

There Is an “I” in Leadership

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Leadership is a topic that has been widely discussed in the church in recent years. What does leadership look like in the twenty-first century? What kind of leaders does the church need? Are there enough leaders to accomplish our mission? These are only a few of the questions about an essential component of congregational and religious life at all levels that are swirling in denominational circles today. Given the parallel conversations about leadership in the corporate and political worlds and in culture as a whole, it is no surprise that the church would have similar concerns about its present leadership and that of the future.

One generally accepted principle about leaders is that they must possess the ego strength and self-differentiation needed to avoid the pitfalls of dynamics such as enmeshment, co-dependency, transference, countertransference, and the violation of boundaries in order to lead effectively. As one of my mentors put it, “You have to wrestle with and rein in the ‘I’ that wants to be seen, recognized and affirmed as a leader.” The values of self-monitoring, self-supervising, and self-awareness are held up in formal theological education, particularly clinical pastoral education (CPE), to help students avoid such pitfalls. Leaders are frequently warned about inserting too much

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of their own personality and preferences into their work. A leader who puts too much of him- or herself into pastoral work is generally regarded as egotistical, self-serving, and insensitive to those being ministered to or served. The hallmarks of good leadership include the ability to cast a vision yet also include the voices, views, and desires of those being led so that they have a sense of ownership in the work.

These cautions are well-warranted and provide a foundational basis for engaging in effective leadership. However, it can be to a leader's detriment to forget that his or her persona, leadership style, strengths, and weaknesses can have a profound impact on the work and ministry of leadership. To ignore the importance of one's own presence in the ministry as a defining variable is to negate the human part of Martin Buber's understanding of the "I and thou" in every ministry encounter as well as every encounter with the Divine.¹ The "I" that is present in the human-human encounter or the Divine-human encounter must be able to accept his or her part and role in the relationship with a commitment to be the best "I" possible. In my Wesleyan tradition, we recognize the self as an imperfect self, yet a self that is always striving for perfection, aiming to be the best self possible.

This essay identifies the essential "I's" that are critical to effective leadership. As a bishop with oversight of around two hundred fifty pastors and congregations and a background as a clinical pastoral educator, I have discovered that the pastoral leader's functioning can be seriously hampered when the leader is unaware of how he or she is impacting and influencing pastoral encounters with individuals or corporate ministry activities. Pastoral leaders should be theologically grounded and able to engage interpersonally but also acutely aware of their intrapersonal dynamics that may enter into the pastoral encounter, whether positively or negatively. There are at least four "I's" that must be a part of the leader's toolbox in ministry: integrity, intentionality, innovation, and inspiration. There may be others, but in this essay I focus on these four as a way of reflecting on leadership in this era.

INTEGRITY

Leaders who lack integrity are doomed before they even start the work. In CPE, we urge students to become integrated, congruent individuals. In life cycle and developmental theory, identity formation is the process

through which we cultivate inner and outer sameness. Who we perceive ourselves to be (inner) and who and how people experience us (outer) must have a congruency that is obvious and observable as we live and work and engage with others.² I partner these concepts with the notion of integrity, which is one's commitment to maintain congruence. Integrity is about the individual's desire to be trusted not simply because she has a leadership title but because she is a sincere, principled individual who can be counted on to act in harmony with her espoused beliefs, commitments, and responsibilities.

Birmingham native Richard E. Simmons III, business leader and founder of the Center for Executive Leadership, recently published *The Power of a Humble Life: Quiet Strength in an Age of Arrogance*.³ In his book, Simmons challenges leaders to monitor their own pride by seeking humility. For me, this quest for humility is a natural path to integrity. Humility binds us to the commitments we make to God and to others when the "ego" desires to receive the credit and the glory. Our integrity is maintained through our humility in knowing that without God and without others, we are incomplete.

A healthy reliance on others enables us to lead knowing that others have skills, talents, and contributions to add to the endeavor. This enables us to know the same about ourselves and thus to live with a faithfulness to who we are and what we can do. Pride does not prevent us from owning our limitations and admitting our faults. This kind of honesty with self and with others reinforces our integrity. People thus trust who we are, what we say, and what we do. Leaders without integrity are doomed before they even start.

