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Conrad Grebel University College

Leaders shaping Leaders: the Critical Task of Identity

I want to begin by saying what a privilege it is for me to be here, to participate in this significant event, and to acknowledge the committed ground-breaking work of Ralph and Eileen Lebold. I know when it comes to a theme such as leadership development for the church, I feel “unworthy to tie the shoes” of Ralph and Eileen. Their long journey on and dedication to this task have been an inspiration to many, myself included, and have produced much good fruit for the life of our church. Evidence of that is sitting all around us tonight. It is good to think together about the leadership needs for the church of the future by honouring the dedicated efforts for leadership development of the past. I thank you for this opportunity to share some insights about leadership with you. Significant parts of my insights are gleaned from the pews of our congregations, and come from the face-to-face engagement with congregations in my tour of churches across Canada last year, and my tour of related organizations this year. Here in Eastern Canada I was so very pleased that David Martin accepted our invitation to participate in these visits, and he too would have much to share with you on this topic of leadership in the church. And let me clarify here at the beginning: when I speak of leadership in this presentation, I am not limited the practice of this to pastors or the pastoral task. While that is clearly very critical, and is a backbone of what we will talk about, the exercise of leadership is much broader. And it is this broad sense of gifted leadership at every level of the life of the church that I am addressing.

But let me begin with a story. It happened during the time of the tour, but is not directly related to a congregational visit. My wife Irene was accompanying me at the time. We had had a long and very intense 10 days already, and had arranged for a bit of a rest on a Monday morning. We were in a place with a hot-tub, and I thought that a Monday morning would be perfect to rest and get away. After all, who would be around in a hotel on a Monday morning?

It was 10:00am and I was revelling in this wonderful, quiet time, with soft elevator music playing in the background, in a hot-tub, allowing my weary body to relax, and my stimulated mind to process what we had been experiencing.

I had been in the tub for just a few minutes, alone, perfect, just as I had imagined, and in came this 40ish man -in trunks. I noticed that his walk was a bit unsteady. He came over, said hello, and climbed into the tub across from me. I noticed that his eyes were a bit glassy, and his speech a bit slurred, and I realized that even though it was early Monday morning, he had already had sufficient drink to be affected, but not enough to be incoherent.

I won't tell the whole story: it's a long one, and one worth hearing. I want to tell only the part that's particularly relevant for this evening's topic. He told me his name, asked mine and where I was from. Then he talked about himself: where he was from, and about his business. He owned a restaurant, he said, and he talked about the intricacies of running a thriving pizza restaurant. Overall, he said it was a really good business, and it allowed him to take time off, relax in a hotel, and enjoy a hot-tub. I will confess that I was not feeling very missional that morning, and was not really interested in engaging him in conversation, especially given the state he was in. I really had looked forward to being alone. He went on and on about his restaurant. At some point he noticed my silence. He stopped talking and looked at me as squarely as he was able, and asked the dreaded question, the question that I kind of knew was coming sooner or later, but which I did not

really want to answer: "And so, what do you do?" How do I explain quickly what I do, especially given that I was not too interested in talking about it? So I said: "I work in administration."

He looked at me again, and after a while he said: "Oh.... But I know enough about administration that you have to be administering **something**, so what **do** you administer?" Well, this is where the story gets really interesting, but I'll stop here. This is the profound question also for us this evening. "We know that we're into leader development, but leaders must be leading toward "something." So what are we leading toward? We know we need leaders, but leaders for what?

One of the insights I gained from my visits to our congregations last year was that we don't need more leaders. I thought we did. But we have plenty of leaders, and we have people with strong leadership capacity at every level of the church. Before the tour, I used to have this vague notion of a leadership vacuum. There is no vacuum. Leaders there are, and leadership there will be. It is not a question of a lack of leadership; it is a question of leaders for what? Leadership as a spiritual gift is already abundantly present in our church. We saw and experienced these sparks and fires of giftedness everywhere. The component of the leadership gifts that needs shaping is the component of the hot-tub question: leadership for something, leaders for what? You can note that part of my answer lies in the title of my presentation: "Leaders shaping leaders: The critical task of identity."

A proverb we often heard in Colombia was that if you don't know where you're coming from and you don't know where you're going, then any bus will do. My suggestion this evening is that in order to give leadership to the complexities of being a church, within the complexities embedded in our world, not any bus will do. The identity and the vocation for this people-hood of God called the church will need to be clear and there will need to be passionate commitment to that vocation.

And that leads me to the second major insight that I gleaned from my tour last year, namely that our ecclesial identity and vocation are not clear. Indeed it is more serious than that: there is no consensus that people-hood is an essential vehicle for the redeeming purposes of God in our world.

And so we face this challenging dynamic which is both a dilemma and an opportunity. There are sparks of strong leadership gifts everywhere but they go hand in hand with an ambiguous, ambivalent, and unclear sense of the necessity for and the purpose of our ecclesial vocation and identity. One pastor recently wrote to me about his perceptions of the status of leadership in our church. After a lengthy description of his experiences, he concluded:

In our denomination, pastors are called to be preachers. Pastors are called to be chaplains. Pastors are called to perform administrative duties for the church. In some cases, pastors are called to be facilitators. Pastors are called to marry and bury. But I'm not sure that our churches call pastors to lead... As a church, I fear that our polity is held with more conviction than our calling.

