

The Discourse of Leadership And The Practice of Administration

“The churches must address the discourse of leadership with savvy and critical analysis.”

Churches face enormous institutional challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Particularly among those denominations that have been in ministry and mission for generations and have built hundreds of congregational facilities, schools and colleges, hospitals and homes, simply maintaining their institutional infrastructure and existing ministries is daunting enough. The further challenge of enhancing their strengths and commitments through a growing membership, all in the midst of the immense social changes of recent decades, would seem to require no less than significant transformation.

Many church executives, officers, consultants, and interpreters have viewed the contemporary situation as a crisis. Many have turned to the discourse of “leadership” as the catalyst for needed transformation. But often the turn to “leadership” has brought with it a framework of assumptions unsuited to the nature and purpose of churches as communities of witness and service.

In this article I argue, first, that the churches must address the discourse of leadership with savvy and critical analysis, naming its biases and sifting through its perspectives with care. Second, I argue that as the churches explore their own practices of administration, they will discover a rich resource through which they can undertake the constructive task of shaping their ministries and missions for contemporary contexts.

The Appeal of Leadership

As the churches struggle with their institutional legacy, the promise of leadership has risen to offer hope for change. Books, workshops, Web pages, and church programs proliferate on church leadership.

Thomas Edward Frank is Professor of Church Administration and Congregational Life and Director of Methodist Studies at Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia.

Reprinted with permission from *Journal of the Academy of Religious Leadership*, Vol 1, No 1, Spring 2002.

While the policy of JACL states that we seek submissions in APA style, we decided to run this article as it was originally published because we felt its message was timely.

This is only part of a wider cultural trend. Thousands of book titles address themes of leadership. Hundreds of centers for leadership study and training have sprung up across the landscape, many of them on college and university campuses, and many associated with theological schools. Leadership is a growth industry that has continued to expand exponentially since the 1950s. As Joseph Rost put it in his book appraising leadership studies as a field, “leadership has been ‘in’ for so long, I cannot remember when it was ‘out’... it has taken on a mythological significance.”¹

One could adduce many possible reasons for the appeal of leadership. Certainly the growing complexity of contemporary American society accompanied by global economic and cultural changes is daunting to all institutions. The term “leadership” itself suggests an aggressive approach to complexity and change, implying direction and control. Many persons who have a stake in a particular organization, whether stockholders in a business corporation or lay contributors to seminary scholarship funds, do not have immediate involvement in day-to-day operations of the organization they support. David Knights and Glenn Morgan have argued that “corporate strategy,” often considered a mark of executive leadership, has sprung up as a discourse and activity to respond to that gap. “The institutional separation of ownership from direct managerial control” through public stockholding means that “the corporation has to articulate its objectives in a systematic way to this external audience.”² Similarly, talk of leadership fills in the distance, assuring stakeholders that the organization has vital purposes and the right people to achieve them.

Social and cultural changes that have swept across the US over the past fifty years have created enormous anxiety about the continuing place of churches in the larger culture. Many authors have warned that the churches must adjust to living in an entirely new post-Christendom era, that a “new paradigm” of church and society is emerging, and that taken-for-granted worlds of assumptions are passing from the scene.³ Established churches and their denominational institutions are labeled “dinosaurs” and ingrained

¹ Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 7. *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 3rd

practices are “sacred cows.”⁴ The churches need leaders, many authors announce, who can see the outlines of a new paradigm, learn from the “new science” that helps interpret (or console readers about) the chaos of perpetual change, and create new forms of Christianity for the future.⁵

In the dominant literature in both church and larger culture, leadership is the power to envision, create, initiate, change, and control. Leadership is the ability to attract, inspire, influence, guide, and direct others toward an objective. Leadership promises those who wonder *Who Moved My Cheese?*—what happened to the company that employed me for twenty years, where did my job description go in the new technology—that life is an Outward Bound adventure in which we can trust exemplars who excel in the ropes course, take risks, and model ways to turn crises into opportunities.⁶

Leadership resides in leaders, most publications insist—persons who are prepared and skilled in bringing organizations to achieve their strategic goals. Leaders exhibit certain attributes or traits that can be observed in successful or effective individuals and Bound

persons, and that other persons in the organization are followers. Profiles of “great leaders” of organizations continue to proliferate.

purporting to describe leadership principles from the Bible that are applicable in any organization.¹⁴ Their book joins many other titles such as *Jesus CEO* that adapt trait theory to the life of Christ and implicitly give leadership a nimbus of divine approval.¹⁵

