

Connective Leadership: Loving Those We Lead

Herbert Anderson

Interdependence and diversity are two dominant forces in modern life that pull in opposite directions. As the planet shrinks and the linkage between global and local realities grows, our awareness of our dependence on one another is intensified. Simultaneously, the visible presence of the world's diversity in our neighborhoods and churches and hospitals makes the cooperation that interdependence requires more difficult. Diversity highlights uniqueness and underscores difference, emphasizing the individual and independence. Interdependence drives toward collaboration, strategic alliances, networks, and temporary coalitions. Although both are necessary, present global trends and the current political dominance in the United States seek to deny diversity by ignoring interdependence.

The tensions created when these twin forces collide challenge traditional patterns of leadership. "To succeed in this dramatically altered environment," Jean Lipman-Blumen proposes in *Connective Edge: Leading in an Interdependent World*, "where inclusion is critical and connection is inevitable, we need a new kind of leadership."¹ The focus of this essay is on that new vision of leadership. The emphasis on 'differentiated leadership'

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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that has dominated much of recent literature needs to be balanced by what Lipman-Blumen calls ‘connective leadership’ in a single-minded ‘double vision.’ *Forming the bonds that sustain connectedness must be accompanied by honoring the boundaries necessary to preserve and respect the diversity of humankind.*

HUMANITY AS AN INTERDEPENDENT WHOLE

Creation is a complex, mutually dependent ecosystem of interrelated organisms requiring delicate balance. The current climate crisis is a reminder that in creation everything is connected to everything in a universe of mutual influence. Technology, exemplified by the internet, continues to intensify human connections across the globe. We know about footprints and food webs and creating or destroying habitats. Teilhard de Chardin once observed that “the farther and more deeply we penetrate into matter, by means of increasingly powerful methods, the more we are confounded by the interdependence of its parts.”² Preserving the distinctions between parts and the whole in an ecosystem depends on clear boundaries that maintain respect for each part of this interconnected whole. If we believe that all things are from God, then the diversity and the interdependence of all things are both part of God’s creating generosity.

A wisdom saying from Zimbabwe—*I am well if you are well*—is a vivid reminder of the interdependence of life. Human life is an interdependent whole, and human connectedness remains an unassailable necessity. All human systems, like creation itself, are interdependent organisms set within a network of physical, social, spiritual, and cultural relations of influence. The vitality of human life, the possibility of human health, and our personal wellness depend on the wellness of the whole. Human interconnectedness, however, is more than wellness; it is necessary for survival. That truth is reflected in these words from Ecclesiastes: “Two are better than one . . . for if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help” (4:9–10). Humanity is complete in community; we ignore this truth at our peril.

The balance of interdependence and diversity is challenged today in several ways. The widespread promotion of tribalism and nationalism throughout the global political climate undermines efforts to establish and maintain interconnectedness. When tribalism prevails, cynicism and violence are not far behind. Moreover, human interconnectedness is impaired

or distorted whenever manufactured fears or economic impulses that disregard the common good dominate. Stinginess born out of fear, greed, isolationism, mistrust, competitiveness, and domination disregards the common good because it ignores or rejects the fundamental human reality of mutuality and interdependence. In this time when we are challenged by far greater diversity than we have previously had to live with, we need leaders who will, as de Chardin puts it, “emphasize both *mutuality* (a focus on common interests and values) and *inclusiveness* (the willingness to include even those very different from the rest, without requiring their homogenization).”³ Connective leadership builds bonds and fosters collaboration by enabling people from divergent perspectives to discover shared concerns and common cause. *Leaders who seek the common good face the daunting task of honoring diversity and promoting interdependence simultaneously.*

LEADERS WITH ‘DOUBLE VISION’

Holding in balance interdependence and diversity requires leaders who have what Newton Malony has identified as “the genius of double vision.”⁴ To be a leader with double vision, one needs to hold two or more opposing ideas in mind and allow for things to be ambiguous and out of sorts for a while without losing the ability to function or lead. When a leader has double vision, she can see everything that needs to be done at once and still do only one thing at a time. It takes wisdom and courage to see both sides of a paradox without immediately choosing sides or comprising. Here is how Malony describes this approach to religious leadership:

Although negotiation and compromise may be called for at times, double vision leadership implies trying to value both sides of a paradox at the same time; both idealistic and profitable at the same time; both having a dominant theology and being open to change; doing very well in the short term and the long term.⁵

According to Malony, double vision is necessary because the environment in which religious leaders work is complex and inevitably paradoxical. An environment of ‘holy complexity’ calls for leaders who have a high tolerance for ambiguity and who are capable, as the poet Keats once wrote, “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”⁶ A leader with double vision holds opposing ideas without needing to resolve them. In order to deepen the contradictions by

which we live, we need to fashion patterns of ministry that are deep enough and broad enough to hold differing perspectives and even competing passions while fostering human connectedness.