We hold polity with more conviction than calling: An interesting, yet disturbing observation.

One of the biggest challenges we face is shaping leaders who deeply trust that the ecclesial vocation of people-hood is foundational in God's hopes for the reconciliation of the world.

Two statements from the Bible summarize this remarkable vocation for us. One comes from Deuteronomy where the vision of the impact of people-hood under the influence of *torah* is described:

For this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"
Deuteronomy 4:6

The other comes from Ephesians:

So that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.
This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord..., **Ephesians 3:10-11**

(The choice of Deuteronomy and Ephesians is a Pauline strategy of adapting my message to the audience. I owe my thanks to Derek Suderman and Tom Yoder Neufeld for the many ways they have helped to nurture this vision of people-hood in me and articulate it for me).

The gist of both of these passages is that the wisdom, *torah*, and gospel of God are best communicated to and made operable for the ideological forces and the political powers of our world via a people whose very life incarnates their message of reconciliation, or as Marshall McLuhan would say: a people-hood where the medium is also the message.

I recently asked a professor in a Mennonite college: how does the rubber of an ecclesial vision hit the road of academic rigor in the classrooms of your school? In other words, how does this foundational conviction of the role of people-hood nurture the way you and your colleagues teach? His answer was brief and to the point: "I don't think it does. It's not there."

The complexities of shaping leadership for our church will not be addressed via technique or polity, although these will surely be valuable tools. And the complexities will not be addressed via academic degrees or programs, although these will surely be valuable vehicles. Ultimately the shaping of leadership for our church will need to address the clarity of identity, i.e. who we are as a people of God, and the imagination for our ecclesial vocation, i.e., what do we lead for. The question of the anonymous, semi-drunk man in the hot-tub: I know enough about administration that you have to administer *something*; what do you administer?

Although it may seem unnecessary, it is important to say that our strategies to address the challenges of shaping leaders must begin where we are now, not where we would like to be. The story is told of a traveler who is lost and stops to ask for directions. The local person thinks for a while and answers: "If I were going there, I wouldn't start from here." I'm afraid that many of the books and strategies about leadership development and the nature and the life of the church use this same logic: they do not start from where we are, but from where it would be nice if we were. This will not do. We do need to start where we are in order to go where we want to go.

This business of shaping leaders for the church in a way that there is clarity and passion about its vocation is serious business. In these last days I have been watching the saga of the deteriorating health of Fidel Castro, as short snapshots of his condition are portrayed via his public appearances. As I watch, I have a profound sense of sadness in me and I wonder what might have been. Allow me to explain.

In 1988, I along with 11 other Canadians had an unusual opportunity to visit with Fidel Castro in his office in downtown Havana. We were with him for about 3 hours, from 11pm. to 2am. We had no particular agenda, and neither did he. He wanted to visit with church folks from Canada. We talked about a lot of things. He asked us what we had seen in Cuba and what our impressions were. He talked about his passion to provide health services to Cubans, and make sure that education was freely available to all. He talked about providing shelter for the homeless and more equality for the poor. He talked about the achievements of the revolution and compared conditions to the pre-revolution Batista times. And we indicated that we had seen fruit of these efforts, and that we were there to learn more. And he began to talk about the church, and about the Christian faith. He said that Christians are good and spiritual people, and he joked that we were surely concerned about getting to heaven. And he said: "You know, I think I should get to heaven too. From what you've seen about how we have helped the poor, do you think there's room for me in heaven?"

And he held up a copy of a brand new biography of him that had just come out that week. And he pointed to a particular page, and he said: "This biographer says here that the Cuban revolution was inspired by Karl Marx and the Communist Manifesto. You know, that's wrong. It was not inspired by Marx. The Cuban revolution was inspired by a carpenter from Nazareth who went up on a mountain to teach. And it was inspired by the sermon from that mountain."

And he talked to us about his education in the Jesuit schools. And about how excited he was to learn about Jesus and his teachings, something he never had heard in church. And he asked his teachers how come he could never hear this in the Latin mass; and why they were not told what Jesus taught and how he lived. And he talked about how badly he wanted to know this Jesus better, and how excited he was about what little that was available to him. And then he made a statement that continues to be seared into my memory. Shaking his finger in his characteristic way, he said:

"Remember that the Cuban revolution was in 1959; three years before the beginning of Vatican II. If the Catholic Church in Cuba in 1959 would have been like the Catholic Church in Nicaragua in 1980, there never would have been a Cuban revolution of the kind we know. But the church wasn't doing what it was designed for, and so someone had to."

And now I watch him on TV. And I remember him telling us that his biggest challenge and fear for the post-Castro era is the challenge of how to keep the passion of the revolution alive in the younger generations who are already taking its benefits for granted. And I wonder what the church and the world would be like if he had been inspired by the life of the church and by its potential. What do you think might have happened if Fidel Castro and Che Guevarra would have become bishops rather than dictators?

