

The Kinds of Leaders We Need Right Now

One of the blogs I follow is written by Vu Le and called *Nonprofit AF*. One of my favorite posts is [*9 traits of the kind of leaders we need in this time and place*](#). It's an excellent description of a kind of nonprofit leadership that comes from his experience both as an organizer and as an observer of seasoned organizers in Seattle. I commend his post and his blog. As I read and re-read his post I noticed that he was talking about concepts that are at the center of Christian theology and congregational leadership. I decided to riff on his post with my own interpretation: 9 traits of the kind of congregational leaders we need in this time and place. I've borrowed from Vu, as well as sampled pieces of scripture and tradition to draw out a way of thinking about leadership and the traits I believe leaders must embrace to move the Church into the future.



1. The opposite of faith is certitude. The most faithful leaders I know are the ones who are comfortable not knowing what is going to happen next. This doesn't mean that good leaders just flop around, reactively from one crisis to another. We have to believe, that is, place our heart and trust, in the presence of God's leadership in the Church. We cannot so fall in love with our plans that we lose our way when things go differently from the way we thought they would. Sometimes we have to tear up our plans and start over. As Vu says, "The leaders that we need must be able to doubt themselves, to question their own assumptions, question their party's assumptions, because that is the only way to see different perspectives and reach the truth."



2. Whoever is not against us is for us. (Luke 9:50) When the disciples see a stranger doing the works of Jesus they are so threatened by their "otherness" that they want to use power to destroy them. Nice. The leaders that we need for the Church today are the ones who press through their fear of the other to get curious about what the common points are between their work and ours. This doesn't mean we have to sell out our distinctive vocation as followers of Jesus; it just means we have to trust that God's Spirit actually is blowing everywhere and filling all things. Or as Vu says, "We need leaders who can bring back civil dialog and collegial disagreements."



3. God makes sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45) We might believe that it would be ideal for good things happened to good people, and bad things happened to bad people, but that isn't the way that God works. All humanity stands under the showering grace of God, even those we think don't "deserve it." And all humanity is affected by the consequences of human sin, those we call "evil" as well as those we call "victims." Our work as leaders in the Church is to deconstruct systems of injustice so that everyone can be freed. As Vu says, "Systems that perpetuate injustice affect everyone. They affect different communities in different ways and measures, and we must focus our strategies accordingly. But overall, inequity ultimately harms all of us."



4. We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Romans 12:5) “Otherness” is a tremendously powerful organizing principle, but it is the principle that dominates what St. Paul calls “the world.” Organizing on the basis of otherness is not in the Way of Jesus. We need leaders in the Church who know, beyond a doubt, that it is the gorgeous diversity of Christ’s members that makes us strong to serve the world. Leaders must reject any rhetoric that names the “other” as anything besides my family. As Vu says, “The leaders we need believe that we exist in one community, that there are not ‘other people’ that we’re helping, that there are no ‘other people’s kids.’”



5. We have to die to self and follow the way of life. (Luke 9:23) Good leaders have enough confidence to get out of the way when they need to. One of the most courageous things a leader can do is let someone else lead so that they may follow. When leaders are able to occupy the liminal space, on the periphery, they can begin to see that the experience of other people is precisely what we need. Leaders need to join in God’s Mission in the world using everyone’s experience. As Vu says, “The work we do is often not about us; we must learn to set our pride and egos aside and do what is needed, even stuff we hate... The leaders we need know that the fight for justice is often paradoxically about them but also not about them.”



6. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Corinthians 12:7) There is no “one size fits all” manifestation of the Holy Spirit. It pleases God to be present in our lives, through the Holy Spirit, in radical diversity. Good leaders appreciate that having diversity in itself is only the first step in transforming the Church. Diversity is essential, but what is diversity for? Good leaders know that diversity in congregations exists to more fully reveal the identity of God in our midst, to show us how God’s love is being manifest right now! As Vu says, “The kind of leaders we need don’t just tolerate opposing views, they actively search for them.”



7. See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. (Matthew 10:16) This is an easy saying of Jesus to either ignore or misuse. You may adopt a kind of cynical worldliness have hardly any innocence in doing the Church’s work. As leaders in the church, the most powerful thing we can do is make a realistic analysis of power in a system, while at the same time seeing that system filled with those whom God loves. We need leaders who, as Vu says, “play the game while they change the game.” We do not have time to live puritanically afraid of getting dirty, nor can we afford to lead like corporate hacks who only look at the bottom line. Good leaders thread this needle with grace, humility, and love.



8. Our job is to be like Barnabas. (Acts 9:27) Barnabas (a name that means “Son of Encouragement”) worked overtime to make introductions, encourage people in their work, and take risks for the sake of the Gospel. Good leaders act like Barnabas: uniting people, and doing whatever we can to empower people to do good work. When we concentrate our imaginations on the Mission of God in the world, looking for all of the ways that God is already at work around us, we don’t have to worry about self-aggrandizement or finding the next killer app for saving the church. As Vu says, “We need our leaders to be able to pull people together...we need leaders who can bring out the best in everyone so they can work effectively across differences.”



9. Always remember that in the end, heaven comes to earth. (Revelation 21) God’s dwelling place isn’t far removed from us; it is right in front of us. This means that leaders must look for God in every place. As Vu says, “The work that we do in this sector is complex and difficult. We are talking about tackling systemic injustice entrenched by centuries of practice. They are ingrained into our culture, our unconscious. Faced with that, it is easy to lose hope. But the leaders we need can balance the realities of our current world with a vision of what our world could be. They find and bring out the good in everyone and in everything. They find hope and joy in the world even in the darkest of days.”

What else do need to consider when it comes to leadership in the Church?