Holy complexity takes many forms in the practice of ministry today. Religious leaders need to embody humility and live as partners and friends with diverse people and institutions in a secular and pluralistic world without abandoning their convictions about what they believe is right and true. When religious leaders are able to practice paradox, it will be easier to embrace the instability it brings, live into an uncertain future, and live beyond fear by showing hospitality to the stranger. The aim of ministry for this time is to empower people to embrace paradox, see clearly the contingencies of living, and acknowledge the inevitability of being vulnerable. Religious leadership that endures chaos and ambiguity, defies easy resolution, and promotes interdependence is more likely to discover the wisdom hidden in the mystery of God.

The remainder of this essay examines one expression of this type of double vision—holding connective leadership and differentiated leadership in balance. Because *boundaries and bonds* are paradoxically connected, religious leadership is both connective and differentiated. If we start with boundaries, then we must keep asking how to nurture within us compassion that is moved by the needs of others. We will keep asking how to nurture the kind of pastoral bond that itself has the potential for healing—*lest we do no good*. If we start with generating mutuality or if self-sacrificing generosity is our aim or if compassion is our focus, then we must keep asking about respecting boundaries—*lest we do harm*. Boundaries are a legal and structural necessity in order to preserve diverse parts and prevent violence. *In themselves, however, boundaries do not foster compassion or nourish the bonds that are necessary for building and sustaining faith communities and caring relationships.*

THE DILEMMA

In the practice of ministry, the tension between fostering bonds and honoring boundaries is a consequence of several factors. The attention to boundaries that has emerged in recent decades was both a necessary response to the violation of trust in the pastoral bond and a way of fostering leadership differentiated enough to function effectively in anxious systems.

As a result of this emphasis, ministers are more often attentive to respecting boundaries than to building bonds. Chaplains in evidence-based hospitals are initially more obligated to report patient needs accurately than to build an empathic bond. These practices have tilted the balance in ministry toward distance more than intimacy, boundaries more than bonds, and differentiated more than connective leadership. *How do ministers honor boundaries, even create boundaries for the safety and well-being of themselves and others, while at the same time engaging in a ministry of crossing boundaries, even destroying boundaries? Who decides or how does one decide which boundaries to honor and which boundaries to cross?*

Honoring boundaries and crossing boundaries in ministry occur alongside building bonds and maintaining human interconnectedness. We need connective leaders who walk with people through change and who form communities of enduring bonds that acknowledge our need for one another in a diverse and interdependent world. Connective leaders seek to effect change through negotiation and persuasion. Connective leaders seek to transcend cynicism by wedding authenticity with accountability in making decisions transparent and open to evaluation and criticism. Connective leaders suspend the impulse to settle for a quick fix in favor of the longer view. Connective leaders seek overlapping visions and foster converging interests and goals.⁷ The challenge for ministers in general and chaplains in particular is that connective leadership may challenge role expectations and job definitions. Connective leaders may need to choose between the *logic of consequences* that is demanded by our role in the human system and the *logic of aspirations* that may express our noblest authenticity.

Ministry is a response to the invitation to love one another as generously as we have been loved by God. The Christian biblical story is an account of God's relentless pursuit out of love despite the human resistance to being loved. The promise ministers seek to embody as connective leaders, albeit imperfectly, is God's extraordinary love, always creating and covenanting, always seeking to reconcile and make whole. In response to the generous love of God, ministerial leaders are lovers who embody the passion of God who broods over humankind like a jealous suitor, longing for connection. In his book *The Risk of Love*, W. H. Vanstone captures this relentless love of God with these poetic words:

Love that gives, gives ever more,
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
Ventures all, its all expends.⁸

This extravagant and persistent love of God is mirrored in the work of ministerial leaders and chaplains who are invited to love people with imperfect generosity. When ministers are connective leaders, they are free to love those they care for without holding anything back because they do not fear losing themselves in the loving. Ministerial leaders for this time need to connect with individuals, engage communities of faith in collaborative work with diverse partners, and participate effectively in complex, highly layered, and interconnected systems of practice.