INTENTIONALITY

The second "I" that is vital in effective leadership is intentionality. Doing things without intent—"flying by the seat of your pants" or "making it up as you go along"—is not only an indicator of laziness but also a diminishment of the sacred call to be a pastoral leader. Although the pastoral leader often does not know what will happen and surely cannot control the outcomes of any particular action, conversation, or pastoral intervention, the pastoral leader should at least know his or her intention in doing something.

Without intentionality, the pastoral leader—regardless of whether he or she is a pastor, chaplain, or congregation staff member—will simply

go through the motions of ministry, perhaps getting things done, but they will be done with little or no relevance to the context or to the people being served. Just showing up is not enough. Just checking tasks off as completed is not the essential work of the pastoral leader. In CPE, we teach students to engage with the "living human document" and to meet people where they are.⁴ Each context, congregation, family, and individual has a personal narrative that they bring into the ministry moment. To have a pre-set or a simple set of prescriptive responses, biblical texts, prayers, and so on to work from as a leader is to reduce ministry to a stark task with no regard for these personal narratives. Intentionality compels the leader to listen, to value presence as much as his or her own responses and insights, and to shape, reshape, reform, and reframe how he or she engages with individuals and communities based on their articulated needs rather than simply on what is easiest, most familiar, or most comfortable for the pastoral leader.

Intentionality helps leaders to moderate and modify their pace, examine their motives, seek consultation, or do whatever is necessary to provide leadership and pastoral care that is relevant to the needs. A pastor with his or her own agenda is not a leader. Intentionality does not suggest that we are free of an agenda, but it mandates that our agenda be a mutual agenda that demonstrates an interpersonal connection to those being ministered to and served. Intentionality also compels the leader to be invested in life-long learning, which is important since there are so many unique narratives. Each encounter or place of ministry challenges the leader to learn more, study more, and be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities. This leads the intentional leader to the next essential "I."

INNOVATION

A leader who has only one way of leading is like a singer who is a "one-hit wonder" or a singer whose songs all sound the same. I have encountered pastors who try to preach the same sermon that they preached at one church at their next pastoral charge. They are often confused when it doesn't work or is not received the same as before. It is certainly possible to preach the same sermon or text at several different churches, but the message should be shaped by the specifics of the congregational audience. Innovation as a functional principle in leadership enables the preacher to rework a thematic sermon so that it speaks to a particular congregation. The temptation that

must be resisted is that of doing the same thing over and over. The challenge is to embrace innovation as a natural part of leadership.

The effective leader is responsible for seeing what is there but also for looking beyond what is seen to envision a more productive, vital future for his or her charges. The effective leader avidly seeks to cast a broad vision, explore new territory, and lead others into spiritual frontiers previously unexplored. Of course, the leader has to be aware of how to pace this work so that he or she does not get too far in front of the congregation (or individual) and discover that fear, mistrust, or something else is preventing them from embracing the vision of the leader.

An undeniable part of the leader's role is to innovate and envision the next step, the next level. I have known far too many pastors who prefer to play it safe and "not rock the boat" or risk rejection and criticism. So, they maintain the status quo of the ministry to which they have been assigned. It is a great disappointment to me when, after a year at a local church, a pastor reports that nothing has changed. I applaud whenever there is no decrease or attrition (whether in membership or stewardship or ministries). But the church and the congregation will not grow by just doing the same thing over and over. Their spiritual muscles will not get stronger if they stay in their comfort zone. Their faith in God will not increase until they engage in some endeavor that they know cannot happen except through God's provision and grace. Innovation is taking to heart the words of Revelation 21:5, "Behold, I make all things new," which demands that our faith be based in the transforming power of Christ.

When leaders and congregations lose their zest and quest for innovation, they begin the slow erosion of becoming a dying church.⁵ One of the things I love about CPE is that it constantly exposes a person to the need for innovation. Ministry in the hospital, for example, calls on the chaplain to be creative—to mold familiar rituals into meaningful experiences that may or may not be known to patients or to respond to requests for rituals and care that have not yet been incorporated into the lexicon of the mainstream church. The ability to innovate is not just to make it up as you go along; it is also the *art* of making meaning for individuals (and congregations) at pivotal times in their lives and spiritual development. Pastoral care as an art, not a science, is the acquired ability to engage with the "living human document" in real time and create an encounter that draws the divine into the experience with relevance and coherence.