But most of all, I'm sad that the church failed him. He was passionately searching for identity, vision, and purpose. What he experienced in the church was an oppressive institution: the largest landowner in Cuba unwilling to distribute this life-giving potential to the poor; the owner of the only educational system there was on the island via which the inequalities of Cuban society were reinforced by shutting out the majority of the population; a church that regularly blessed the brutality of the Batista regime with its prayers and by its collusion with the injustices being perpetrated by the system. He experienced liturgies in a language he couldn't understand, worship that didn't make sense, a Bible that the church prohibited him to read. He experienced the incredible luxury and wealth of the church – wealth controlled and dominated from a foreign land, and luxury in the midst of abject misery and poverty of the Cuban people.

And I am saddened by this. He too wants to go to heaven. And he wonders whether his sins are any worse than those committed by the church, by those who claim a sure place in the heaven he too yearns for. And he wonders whether his ministry isn't just as good as that of the recalcitrant church that nurtured him (or didn't) in his childhood.

So when I see our church with this combination of strong leadership potential yet with an inclination toward an ambivalent and unclear ecclesial vocation, I am saddened here too. And I know we can do better. We are not a pre-Vatican II church.

We are a church with a powerful memory of costly discipleship, a soul of compassion for the oppressed, an open Bible that has nurtured people-hood within us, a hermeneutic that has underscored peace and justice as a non-negotiable component of our understanding of the *torah*, wisdom, and gospel of God for the world.

We are also a church challenged by the modern, post-modern, Christendom, post-Christendom, highly spiritualized, individualized, global yet narrowly tribalized context of our time.

And we are a church that is weakening in our conviction that people-hood is both a vehicle for and a living sign of God's hopes to address the complexities of our world. We believe in discipleship. What is abating in us is an understanding of discipleship that puts the role of people-hood as central to the vision of God for the world.

We need to shape the dynamic leadership gifts that are already among us so that these leaders are leading us toward the powerful vocation that the church was designed to have. If this is indeed the preferred outcome for the 'shapees,' we need 'shapers' that are committed to an ecclesial vision. This means that this ecclesial rubber needs to hit the road in our Sunday schools and curricula. It needs to hit the road in the classrooms of our schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries. It needs to hit the road in our camping programs and baptism classes. It needs to hit the road in our worship, preaching and teaching; in our music, art, and poetry. It needs to hit the road in our vision and mission statements, our strategic plans, and our budget expenditures.

Most of all this rubber needs to hit the road in the nurture of our imaginations and in the ways we shape the imaginations of others. We need leaders who trust and who believe that it is better to strengthen the church in its missional vocation than simply to keep on strengthening the mission and activities of the church, in spite of the church. By strengthening only the mission of the church, we easily, maybe inevitably, begin to assume that a particular activity is actually the foundational purpose of our faith. In other words, we confuse strategy with vision and purpose. By strengthening the church for its missional vocation we return to the biblical vision that God wills a people-hood that will incarnate the mission of divine restoration of the world.

If we focus only on strengthening the mission of the church, then any strategy will do, and Castro's strategy to bring reconciliation to the world becomes as understandable as many others. If we focus on strengthening the church in its missional vocation, then not any strategy will do. The primary strategy then will be to assure that what we are proposing for others is already, in some way, present in ourselves. And others can watch and participate and join the new community, a sign of God's reign of earth.

I have already hinted that being the church, and providing leadership for the church in Canada, in the 21st century is a formidable task. The daunting challenges are not only, and perhaps not even primarily, pressures or enemies from the outside attacking the church. More often than not, those are the challenges that unite and strengthen the church. The more insidious challenges are those coming from the inside. Or perhaps better said, they are those that are the fruit of the many ways

in which the unquestioned values from the outside have been embedded, colonized, and found a home within the imaginations of the inside.

In order to be a strong church, we need to work harder to make sure that leadership gifts are shaped by an imagination that trusts that the Reign of God is already among us and we need leaders who trust that Jesus is Lord of this kingdom. We need leaders who trust that the preferred strategy of God to redeem and reconcile creation to its intended design is via a people-hood, a living sign of the Kingdom of God.

We need leaders who know that their own imaginations are also colonized by non-ecclesial, dichotomized, and non-gospel assumptions and who are willing to repent, dislodge and uproot these assumptions and become pioneers in nurturing new imaginations within themselves and to work at shaping the ecclesial imaginations of others. We need leaders who can help us discern the changes needed by the church and who develop some expertise in leading the church through change. We need leaders who are energized by the challenges of complexity, because it will not be easy to be a church leader in the 21st century in Canada.

Let me conclude with a quote from Craig Dykstra, vice president for religion at Lilly Endowment Inc. He speaks specifically about pastoral ministry, but I believe what he says is true for church leadership in general:

Pastoral ministry may require a complexity and integrity of intelligence that is as sophisticated as that needed for any kind of work we could think of" ("The Pastoral Imagination," in *Initiatives in Religion*, 9, no.1 (Spring, 2001), p.2).

A sophisticated complexity and integrity of intelligence: would you like to sign up? Can you encourage others to do so?

May God bless us as we seek to be a faithful Mennonite church in Canada.

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