CHALLENGING BOUNDARIES AS THE WORK OF MINISTRY

While most boundaries intend that distinctions are preserved and people are not violated or abused, ministers who are connective leaders will challenge the boundaries that exclude or separate people. For the sake of community and human wholeness, it is crucial that boundaries are permeable. When the distinctions we make between race, gender, ethnicity, or class become impermeable barriers that separate people, violate human well-being, and impede community, connective ministerial leaders will challenge those boundaries in order to heal and restore the human family. When the boundaries people erect out of fear are walls that separate, ministry as connective leadership will encourage people to live beyond their fears and cross boundaries that exclude.

Almost everything about our lives in a technologized society simultaneously connects and pushes us away from each other. When we help people cross the barriers that fragment life, we invite them to be open to something greater than what can be felt or seen or touched. When congregational loyalties and denominational distinctions and religious differences become barriers that prevent people from coming together for the common good, it is necessary that connective ministerial leaders cross those boundaries for the sake of the whole. We need faith communities that will challenge tribalism and establish permeable boundaries instead of territorial walls disguised as boundaries.

Challenging boundaries as connective leaders is risky. In order to set aside a barrier that has protected us or a prejudice that has made the world seem secure, we wager some or all of our security. Barbara J. Blodgett warns us that entrusting ourselves to another can be a bumpy road. "Trusting others always involves risk. . . . Trusting other people always makes us in some way vulnerable to them."⁹ People entrust each other with themselves or with things they value, and this connects people with one another. But this intimacy that is practiced in communities of faith also makes us susceptible to wounding and being wounded. Because of the level of intimacy that should exist in congregations, no church is completely safe. When abuse occurs, it must be punished. When violations of trust occur, they are honestly recognized. One way to minimize harm is to be ready for it.

Eric H. F. Law has described the benefits of boundary crossing for the sake of a more inclusive community in a very compelling way. It is a risky process, he suggests, to move beyond the margins of safety that define us. And yet a newly negotiated boundary for faith communities, in which there is time and space "to take into consideration another's needs, interests, experience, and perspective," will lead to a clearer understanding of ourselves and others.¹⁰ Jesus invited his listeners not to be limited by fear in order to cross the boundaries that exclude. When we practice hospitality in such a boundary-crossing way, we will welcome unfamiliar people and unknown ideas into our lives in ways that expand our world and deepen our faith. And we may be surprised by grace beyond safety.

Ministers are connective leaders whose search for wholeness and integration in an age of fragmentation will lead to boundary crossing as a way of life. At its best, ministry invites people to be 'integration seekers' who transcend even the boundaries of time we erect between past and future. The phrase integration seeker comes from Robert Larkin, an Episcopal priest and a practicing physician, who has had considerable experience holding together what others might keep separate. Larkin's deep passion about vocational integration and personal wholeness is reflected also in his concern about the fragmentation of modern life.

I see in many ways reactions against fragmentation and not a trajectory toward further fragmentation. People are saying no, I can't take it anymore, I am sitting in my house, I work from my home, I write to my girlfriend, I have text messages every 15 minutes from my lover, and after a while you say 'enough of it.' What about sharing a glass of wine?

Whenever we entrust an aspect of our life to an 'other' in an act of care, boundaries are crossed. Whenever we listen to people facing a life-threatening circumstance or desperately seeking to make sense of sixty years of life in the next twenty minutes, whenever we hear the fear of an uncertain future, we cross a boundary. Those life moments evoke deep compassion as chaplains seek to help people transcend barriers that diminish the soul or help them gather up the fragments of a life into an integrated whole.

BUILDING BONDS OF TRUST ONE STORY AT A TIME

Ministerial leadership depends on trust, and trust is built story by story as ministers listen to people tell about their lives. Careful listening breeds trust. And trust makes it possible to deepen affectional bonds. For the present and future of ministry in a pluralistic context, we need women and men who are active and receptive, rational and sensible, living and working in between the realm of clocks and computers and the realm of mystery and faith. Many years ago, in a book entitled *The Priest in Community*, Urban Holmes suggested that sensibility and receptivity are critical characteristics for ministry. Being sensible, Holmes suggests, is the ability to "devour the whole experience, with all its contradictions, and make a new whole meaning without leaving anything out."¹¹ Hearing the whole story matters. Being a trusted authority depends more on how much we hear than on what we say or do. One of the serious illusions of ministerial leadership today is that cleverly devised strategies will fill the pews and renew the church. It is rather the minister who acts receptively and listens deeply who will find the depth of sacred symbiosis between the human and divine stories.