Indeed many business corporations and other institutions appear, in the words of Rakesh Khurana's recent study, to be looking for a CEO who is, if not Jesus, at least a "corporate savior" or "messiah." Such persons by definition must be hired from outside a company perceived by its board of directors to be in "crisis" and in need of a person whose "charisma" will inspire confidence in investors. Ignoring the contingencies of institutional and historical context, and even downplaying the CEO's experience with a company's particular business, boards look for an individual who can "single-handedly sav[e] a troubled corporation." Thus a "closed market" of charismatic CEOs has been "socially constructed" around investor faith that certain individual traits of "leadership" can transform companies.¹⁶

Such popular trends substantiate the claim of organizational psychologist Burkard Sievers that leadership talk, as it separates leaders from followers, managers from workers, is a form of deification. "Converting men into gods . . . who take part in the immortality of their firm" through its profits and products, the symbolic language of leadership attracts the ambitions of some, feeds the fantasies of others, and leaves the remaining ordinary workers to "the fate of ephemerals who . . . are surrendered to hopelessness and mortality."¹⁷

The fascination with individuals as leaders masks fundamental

¹⁴ Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) and Kenneth H. Blanchard, Bill Hybels, and Phil Hodges, *Leadership by the Book: Tools to Transform Your Workspace* (New York: William Morrow, 1999). Ken Blanchard was the co-author of one of the all-time best-selling business books, *The One Minute Manager* (New York: William Morrow, 1982) with Spencer Johnson, author of *Who Moved My Cheese*. Blanchard also published, with Sheldon Bowles, the more recent *Gung-Ho! Turn on the People in Any Organization* (New York: William Morrow, 1998) which promises to "increase productivity, profits, and your own prosperity."

¹⁵ Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995). Jones runs a consulting firm whose mission is to "recognize, promote, and inspire divine excellence."

¹⁶ Rakesh Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), x, 23, and chapter 2 *passim*.

¹⁷ Burkard Sievers, *Work, Death, and Life Itself: Essays on Management and Organization* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 170.

conceptual problems with attribution theory. To attribute the movement or productivity of an organization to a sole leader or even leadership team is an exercise in explanatory control. As Sonja Hunt put it in an incisive article on “The Role of Leadership in the Construction of Reality,”

The tendency to make inferences about causes of events and behavior, based upon fragmented information and the internalized semantics of social reality, has been formalized in attribution theory. The “fundamental attribution error” is to attribute happenings to the characteristics of the actors in the situation rather than to contextual variables. . . . The tendency to seek for an agent of events predominates in cultures and

premise is accepted, research is then committed to reporting sagas of “great” leadership in an effort to break the ‘code of leadership’ and unlock its secrets. The researcher who can then announce the code to the world has just made a career.²⁰

Some authors on leadership have tried to move beyond trait or attribute theory to a broader exploration of practices that mark successful organizations. This shifts the discussion away from an exclusive focus on individuals and their influence, and toward an interpretation of organizations as operative, instrumental “cultures” that express collective assumptions, norms, expectations, and ways

by a corporate foundation, purporting to identify *Excellent Protestant Congregations* and *Excellent Catholic Parishes*, together with web sites, conferences, and related study materials so that others can adopt these “best practices,” are as exemplary of this trend as anything in the business world.²²

Like leadership studies generally, such approaches fail to take seriously the profoundly contextual nature of organizational purposes and the socially shared practices of nurturing those purposes toward fruition. As sociologist Arthur W. Frank argued in cautioning against categorization of individuals for therapeutic management, “aggregation into categories sacrifices the quality of embodiment” that characterizes everyday life. Aggregation of data into types and categories reduces complex interrelationships and contingencies to objectifications that fragment and oversimplify reality as an

learn. While women often excel at these practices because of the dominant socialization patterns in American society, Fletcher warned that relational practices “are regularly either “disappeared” as naive or absorbed into organizational objectives in a way that “leaves the masculine logic of effectiveness unchallenged.”

If “building webs of connection rather than hierarchies” is useful only in helping achieve organizational goals, Fletcher argued, then feminine practices cannot challenge the “instrumental, masculine perspective” that drives most organizations.²⁶ Relational practices will not be considered “real” leadership, and leadership advocates will continue to prize such traits as vision, drive, and influence. These traits perpetuate the American masculine myth of the self-sufficient, “self-starting” individual who can shape the course of history, creating his own reality, picking and choosing among institutions or acting entirely without them. This myth, so evident in iconic Hollywood portrayals of the American West, suppresses the reality that human beings are constitutionally social and profoundly shaped and sustained by social practices.

