign contributions." It's the old quid pro quo.

Transforming leadership, on the other hand, is more potent. "The transforming leader recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand of a potential follower. But, beyond that, the transformational leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the fuller person of the follower." The result of transformational leadership is the elevation of aspiration, the conversion of followers into leaders and leaders into moral agents.

Burns's vocabulary helps us name something that goes on in churches. While Burns tends to attach moral values to these two styles of leadership, it is an oversimplification to label one bad and the other good, or to suggest that one must choose between the two styles. Most leaders offer a blend of the two. Most congregations, for example, have legitimate expectations of pastoral leaders—that pastoral and hospital calls will be made, staff supervised, stewardship campaigns led or supported, worship services planned and sermons preached. When they call a new pastor, many congregations have a specific list of needs and priorities. They may need leadership for a building campaign, or help in resolving a festering conflict. They may want the new minister to hire a capable youth leader, or revitalize a pastoral calling program. Clergy are usually well advised to attend to these expressed needs. By responding to them effectively, trust is established and a minister gains a base of support upon which to build.

However, ministry that operates only at the transactional level—meeting expressed needs—may fail to touch the deepest needs of congregations and of the people who make them up: the need for transformation, for personal and institutional change in

light of the vision and values of the gospel. Clergy who operate only at the transactional level are in danger of allowing the congregation to become an audience or clientele for goods and services. The priesthood of all believers becomes the gathering of religious consumers.

The apostle Paul models ministry that is a lively blend of the transactional and transformational. In many of his letters, Paul responds to specific needs, questions and concerns of congregations. Members of these early Christian communities find themselves struggling with an array of questions—questions about diet, about relations with distant congregations, about the meaning and celebration of the Lord's Supper, or about marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. Paul does not hesitate to respond to particular concerns. Yet in doing so he almost always pushes beyond the immediate problems to deeper issues. All food is acceptable, but let's consider the nature of Christian community and how to relate to people who are not so liberated as we are. "Discerning the body" in the celebration of the sacrament includes awareness of the needs of others and of their inclusion.

In this way, Paul responds to felt needs, but he transforms and reframes them as well. He exercises what Burns calls "the elevating power of leadership." He invites people to become more than they are and truer to their professed calling and grace-given identity.

Burns's distinction between transactional and transformational leaders reminds a pastor to take seriously the hopes, needs and agendas of individuals and of a congregation, and yet not be trapped or driven by them. There is a larger purpose, a higher calling, a new creation to be put before both pastor and people and in response to which both may be transformed.

Edwin H. Friedman's book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* is not, strictly speaking, about leadership. His primary concern is to bring the insights of family systems therapy to congregations. Yet sprinkled throughout Friedman's work are insights into the role and nature of leadership. Some of the best are tucked into the introduction, where Friedman discusses the difference between leadership defined as expertise and leadership understood as self-definition.

Friedman notes that our society, enamored as it is of expertise, often understands a leader as the expert, the one who has mastery over all the relevant knowledge or technique. Yet in social systems such as families, churches and synagogues, such

expertise is not only elusive but may even prove counterproductive. "If we must conceive of leadership in terms of expertise," writes Friedman, "none of us will ever feel adequately prepared."

Instead of urging leaders to be experts, Friedman recommends that leaders develop the capacity for self-definition, the ability "to define his or her own goals or values while trying to maintain a nonanxious presence within the system." He further observes, "There is an intrinsic relationship between our capacity to put families together and ability to put ourselves together."

This is not to say that a glib focus on self or one's own issues is substituted for necessary knowledge. Some forms of expertise and a command of some areas of knowledge are necessary for pastoral leaders. We should have some mastery of the tools of exegesis, homiletics, liturgical planning and pastoral care and counseling. But our greatest strength as leaders lies not in the accumulation of information or technique, but in knowing ourselves and being able to articulate and act upon goals and values that are central to us and which are rooted in our faith.

Friedman's call to self-definition brings to mind the temptation story in Matthew and Luke, which shows Jesus resisting the pressure to define himself in response to others' expectations. The devil tries to evoke Jesus's anxiety and sense of inadequacy. The devil urges Jesus to resort to the application of technique or expertise and to fulfill others' definition of his role. "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." Giving way to these pressures would be to betray his own self-understanding and vocation. Jesus rejects such an understanding of leadership. He defines his goals and values with relentless consistency: "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve God only."

