

Why lead? Discipleship as leadership

Leadership is big these days. And I've become suspicious of our emphasis on what looks more and more like leadership for leadership's sake.

by [Adam J. Copeland](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue



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The signature that was automatically included at the bottom of the student's e-mail message listed her college major, the semester that she'd spent studying abroad, a work-study job and her participation in various honor societies, choirs and councils. If the e-mail had been responding to a job offer, I'd have understood why she added this information. If I were a talent scout, perhaps I'd get used to the litany of credentials. But as a college professor I found all this information to be a kind of unsolicited festival of her leadership potential. Is it also a symptom of a misguided concept of leadership?

Leadership is big these days. The pages of the *Century* are filled with ads for church leadership conferences. Duke Divinity School runs a leadership blog. I myself direct a program in faith and leadership for a church-related college. On my bookshelf are titles such as *Leadership on the Line*, *The Spirit-Driven Leader* and *Leadership for a Better World*. My students are hounded from their first week of orientation until graduation with invitations to attend leadership workshops, build their leadership

résumé and be sent into the world ready to lead.

I have nothing against leadership or leaders and sometimes claim the role myself. But I've become suspicious of our emphasis on what looks more and more like leadership for leadership's sake. We may be missing the point.

When I reflect on my experience in the church, I realize that the leaders to whom I'm most drawn are those who *follow* as much as they lead. The distinction can be difficult to detect, as it's usually a matter of disposition, self-awareness and spiritual practice. But the fact is that God calls all of us—no matter the length of our e-mail signature and number of credentials—to *follow* Jesus Christ. Following may eventually require leadership, but it's a particular sort of leadership that's centered and unpretentious.

Around the time of desegregation, black congregations were sending delegations to visit white congregations on Sunday mornings as a witness to the need for integration. There's a story about some elders at one white church who heard about the upcoming visit from blacks and hastily called a meeting. How could they keep the visitors away, many elders wondered. After listening to the debate, the pastor finally spoke up. "You elders can do what you want, but the instant that one of our brothers and sisters is shown anything but the finest Christian hospitality, I'll be leaving the pulpit and not coming back." That settled it.

That pastor demonstrated leadership. But in my mind his powerful words were more about following Jesus' call for justice than bolstering his cred as leader-of-the-month. That pastor didn't wait to consult a leadership coach, pause to "get on the balcony" or take a poll of his core members' opinions. A prayerful, faithful man, he followed the faith in his heart regardless of the elders' anxieties. It looked like leadership, but it was actually followership.

We seem more concerned with equipping our young people with leadership training than with discipleship practices. My students attend myriad leadership seminars, lead student organizations and hear lectures given by famous leaders. These opportunities usually address the *how* of leadership, but they rarely address the *why*.

The story of Jesus calling the disciples in Matthew 4 addresses the why. There's something endearing about how the first disciples drop their fishing nets and follow this man named Jesus. I remember learning the story in Sunday school and acting it

out wearing musty, badly fitting costumes. I had no idea what it meant to be fishers of people, but it was fun to mimic throwing away the fishing nets.

Now when I read the story I'm struck more with fear than amusement. This simple story, spare of detail, is a testament to the power of Jesus' call. When Jesus called to Peter and Andrew on that beach he did not say, "Here are my long-term objectives. Talk my proposal through with your stakeholders at your annual meeting and let me know if your analysis suggests the mission is scalable." Instead, Jesus was abrupt. He said, "Follow," and the spontaneity frightens me. How do I teach this impromptu, instinctive followership to my students?

I know a pastor who received a phone call from a migrant farmworker. A group of 20 workers had traveled to the state capital to testify before the legislature about immigration reform and farm labor laws, but the hearing had been pushed back a day. Not knowing where to turn, the leader began calling downtown churches.

"We need a place to sleep," the farmworker explained when the pastor picked up the phone.

"You mean tonight?" the pastor gulped.

"Sí," he said, "can you help us?"

After a few seconds of silence the pastor responded, "Of course we can. We'll have dinner ready at 6:30 and as many sleeping bags as we can find. We'd love to welcome you at our church. We'll see you tonight."

Following Jesus, even today, can be shockingly abrupt. I bet that pastor angered some members of her congregation that night. Her quick response may not have gained her social capital. There was probably a flurry of e-mails. But that evening over chili and corn bread, her congregation was *following* as its members fished for people.

Our world desperately needs leaders, but not just any kind of leaders. Lines automatically printed at the bottom of an e-mail may be outwardly impressive, but they mean little when it comes to the heart of leading. We need leaders with a passion for the gospel, with Bibles that are worn, with ears to hear and with communities to support them. We need leaders drawn to the work of building God's kingdom instead of building their résumés. We need leaders with admirable ethics and deep faith foundations. We need leaders who follow.