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A Parable about Pastoral Leadership

Only the wisest of pastors can create a congregational atmosphere where the reins of leadership shift with each new opportunity or crisis. At least four types of leadership—character, focused, transformational, and shifting—are necessary for congregations attempting to navigate their rapidly changing environment. These four types are not a progression, but rather the forms of leadership that typically surface for congregations facing specific challenges.

Character Leadership

Once upon a time, a pastor decided to take the congregation on vacation. On the way to their destination, the plane crashed but landed safely on a deserted island, injuring no one. The congregants knew that it might be quite some time before help arrived. They set out to gather wood, pluck berries, sharpen spears for fishing, and fashion rope for constructing huts. While pursuing these tasks, a few disputes arose among the congregants and they brought those disputes to the pastor for mediation.

The pastor, trained in the art of managing conflict, was quickly able to deal with the minor conflicts. One day a parishioner suggested that many of these disputes could be avoided if all the new island dwellers would simply mirror the temperament and values of the pastor. He argued that this approach would avoid future disputes. This worked. The congregation went about their chores and lived peaceably for the first year of their shipwreck.

Moral: Modeling behavior is one of the most powerful forms of leadership. This can be seen in a pastor who launches a building program or organizes a community dinner.

Focused Leadership

Early in the second year of their existence on the island, a congregant who regularly fished in the cove noticed that the ocean's water level seemed to be rising steadily each week. When news of this discovery reached the pastor, the pastor quickly

declared, "We must move to the highest point on the island!" Because the pastor took meditative walks, he knew where the highest point was and announced that it was only a three-day journey.

Preparing for the journey, however, took much longer than three days. The pastor appointed someone to officially monitor the water level, while also organizing others into working teams dedicated to disassembling the camp and preparing for the move. Because these preparations took several weeks, the pastor could make several scouting trips to the new location to map out the location. The team's plans united into one seamless design that transpired like clockwork.

The days of year two seemed to fly by as each person was fully dedicated to their acquired task, trusting that the new location would allow the congregation to survive the hastening tide. Finally, the day of the big move arrived, and at the end of the three-day journey the congregation arrived safely in their new abode where they celebrated their safety during the final week of the second year of their shipwreck.



"THE PASTOR SAID WE'RE FREE TO EXPERIMENT AS LONG AS WE DON'T CHANGE THE ORDER OF WORSHIP, MUSIC STYLE, OR SANCTUARY TEMPERATURE."

Moral: Focused leadership gets the congregation from point A to point B. This can be seen in the pastor who takes the lead on a new mission goal, constructing a long-term plan and delegating tasks, all while monitoring progress.

Transformational Leadership

It did not take long for the pastor and congregation to figure out that this new location was a terrible place to live. Although the new geographic coordinates did indeed provide safety from the rising tide, scouring and damaging winds came daily just before sunset. Then, sunset brought plummeting temperatures, much colder than any temperature that the congregants had experienced before.

The fact that everyone knew who picked the new site—the pastor—prevented their public display of remorse. But covert and increasingly passive-aggressive resistance grew each day. The pastor knew not what to do but pray.

Soon others joined in prayer, breaking the isolated pattern of pastoral discernment, intercession, and disclosure that had characterized their first two years on the island. Along with prayers, they came to the discovery of new gifts and new insights into the problem at hand.

“I could have told you that this would be a terrible place to live,” said the meteorologist who came to the prayer group one day. “I concur,” said the geologist who also held a degree in global climatology. Soon a new team assembled to study the best place to live on the island, drawing from the various gifts of the congregants.

Still, convincing the congregation that they must move again to a new location proved much more difficult. Dreadful as the conditions were, many had grown accustomed to them.

The pastor appointed a second leadership team to listen to the grumblings of the new faction that had emerged among the congregants who were considering staying at their existing location. Listening helped. By addressing their concerns and listening, new insights emerged from the curmudgeon group. During the final week of their third year on the island, the congregation moved to a much more suitable location.

Moral: Empowering a team to guide and assist the pastor helps the congregation move from point A to point B. Although the movement is still linear, the required pastoral skills are completely different from focused leadership.

Drawing on multiple gifts and forming a new vision is the crux of transformational leadership, such as can be seen when groups are empowered to effect real changes in the congregation.

Shifting Leadership

As pleasant as these new conditions were, they were not safe. The congregant responsible for tracking the rising tide consulted with the leadership team. Together they concluded that no location on the island would be safe. Within six months, the entire island would be under water. For a while, this catastrophic news catapulted the congregation into chaos.

However, slowly amidst the disorder, varying groups began to emerge to address the needed change. Shipbuilders commenced a project, food gatherers sought out less perishable food, and another group constructed sails. Completely unknown to any of these teams, a rogue group began to build beds and eating tables that would minimize the effects of the swaying sea.

Although teams seemed to be operating independently of one another, the pastor knew that seeking more control over the work teams might slow their progress and spell doom for the congregation, and so he merely stepped in at times to remind the groups to meet their deadline. Within six months, just before the daily high tide reached the sleeping quarters of the congregants, they successfully launched out into the sea.

Moral: If the transformational leader refrains from overusing his or her gifts, the phenomenon of shifting leadership can ensue. Leaders drawing on this leadership form articulate where a group is going, but not how it will get there. For example, the pastoral leader sets people free to innovate and experiment when reaching out to a radically changing neighborhood.

The Moral of the Parable

Because differing conditions call for different styles of leadership, the right form of leadership at the right time yields the greatest dividends. Each of these leadership styles are appropriate at different times, and none of them are better than the others. Few things are worse for a congregation than a leadership approach that refuses to leave the helm even after the ship has sailed.