Later in his ministry the pattern continues in a host of exchanges between Jesus and the religious leaders and authorities. They often want to paint him as an expert and then challenge his expertise. One thinks of the story in Matthew 22 where the Pharisees first build Jesus up as an expert and then try to trap him with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. Not only does Jesus elude the polarized alternatives into which they would entrap him, but he manages to be faithful in exercising his ministry by putting the question back into their laps. "Render unto Caesar what is Ceasar's, and unto God what is God's."

Drawing on Friedman's framework, one might describe Jesus's entire ministry as that of defining his goals and vision in the face of pressures from all quarters to betray or deny them.

An understanding of leadership as self-definition provides a helpful alternative to the path of domination on the one hand or facilitation on the other. Friedman suggests that it is possible to say to a congregation or a church council: "This is what I care deeply about and this is what I understand myself as called to be and do," without imposing one's will on others. By being direct and open in this way a leader avoids either will-lessness or willfulness in favor of clarity and conviction. Self-definition allows members of a congregation a sense of direction without imposing that same sense of direction.

Self-definition may sound easy, but it is not. It calls upon leaders to know their own minds, to be steady and consistent in their convictions, and to have the courage of their convictions by being forthright. This is often a great gift to a congregation, for it is a model of integrity that encourages others to act out of their own deeply held convictions. Furthermore, when a leader consistently articulates his or her goals and values, potential allies are enabled to step forward and become real allies. If the flag is flying, it becomes possible to follow it.

A third author whose work holds particular value for church leaders is Ronald Heifetz of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz addresses the nature and challenge of leadership when there are no easy answers or ready solutions. Heifetz distinguishes between "technical" and "adaptive" work. Drawing on medical examples, Heifetz says technical work might involve a physician diagnosing an illness and prescribing a shot or a week of pills which fix or solve the problem. Both problem and solution are clearly definable.

Adaptive work is different. There are two kinds of adaptive work. In one case, the problem is definable, but discovery and implementation of the solution require learning. Heart disease, for example, may require that a patient not only consider and choose among various treatment options but also make appropriate life changes. The second type of adaptive work is even more complex. Here the problem itself is not clearly defined. Simply to understand the nature of the problem requires learning. Chronic illness or impending death often requires this kind of adaptive work.

As the era of American Christendom has ended, and the mainline churches have lost their established status, we face an adaptive change which requires enormous learning to define the problems, much less to locate and implement solutions. Churches may try to approach their challenges as if they were of a technical nature. The problem is defined as "membership loss," and the solution is church growth techniques. But our situation is a great deal more challenging than that. The skills and knowledge, the ways of being the church, that were appropriate and served us well in the establishment era no longer fit the new realities of a much more secular and religiously pluralistic society.

We can see an illustration of adaptive leadership in Moses, who over the long stretch of the Exodus and wilderness journey was engaged in helping the former slaves make a transition from one reality, slavery, to a new one, that of being a people in covenant with Yahweh, a people who are free and responsible in a particular way. The change is a long and labored one, filled with difficult learning for all concerned.

Time and again, Moses is confronted in the years of the wilderness sojourn by those who want a quick fix, a technical solution. "Give us bread," they demand. Manna is provided, but it only points to a deeper source of provision and to the new reality emerging. As in adaptive work, the problem that Moses and his people face is not clearly known or defined at the outset. It requires learning. Nor is there any readily apparent and applicable solution. The solution, such as it is, lies in making the journey, living into the new reality in the midst of an uncertain situation. Heifetz describes the leader's task as "mobilizing adaptive work." Moses mobilized adaptive work in a most literal way, leading people on a journey of learning and transformation.

In many ways, the task facing leaders of mainline denominations and congregations today is to mobilize people for adaptive work—that is, to help people understand the social and religious changes occurring in our time and to enter into new ways of being the church, knowing as we do that we are far from fully understanding our situation or knowing the particular ways we are called to respond. To mobilize people for adaptive work is to help them enter into that zone of risk where new learning and new self-understandings, as well as new ways of acting, can be discerned. This is not easy work. Most of us would prefer to take a regimen of pills rather than face death and resurrection. But it is promising work for which our faith, scriptures and varied ecclesial traditions provide rich resources.