For four years, Jonna Monroe listened to the needs, concerns, and desires of the people at Old Brick Church. When she first came to the congregation, she held several 'listening sessions' in which she listened to the concerns of different groups: the young adults, school parents, the Board of Elders, and the staff. It took her a long time to earn their trust and thereby establish her authority. Jonna Monroe knew that her authority at Old Brick Church depended in part on how well she met their expectations. She understood that "they need[ed] to be liked by me" before they were willing to trust her pastoral leadership. When she buried three parents of children in the day school, Pastor Monroe began to feel trusted. She was more comfort-

able being the leader and equally determined to give that authority back to the congregation. This is how she said it:

I am not a good pastor because I am smart or witty or popular. I am a good pastor because these people in the congregation have endowed me with the opportunity to be their pastor. My authority is rooted in and born out of the faith community. When I am clear and the congregation is clear about my own authority, I can give it back to them.

Careful listening to the congregants' stories helped Pastor Monroe understand the culture of the congregation and the particular needs of its members. More than that, as a connective leader, she understood the importance of building bonds with the people she loved and served. Pastor Monroe also knew that to be a trusted leader, she had to be willing to be vulnerable as well. To trust someone and to be trustworthy both depend on the willingness to risk being vulnerable with one another. Congregations receive their ministerial leaders but ministers must receive the congregation as well. In turn, leaders take the people with whom they minister into themselves, hold them respectfully and lovingly, and send them out into the world. Reciprocal intimacy in pastoral work is always risky. When minister and congregation entrust themselves to one another, it is a "unique sort of relationship because of the risk it incorporates."¹² To trust someone and to be trustworthy both depend on the willingness to risk being vulnerable with one another and receptive to one another. Hearing the stories people tell also has the potential to change the hearer. Caregivers regularly embrace the possibility of being changed in order to listen to the stories people tell. *Forming trustworthy leaders who are willing to risk being vulnerable continues to be a critical focus in preparation for the future of ministry.*

Loving people and hearing stories are necessary but not sufficient for the work of ministry in general and chaplaincy in particular. Ministerial leaders will be regarded as trustworthy and able to function as connective leaders if they are competent in the work they are called to do. Research in chaplaincy points to the need for measurable skills and competence in hospital ministry. Sustaining competence in chaplaincy as health practices continue to become more complex will require ongoing training.

Congregational ministry is no less demanding. When Doug Purnell was interviewed to be the pastor of St. Ives Uniting Church of Sydney, Australia, he used his work as an artist to introduce himself to the nominating committee of St. Ives in this way:

I offer no big plans. I can only promise to live honestly, openly, and deeply as your spiritual leader. I will love the people given to my care. I will lead the best worship I am capable of. I will listen to the people of the congregation and the community. My understanding of ministry is like standing in front of a canvas with a brush in hand but no preconceived plan. If I listen deeply to the paint, occasionally, just occasionally, a miracle happens and something new and unexpected emerges.

Purnell and the congregation of St. Ives together fashioned a creative ministry inspired by his vision and sustained by his competence and determined affection for the people of St. Ives. Members of the congregation identified his particular competence around the use of time, seeing a project through to completion, and inviting them into a shared vision of a new future. For others, competence may include understanding others, setting limits without discouraging dreaming, holding paradox, or making realistic strategic plans. Loving fosters important bonds, but loving is not enough. Ministerial leaders also need to be competent.

DIFFERENTIATED LEADERS AND COMPASSIONATE LOVERS

In a world that is simultaneously coming together and breaking apart, fragmentation and fear are in the air we breathe. The tension and conflict generated by interdependence and diversity pulling in opposite directions continues to generate desperate efforts to ease anxiety. Tribalism is not the solution. Leadership by intimidation will not endure. In any environment or community that is fearful, efforts to reduce anxiety by managerial or administrative solutions are often only palliative in the short run. Fashioning an enduring vision in a fearful age means finding the balance between loving people just as they are and challenging them to live beyond fear.

