
CONCERNS FOR YOUNG LEADERS

A Discussion with Young Adults within Our Denomination

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INTRODUCTION

The primary reason I ask you to concentrate more on positive aspects, rather than negative factors of your church life, is because that determination to remain hopeful—despite the impossibility of it all—is a skill you must acquire in order to survive leadership challenges in the body of Christ. It takes resolve to stay standing in the face of problems with people, resources and circumstances.

The trappings of leadership are enjoyable when we feel supported by people and affirmed by dynamic circumstantial evidence (rising offerings, developing disciples, happy people). But it isn't always that way, is it? In fact, it usually isn't like that at all. Just about the time we adjust our budget upwards, the offerings taper off; people we've invested in heavily, move to another town across the country, and the people who never seem to make any progress sap our time and energy; and, (have you noticed?) someone is always unhappy with us. So, if you are (only) enjoying yourself, you probably aren't leading believers into more of their inheritance.

The biggest problem with problems is that they are easy to spot. I imagine one of the reasons you felt like you would be a good leader was because you observed lots of issues that leadership should have been fixing: *"If they would only..."* Now that you are a leader, do you find yourself repeating that phrase—except aiming it at followers? The human tendency is to think ourselves profound when we spy and decry what's wrong. That leaning is particularly insidious among leaders who want to collect accolades for themselves—more than to accomplish things for others. Church leaders are especially vulnerable.

When church problems do not yield to slogans and quick-fixes, pastors fall back on an ageless consolation that is antithetical to true leadership: *"Given all the disadvantages of my situation, I should not be expected to do much of anything except survive."* We take up our lamentations as a prelude to the contest, so no one will expect us to triumph. It isn't humility causing us to wail. It's fear. We want insulation and deniability.

It is so easy to become pessimistic and/or passive as leaders. Those are the false safety zones offered by your real adversary. He urges you to whine and become critical—to stop believing—stop serving the purposes of God (with utter abandon), and to stop the “jar” from tilting too far and irrevocably forward that you become completely poured out on the altar of service to others.

Remember, you will always be outgunned, outnumbered. It is the nature of our conflict. We are guerilla fighters, not an overpowering military force. The 10,000 soldiers that left us feeling heady on the other side of the hill invariably look pitiful when we top the rise and spot 20,000 enemy soldiers coming at us.

God wouldn't have it any other way!

By no natural means, eloquence, experience, money, or numbers will we carry the day—but rather, by sacrifice, surrender and simple *faith-plus-obedience* (the “things of the Kingdom”) will we get led in victory. But even that triumph looks nothing like a Hollywood ending. We want the fanfare of coronation trumpets, not a lonely bugle playing taps over a grave. We want *once-and-for-all* victory parades through the streets of Imperial Rome—not crosses added *one-at-a-time* to the string of martyrs lining the Apian Way.

We do win in the end, but the end is a long time coming! The needs and problems in your church will always seem to outweigh available solutions. Get used to that picture of reality, but never concede its finality. Remember the loaves and fish—Peter, given the first opportunity to participate in a miracle, offered a reasonable assessment and a good “impossibility” defense (“*What do you expect ME to do about it?*”). The boy offered everything he had, and Jesus multiplied it (John 6:8-11).

With all that said, what concerns do I have about the future of our churches? What long-range challenges will you face as you inherit the mantle of older ministers like me? While I remain wildly optimistic and excited about the years ahead of us, there are three concerns that top my list.

#1—DEARTH OF YOUNG LEADERS

Though I love history, I have never been drawn to heritage-sites to see where *people-of-the-past* lived. Those places give me the creeps. They feel too much like ghost towns, and their emptiness smothers my curiosity. I don't like being a voyeur peeping through time's window. Besides, I know the specifics of their dining room will give up no clues about their personhood or accomplishments. Sorry to be so morbid, but I'm trying to give you a sense for a feeling I have when I visit churches—the same one they have at wax museums.

I miss the living-breathing presence of vitalized young adults who have concluded that they have no real choice in their career decision or their life-calling. Like Paul, a man under compulsion, we're supposed to be men and women who get on a bus in a foreign city and just stay on it because we do not know where to get off! We're not sightseers or occasional tourists who ride around and disembark at the same place where we got on.

I meet many young potential leaders who are interested in short ministry excursions and round-trip city tours. They want a "taste" of ministry—but one that fits their busy life-itinerary. Where are the young adults who want to buy one-way tickets to destinations unknown?

Everywhere I travel, I come across the same life element missing in the body of Christ. I find few 20-something's who will admit to being called for ministry service—for a lifetime of spiritual leadership—for a sustained 50-year campaign in the vanguard of Christ's army.

In my generation, most ministers had some identified leadership role by the time they were 24. I like asking pastors all over the world at what age they "began ministry service" in an acknowledged position. Their answers are almost uniformly 'in the early 20's.' In this generation (sorry to sound so old), there is little demand for that early scheduled ministry bus to *who-knows-where*—it is barely profitable *running once a month* in your generation, whereas in my day, it seemed to *run twice every day*.

I do not think this issue is a uniquely American problem, but I wonder if the leaders of previous generations—people like me—have given and done too much for the sake of younger people. It's hard to find young leaders who have an observable initiative (inner compulsion) to launch out into previously uncharted territory. The pioneer heart hardly beats anymore. Scant, indeed, are those who say, "Here am I, send me."

What that portends for the future makes me shudder. So many existing pastors are at the age when denominations experience a precipitous drop out of ministers. **In most of our churches, the pastors have no clear successor, and certainly no young adult waiting in the wings, being trained as an understudy.** This does not bode well for our churches ten years from now...