Leadership and Organizational Cultures and Logic

Leadership discourse directly expresses the organizational culture in which it is advocated. Where rationality and productivity are the norm, leadership will by definition be expressed as rational

²⁶ Joyce K. Fletcher, *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12-14, 96, 105. Fletcher has been joined by Joanne Martin of the business school at Stanford and other scholars in a gender critique of the bureaucracy theories of Max Weber that have been so dominant for a century. In describing an ideal type of organization governed by rationality, division of labor and specialization of task, substitution of office for person, and production of written records, these authors argued, Weber devalued the role of practices usually associated with the feminine in western societies. Not only was his language about bureaucratic organizations entirely male, but his ideal model served to legitimate and reinforce the organizational practices it purported to describe. His insistence on the inevitability of (his model of) bureaucracy elevated it to the status of the only workable organizational form in modern societies.

Richard Harvey Brown has advocated understanding bureaucracy itself

decisiveness that brings measurable growth and success. Where sustained relationships of mutual support are the norm, leadership will express relational skills of listening, affirming, and inclusiveness. No organization exhibits a completely uniform ethos; most are a continually shape-shifting blend of assumptions and values. Expectations of leadership are thus equally shape-shifting and ambiguous.

Yet organizations are also distinct cultures, in more than the simplistic instrumental—and readily manipulable—sense conveyed by Peters and Waterman and other business writers. As cultures, organizations come to focus in certain symbolic objects or forms that capture their identity and purpose. They tell paradigmatic stories of their founding or turning points in their history that seem in retrospect to be critical moments. Over time they develop characteristic ways of working, of addressing a changing environment. They express basic outlooks and assumptions about the world that are reflected in the work styles and attitudes of their employees and constituents.

Viewed from the perspective of organizations as cultural systems that evolve over time in constant interaction with larger social and cultural environments, leadership is a profoundly significant myth. The term and whatever expectations cluster around it express what the organization names as most meaningful about its purpose, most true about the world it is trying to affect, and most compelling about its aspirations. Discourse of leadership is a kind of shorthand symbolic language into which an organization's culture is compressed. Often leadership captures for constituents what the organization most values about what it is trying to accomplish.

Organizational cultures also express an institutional logic. While this logic is most evident in the way an organization thinks through problems, it is more generally threaded through an organization's central purposes and reason for being. As Roger Friedland and Robert Alford described it, the “central logic” of an organization is “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions [that] constitutes its organizing principles.” Organizations structure and defend themselves by their logics, and their logics provide constituents a manageable but limited focus for their own choices and interests.²⁷

²⁷ Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford, “Bringing Society Back in: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions” in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232-263. Quotation is from 248.

Friedland and Alford offered as examples the logics of larger social institutions such as capitalism (accumulation and commodification) and family (community, loyalty, reproduction).



formative in the church's heritage. For example, a sacramental logic of pastor as priest and representative of the ministries of all Christians no longer appears in the *Book of Discipline* in any elaborated form. Moreover, the church has not heeded the voices of women warning of the consequences of a free-floating language of "servant leadership." The term has shifted in popular use from Greenleaf's emphasis on the trusteeship of organizations externally focused on social goods to a preoccupation with internal organizational styles. Many organizations have adopted the lingo in order to reinforce values of participation and consensus. But if the leader is only a consensus-builder, argued management scholar Shirley Roels, deferring to the wishes of the group and serving as "a conduit for the desires of followers," she or he may erode the organization's capacity to gather its resources and address its continually changing environment.³⁰ Who is serving whom in "servant leadership" remains vague and subject to the whims of ideological parties or assertive personalities in the churches. Language of "servant leadership," along with "team building" or its predecessors such as "quality management groups," can mask the realities of power relations in any organization. This is particularly an issue for women, whom men in the dominant culture often expect to be deferential anyway.