Too much difference often generates a longing for certainty. For that reason, absolutizing stalks the same terrain as anxiety. Instead of acknowledging that anxiety is an inevitable consequence of living in a diverse creation, we are tempted to polarize the world so we will have enemies to fear and fight. Whoever is 'other' is the enemy, and the stranger is dangerous. In our search for certainty, we are more likely to perceive ambiguous situations as threatening rather than promising. Much has been written about the importance of leaders being a *non-anxious presence* in religious communities overwhelmed by anxiety. It remains critical that connective leaders

are differentiated lovers, competent to engage people at the deepest level without being caught up in their fear or their longing for absolutes.

When this vision of ministerial leadership as both connective and competent is focused on the care of individuals, it resembles compassionate empathy. Empathy is essential for effective human care, and it is the prerequisite for all other interventions for the sake of healing and wholeness. Empathy includes ‘setting the other at a distance’ so we see others fully and completely and hear their stories accurately. At the same time, we are inevitably moved by the stories we hear. Connective ministry emphasizes the uniqueness of the ‘other’ through empathic listening and holds the ‘other’ with compassion in order to diminish isolation.

When Christians speak of a suffering God, they have in mind this sense that our struggles and our pain are on God’s heart. Human compassion is the perception of the other’s pain, hurt, sorrow, despair, and longing that is intense and vivid. Accurate empathy is possible without compassion. However, spiritual care or care informed by a religious faith is marked by compassionate empathy—not simply empathy alone. Listening carefully to the other’s story is first. If, however, we have made room to hear and hold the story of another with a compassionate heart, then their pain will be changed by our hearing. Healing happens when the one seeking care believes that his or her pain is on the caregiver’s heart. Once that happens, both the caregiver and care receiver are changed. Compassionate empathy of that sort is kept in balance by maintaining clear but permeable boundaries and fostering dependable bonds.

A Scandinavian proverb points to what is needed in forming connective ministerial leaders for this time: “Faith is like a bird that feels the dawn breaking but sings while it is still dark.” One of the enduring challenges for ministerial leaders, especially when the lives of people we lead and love are driven by fear, is to embody hopefulness while it is still dark. Even when they themselves are anxious, religious leaders and religious communities are signposts of grace and catalysts for new beginning. It is an act of both hopefulness and courage for connective ministerial leaders to wait in the darkness, embrace ambiguity and anxiety, and foster a spirituality hospitable to God’s tomorrow, beyond the answer of yesterday’s certainties.

Despite all the complexities and disappointments of human love and connectivity, *social and relational wisdom* must be added to self-differentiation as essential for effective ministry today. This new kind of leadership

recognizes the power of relationships and the need for human beings to be in community without losing particularity and identity. The complexity of life and faith in an age when interdependence and diversity collide requires both compassionate connection and respectful differentiation, bonds and boundaries. Noted University of Chicago professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has summarized this human vision in the following way: "Just as we have learned to separate ourselves from each other and from the environment, we now need to learn how to reunite ourselves with other entities around us without losing our hard-won individuality."¹³ In a world fearful of coming together and breaking apart, we need differentiated leaders who are compassionate lovers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay grew out of years of conversation and collaboration with Edward Foley, OFM, around the larger theme of Imperfect Excellence in Ministry. I am grateful for his willingness to use some of those shared ideas in this text. The brief vignettes are adapted from longer interviews and are used here with permission. Portions of this essay were previously published in *Congregations* vol. 39, no. 4 (2012) under the title "Leaders Are Lovers."

NOTES

- 1 Jean Lipman-Bluman, *Connective Edge: Leading in an Interdependent World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), xiii.
- 2 Teilhard de Chardin as quoted in Lipman-Bluman, *Connective Edge*, 12.
- 3 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 48.
- 4 H. Newton Malony, *Living with Paradox: Religious Leadership and the Genius of Double Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
- 5 Malony, *Living with Paradox*, 7.
- 6 John Keats as quoted in Alfred Margulies, *The Empathic Imagination* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1989), 12.
- 7 Jean Lipman-Bluman, "The Age of Connective Leadership," *Leader to Leader* 17 (Summer 2000): 39–45.
- 8 W. H. Vanstone, *The Risk of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 119.
- 9 Barbara J. Blodgett, *Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 3.
- 10 Eric H. F. Law, *Inclusion: Making Room for Others* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 42.
- 11 Urban T. Holmes, III, *The Priest in Community: Exploring the Roots of Community* (The Seabury Press, 1978), 73.
- 12 Blodgett, *Lives Entrusted*, 18.
- 13 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (HarperCollins, 1990), 221.