#2—DECLINE IN "SPIRITUAL" THINKING/MINISTRY

While I firmly advocate loving God with our mind—and using our brain to bring Him glory by thinking things through—I also know that "singularly spiritual" weapons are the only ones that can alter the condition of someone's life. As I always told my children in their academic pursuits, "Of all people, we who name Jesus as our Lord, ought to make the most of those qualities He has created in us; our 'brains' ought to be used to the utmost, and our personalities ought to shine the brightest. Every talent we have should be optimized and utilized in our lives."

But there is one little proviso; using one's brain (or bicep) is a great idea when doing a job for which intellect (or strength) will yield the best results. Don't try to lift a heavy package with your brain, or solve a math problem by flexing. Similarly, we must discern the extent to which the task in front of us has a natural, spiritual, or mixed solution. People who try to solve spiritual matters with their brain, or organic problems with their spirituality have never impressed me. I want to be smart and discerning enough to know which aspect of my being ought to be brought to bear on which situations.

Most of the time, pastoring calls for *more thought and more revelation*. I need spiritual discernment *and* sensible reasoning—balancing the natural and spiritual realms. Loving God with our heart, soul, mind and strength is a call for total integration—offering our whole being, with its multifaceted components, for service to the Lord. It's like saying, "Walk with both your legs." The military may think, "left, right, left," but most of us don't. I am almost never aware of which leg is moving forward while the other is holding its ground. I walk using them both, and I fall into a natural, bipedal rhythm.

Having watched too many Pentecostal pastors utter disregard for *thinking things through*, I believe a good many of their quandaries in ministry could be solved with more careful planning and more articulated thinking. So, don't hear me calling for an ostrich-spirituality where leaders bury their head in the sand and try to navigate the complexities of church "by faith" and the Holy Spirit. David led Israel with integrity *and* "skillful [intelligent, discerning, analytical] hands" (Psalm 78:72).

What concerns me more than the lack of thought is the lack of spiritually discerned (biblical) approaches to the problems leaders face. It is as though we have traded in our "divinely powerful" tools for implements, strategies and solutions borrowed from universities, showbiz, or Fortune 500 companies. Under the guise of two important but limited values ("excellence" and "relevance"), *many young pastors neglect the great privilege we have of being fundamentally different from every other entity and group of people in the world: we are not limited by the "best" the world has to offer in advice. We have access to revelational understandings and out-of-this-world powers.*

Years ago, the expression "*out-of-this-world (man)*" meant something truly fantastic and noteworthy. I worry that too many leaders are leading too many followers away from dynamic spiritual operations—where the truth of God's word and the witness of His Spirit collide with and obliterate the malevolent spiritual forces arrayed against us. Let us contend more for "signs and wonders" when our appeal to an Authority higher than "the prince of this age" overturns the world-as-it-is.

#3—EQUATING GOSPEL-ESSENTIALS WITH AMERICAN VALUES

I'll touch only briefly on my third major concern of the state of today's Church—and its future. In simplest terms, I worry that the social, political and cultural distinctives of "Conservative America" have become synonymous with essentials of the Gospel. Like the protesters in Santa Cruz who chain themselves to Redwoods and shout slogans at the media, American Evangelicals and Pentecostals have tied themselves to a narrow set of issues and ideologies. This has created an agenda that is more political and moralistic than it is *spiritual and redemptive*.

The few legislative and electoral victories of the last couple decades have fooled much of the Church into imagining that the Kingdom is won or lost at the ballot box or in the court of public opinion. Even a cursory view of history ought to convince anyone that whenever the Church became too closely identified with the State—when priests and politicians were difficult to differentiate—the Church lost its rightful place and its primary witness. But my angst goes beyond mere political considerations and the unstated assumption that Christians should be aligned with one party, as opposed to the other. I have never been a "party guy."

Rather, I see the place that the U.S. has had in spreading the Gospel around the world. When the people of other nations viewed our country with grateful respect, the strong identification between *American sent and funded missionaries* and the *Good News* worked to our advantage. Now, however, many of the not-so-good traits of our culture are tarnishing people's view of Jesus. For instance, Americans are can-do people; we're optimistic, entrepreneurial, and quick to lend a hand. That's good. But the downside of that is that we think we're right—*all the time*. We presume to lead—even when not asked to do so. And we help—whether or not anyone wants our help. In short, the world sees America as an arrogant, pushy, opportunistic nation that expects every other nation to follow its lead.

THAT PERSONA IS A FAR CRY FROM JESUS' QUIET APPROACH

In the decades of my extensive travel to other countries, I have never seen America viewed with such contempt and suspicion. We have the enmity, not the envy of the world. **To the degree that the Gospel remains associated with the politics and policies of America, its witness will suffer in other nations.** And that is not even addressing the disconnect we have in our own nation between an increasingly "emergent" culture and a fast disappearing "traditional" mindset that conservatives try to preserve.

Am I against "traditional" American values? Not in the traditional sense of being against something. I just think the concept is totally inadequate. It's a slogan—a rallying cry. I am bemused by what people mean by the phrase. It is so typically American to lay claim to a distinct set of values—as though we are the only nation whose people got it right.

On any objective moral standard, I can't imagine that Americans are much better than citizens of other lands. Our historic revivals and awakenings simply attest to our need for them, and depending of which era "traditional" is supposed to point to, I'll just bet that there were many, many generational bondages and traditional sin-practices holding people captive.

Jesus' Church doesn't espouse national values. We call individuals to repentance. We say to wayward souls, "There is another way." And in the face of repeat offenders-against-God, we offer forgiveness and assurance of His continued (everlasting) love. The Bible is neither a national *showpiece* nor a cultural validation. It confronts and challenges and comforts everyone. Let's not demean its message by connecting the word of God to any class of people, any political platform, any national interest, or any one nation.