Churches and church organizations clearly exhibit, then, diverse borrowings of "secondary logics" that guide and govern them. To some extent, as Harry Stout and Scott Cormode argued, these are simply "patterns of overlap and imitation" of other institutions "that grow from human beings' simultaneous membership in diverse institutions."³¹ At worst, however, churches not in sustained conversation with their own heritages and practices may be all too susceptible to what Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell termed "institutional isomorphism" or the tendency of organizations toward homogenization under similar environmental conditions. The authors' hypothesis that "the more ambiguous the goals of an

³⁰ Shirley J. Roels, "Organization Man; Organization Woman: Faith, Gender, and Management" in Shirley J. Roels with Barbara Hilbert Andolsen and Paul F. Camenisch, *Organization Man, Organization Woman: Calling, Leadership, and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 17-79. See particularly her discussion of servant leadership on 49-50.

³¹ Harry S. Stout and D. Scott Cormode, "Institutions and the Story of American Religion" in N. J. Demerath III, Peter Dobkin Hall, Terry Schmitt, and Rhys H. Williams, eds., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62-78. Quotations are from 73.

organization, the greater the extent to which the organization will model itself after organizations that it perceives as successful,” may be particularly applicable to the churches, whose vocation as “stewards of God’s mysteries” (I Corinthians 4:10) is inherently ambiguous.³² Yet the churches also can trust and carry forward their own constitutive practices, in particular the practice of administration.

From Leadership to Administration

The multiple agendas of leadership talk and its commercial assumptions make it a problematic discourse for church organizations. What communities of faith need in order to thrive is neither the heroic and idiosyncratic visions of entrepreneurs, nor bi-polar leader-follower dynamics that stir them to seek experts who will rescue them from perceived decline, nor the patter of egalitarian jargon that masks power relations. If communities of faith are going to employ the language of leadership—and given the dominant commercial culture of Western societies, they surely will—then they must adopt a balanced approach that is both critical and constructive. They will need to draw deeply on their heritage of theology, polity, and practice to construct an understanding of leadership that is both critically shrewd about organizational assumptions in contemporary society and authentic to the churches’ identity as institutions.

For a balanced approach the churches can turn to a practice that has been constitutive of Christian communities from the beginning. The churches can explore the possibilities of a rich and nuanced understanding of administration as a practice of advancing organizational purposes and institutional flourishing. The term in church context may help clarify the organizational logics central to the nature and purpose of the churches, and demonstrate the significance of the churches’ heritages and cultures for expressing their ministries. Moreover, the churches’ understandings and practices of administration have much to contribute to the larger discussions of leadership continuing in all organizations today.

The term “administration” contains in itself an orientation to its practice. For one thing, it is by definition a form of ministry. Administration is an expression of *ministerin*, the Latin translation

³² Paul D. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields” in Powell and DiMaggio, *Institutionalism*, 63-82. Quotation from 75. Quotation of the Bible is from the New Revised Standard Version.

of the New Testament Greek *diakonia* or service. It is a form of *diaconate* in which members of the community of faith are in ministry with each other and in the wider community and world. It is a form of service to the intentions and purposes of God in the

time continuously building up the community and extending its ministries in current contexts.

Practices are not given whole or complete. Rather, they come to fullness through the practice of them. Through the continuous practice of administration, the churches address the challenges of particular contexts, wrestle with appropriate ways to adapt and integrate the influences of surrounding institutions, and struggle with conflict among differing images of faithfulness and logics of organization.

The practice of administration is both formal and informal. Some arrangements of governance are expressed in polity, written in books of order and sustained by rituals and traditions that legitimate a church's forms of authority. But in many ways administrative practice is less canonical than informal. "Communities of practice" form in churches and church organizations in response to changing needs and contexts. Not necessarily corresponding with canon or office, these "vital interstitial communities" are often most effective collaboration to organize work and solve problems.³³

The churches' central logic for constructing the practice of administration is embedded in biblical language of stewardship (*oikonomia*). The Greek term already contains in itself the image of the house (*oikos*) as a space that makes certain functions possible (shelter, food, rest, and so forth). Stewardship embraces the economy of the whole household to the end that its resources are used fully and justly and that its purposes flourish. Household economics is hardly a settled pattern, to be sure; stewardship must be worked out among differing conceptions of what makes a household just, orderly, and generative. Here again, gender is a particularly acute issue for the household of faith, as many women and men seek a justice grounded in equality and participation, rather than the hierarchy and patriarchy evident in some forms of Christian community.³⁴

New Testament images are helpful in conceiving of stewardship. The Apostle Paul used the image of the builder as the one who creates or constructs the foundation and spaces of the household within which the community of faith will live (1 Corinthians 3:9-10). He also suggested the image of the gardener planting and watering. The garden, too, is a space. It must be