INSPIRATION

The final "I" for consideration in this essay is the function of inspiration. Leaders do a lot of things—they organize, they delegate, they decide, they counsel and consult, they discipline and they challenge. But if leaders who are skilled in all of these tasks are unable to be an inspiration, their impact ends once they leave the room, exit the pulpit, or move on to another assignment. In the movie *Black Panther*, the king says to his son—who is reluctant to accept his father's death—that he (the king) has failed if he has not prepared his son for his father's death. I would expand on that thought and say that the leader has failed who has not prepared others to continue the work and ministry after he or she has departed (temporarily or permanently). I have seen pastors trying to continue to conduct the business of the church from their hospital bed, perhaps out of mistrust of the leadership of others but also because they have not inspired others to rise to leadership.

The pastoral leader who has to do everything robs others of using their God-given gifts for the sake of growing the ministry. An inspiring leader recognizes that a critical dimension of leadership is preparing the next generation of leaders. Equipping the saints is a part of the work of leadership (Ephesians 4:12). Even in institutional ministry, the goal of spiritual care is to equip individuals in crises with tools that they can use in the future to process and grow from their experiences of hurt, trauma, grief, and loss.

Inspiring others involves a selfless giving of one's own lessons learned and trials overcome to instill and lift up the value of hope. Persons without hope, and also congregations without hope, languish in the perils of the present with no confidence that their faith or even their will for something better will make a difference. An inspiring leader can be real and acknowledge the present, but a leader who is a preacher, pastor, chaplain, mentor, or coach can also convey the hope that is embodied in our faith in the transcendent.

In an article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled "How to be An Inspiring Leader," Eric Garton writes: "Inspiring leaders are those who use their unique combination of strengths to motivate individuals and teams to take on bold missions—and hold them accountable for results."⁶ A colleague of mine, Daniel Schwartz, executive director of Faith in Action Alabama (an ecumenical, action-oriented organization), often says, "We need to dream God-dreams." In other words, we are to hope for things that are beyond our capacity. This inspires others to see beyond the now and beyond the limits

of the present. The inspiring leader is careful not to push people into a place of fear with demands to have greater hope and faith but guides and accompanies them on a journey with support, strength, and the commitment to sojourn together into a new place of faithfulness and hope.

When I think about the inspiration that is imparted by an effective leader, I recall the campfire song I learned years ago: "It only take a spark to get a fire going / And soon all those around can warm up to its glowing."⁷ The effective leader is the spark that can inspire others to grasp the vision, become enthusiastic about the ministry, take the risk to try something new, and walk by faith and not by sight.

In conclusion, when a leader remembers there is an "I" in leadership—integrity, intentionality, innovation and inspiration—that leader embarks on a journey that will benefit not only the leader but also individuals, congregations, and communities. These "I's" are part of the answer to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay: What does leadership look like in the twenty-first century? What kind of leaders does the church need? Are there enough leaders to accomplish our mission? A renewed commitment to these qualities on the part of current leaders will ensure that the church has effective, spirit-driven leadership for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 1923.
- 2 The writings of Erik Erikson are the seminal source of this theory. See especially *Childhood and Society* (1950) and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968).
- 3 Richard E. Simmons III, *The Power of a Humble Life: Quiet Strength in an Age of Arrogance* (Birmingham, AL: Union Hill Publishing, 2017).
- 4 Anton Boisen, the founder of CPE, coined these phrases as a way of encouraging care providers to listen, value, and utilize each person's unique personal story when offering pastoral care.
- 5 Thom S. Ranier, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).
- 6 Eric Garton, "How to Be an Inspiring Leader," *Harvard Business Review*, April 25, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/04/how-to-be-an-inspiring-leader>.
- 7 These lyrics are from the song "Pass It On" by Kurt Kaiser (based on John 4:29).