³³ John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, "Organizational Learning and Communi-

marked out, tilled, planted, tended, all with an eye to making something possible. “You are God’s field, God’s building,” Paul wrote to Corinth—a space that must be well managed and cared for if God is to create something there. “Only God . . . gives the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

Ethicist Larry Rasmussen summarized the Christian practice of “shaping communities” in a way that extends biblical images of stewardship. “Proper ordering, as any gardener, cook, orchestra conductor, or housekeeper can tell you, is basic to good living . . . thriving, not to say surviving, requires the creative ordering of freedom.” Rasmussen suggested the image of “choreographer” to grasp the tasks of administration. “Shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.”³⁵

These images put us at nub of the tension between administration and what American society often seems to mean by leadership. The ecclesial images of administration are about creating a space in which fruitfulness can flourish through cultivation of the community’s resources and removal of obstacles to the community’s thriving. But this does not satisfy advocates of leadership. Impatient with waiting for architects or with tending a garden and watching for signs of growth or with letting people learn the dance, the dominant voices call for someone to lead—that is, to make, to create, to innovate. The purpose of leadership, they insist, is to direct people to produce a tangible output. The prevailing social image of the entrepreneur comes closer at this point to what many people seek for organizations, in particular the churches.

The difficulty with entrepreneurialism is its premise of enterprise. Churches as communities of witness and service are not first of all human enterprises or inventions. Churches do not make or produce in the sense that we would normally understand in what Rost termed “the industrial paradigm” so dominant in American society.³⁶ Churches are communities called into being by something beyond themselves. They are communities of reception. They are an organized response to something already given.

Churches are constituted by a logic of gift. They arise

³⁵ Larry Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities” in Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Truth: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997). 119-132. Quotation from 120-121. I am indebted throughout my theological discussion of administration to one of the few “classic” texts in the field of church administration, Thomas C. Campbell and Gary B. Reiersen, *The Gift of Administration: Theological Bases for Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

³⁶ Rost, *Leadership*, 27.

from the premise of God's gift of life, and everything they do is grateful response in stewardship of that gift. This is not an exchange relationship on which commerce is based (although American commercialism continually tries to make gift-giving a form of exchange). Churches are constituted by practices of seeking and giving signs of God's presence in the world, responding to God in mercy, companionship, care, and peace.

If administration is based on a logic of giving, does this mean that churches have no place for industriousness, for initiative and innovation? Hardly so, for the effective management and expression of the wealth and diversity of gifts that churches enjoy calls for enormous energy and focus. The flourishing of Christian organizations requires "a ke for enormous eShiusmungifts tdisc80this ?00 -1.167.u vard(?00wbt(ard(?

stories, symbols, rituals, and language of the organization's living tradition.³⁸

Who practices the art of administration in the churches? Do we not finally have to return to the question of leadership: Who will lead the processes of management, discernment, and fulfillment of purposes? I would argue in closing that what members and stakeholders of churches and church organizations often mean by "leadership," and what they ordinarily want when they speak of "leadership," is what I have described as the art and practice of administration. To be sure, every church and church organization

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their organization consider “a change in values, beliefs, or behavior.” Leaders nurture their institutions to engage in the “adaptive work” necessary “to mobilize people to face, rather than avoid, tough realities and conflicts.”⁴⁰

A “learning organization,” in Peter Senge’s companion concept, seeks to imagine systemically the relationship between its purposes and the continually changing environment in which it finds itself. Those identified as leaders are the primary mentors and teachers within a community of learning that together must discern how it can best focus its service in its current situation. Senge called the “shift of mind” necessary for a systemic and communal imagination for learning no less than a metanoia or transformation from typical organizational thinking.⁴¹

For the churches, organized around the metanoia of witnessing to the Reign of God, no term could be more native than transformation. The churches hope to give signs of God’s Reign through administration of their communal life and work in ways that express mercy and justice. Grounded in their constitutive logic of gift, they must seek to discern their gifts and build upon their strengths through the art and practice of administration, so that their witness and service may flourish.

⁴⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 20, 22.

⁴¹ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990), 13. Indicative of the lack of conversation between scholarship in organizational studies and the churches, Senge used the term metanoia with only incidental reference to its centrality in Christian faith and traditions. One might say the same of the proliferating fad of mission statements for everything from grocery stores to the post office, a secularizing and commodifying of language native to the churches.