



Leadership Under Constraints

What Does It Mean to be Asked for Leadership in a Managerial Institution?

by **Gil Rendle**

Senior Consultant, Alban Institute

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Introduction

Every discipline has its perspective but not the whole story. Even if we were to understand only the individual human being, biology, psychology, theology, sociology, and anthropology all have a contributing perspective without being able to define the whole either singularly or collectively.

What follows is a perspective on the current setting and challenge of leadership within the United Methodist Church from the lens of systems theory and organizational sciences. Other voices and other disciplines need to be blended into this perspective in order to speak more fully and faithfully. This paper, however, does not seek to offer a full explication of leadership needed within the church for this time. Rather, the perspective in this paper has been kept narrow in order to bring clarity to the organizational and systemic challenges that currently face episcopal leadership.

Bishops in the United Methodist Church and the staff and leaders of their conferences are today being asked to provide new direction for the denomination that wishes to steer away from trends that have dominated past decades and that are felt to have weakened the denomination. Bishops and district superintendents, however, are being asked for leadership in a managerial system. It is a task for which the denomination has not trained its leaders. It is a task that, if well done, will not be met with full appreciation but will be challenged by resistance in many quarters—not least of which will be the national church.

The United Methodist Church as a Managerial System

The United Methodist denomination has been identified as a “managerial episcopacy” by Edward Leroy Long in his 2001 study of the politics of a range of denominations and expressions of the Christian faith. Long looks at three denominations with episcopal heritage in which the biblical principle of oversight (*episkope*) is located in leadership persons and is a means of system organization. Long distinguishes United Methodism as a managerial episcopacy as distinct from the Roman Catholic “monarchical episcopacy” and the Episcopal “pastoral

episcopacy.” Each of these episcopal systems defines different roles and responsibilities for leaders. When describing the United Methodist Church, Long states:

. . . a managerial episcopacy is concerned primarily with making the church function effectively. It views the office of bishop in functional terms, as involving managerial skills, rather than giving it theological dimensions or sacerdotal significance.¹

This does not imply that the role of the United Methodist bishop does not have theological or sacerdotal functions and responsibilities. Indeed the United Methodist Church does look to bishops within the United Methodist denomination to assume teaching and priestly roles. Nonetheless, Long argues that the governance pattern of the United Methodist Church was heavily developed “in an era in which efficiency was becoming a desired goal in the culture as a whole, when the business world was developing complex logistical systems, and when decisions, more than heritage, were seen as influential in human affairs.”² He argues that the defining role of the United Methodist bishop and of denominational leadership is managerial as symbolized by the location of episcopal offices in office centers rather than in congregations or cathedrals and by the episcopal attire which is more commonly of the same order as ministers in full connection than defined by symbols of the office.

Like all managerial systems a managerial episcopacy has checks and balances on authority to establish managerial boundaries that are not always encountered in other leadership systems. Such checks and balances within United Methodism include:

- The primary role of bishop as limited to the interpreter of polity (*Book of Discipline*).
- A limited tenure giving only tenuous authority.
- Non-membership in the annual conference that allows the bishop to preside but without vote.
- A Council of Bishops that does not designate a “head” for the entire church.
- A system for setting fundamental denominational policy through the legislative powers of a representational body (General Conference) rather than in the singular or collective authority of a leader(s).
- A Judicial Council that serves as a “watchdog” tool for appeals of episcopal or conference decision making.
- Bishops’ subjection (in practice if not intent) to conference and jurisdictional points of professional and spiritual evaluation (i.e., conference and jurisdictional Episcopacy Committees).

Boundaries and accountability, of course, are healthy in community. It is important, nonetheless, to recognize the limits that they place on leadership, particularly when practiced within a managerial system.

Management and Leadership

The primary point is that the present United Methodist Church has inherited and developed a managerial system from which it now asks for clear leadership. It is true that management and leadership are not disconnected, and no organization can live with one of these functions to the exclusion of the other. Indeed, all living systems need management and leadership in a continuous and complementary relationship in order to maintain balance and health while also negotiating change and development. While complementary it is important also to note that management and leadership address distinctly different needs of an organization. One manages the present, the other defines the future. One provides stability, the other change. One provides smoothness and efficiency, the other disruption. One provides comfort, the other anxiety.

A classic distinction made between management and leadership is that each seeks to answer a different question.³ Management seeks to answer the question: “Are we doing things right?” This is a question of appropriateness and efficiency; pursuing this question provides security and stability for the organization. In the local church, “Did anyone order enough candles for the Christmas Eve candlelight service?” is clearly a managerial question. If the candles were ordered, the service goes smoothly. If not, there are disruptive consequences. This does not infer that managerial questions are trivial. Indeed management is commonly based on experience—good management practices avoid many problems while providing stability and security. Management systems also provide standards of practice for workers and participants to follow. Note, however, that managerial questions and managerial leadership assume that there is a “right” way for something to be done and that the appropriate strategy is to replicate what was done and what was seen to be right in the past.

Leadership seeks to answer a very different question: “Are we doing the right things?” This is a question of purpose and meaning and is often experienced as disruptive. A well-formed leadership question does not increase efficiency but creates disruptive challenges that cause the system discomfort by requiring inquiry, learning, and making choices. In doing strategic planning work with congregations, the Alban Institute commonly uses three leadership questions (when appropriate), which we identify as “formation questions.”⁴

- Who are we?—the identity question
- What has God called us to do or to be?—the purpose question
- Who is our neighbor?—the context question

Such questions are difficult to pursue because they raise to a conscious-level investigation of what has usually been assumed as known. Such questions require active learning to make faithful choices about the future. For example, “What is the purpose of an annual conference?” is a leadership question that causes disruption and requires active decision making about the future goals and uses of the conference’s resources.

The Paradox of an Established Management System

It is common, if not axiomatic, for established organizations to request leadership (which prompts disruption and anxiety) only to resist it and reward management (which maintains stability and security) instead.

Leadership

The tension between the interrelated functions of management and leadership is heightened in a time of great change when old practices do not serve well and when new directions are not solidified. In such a time what constitutes appropriate leadership is questioned and contested. Does the leader focus the attention of the group on answers or on questions? “Imagine the difference in behavior,” writes Ron Heifetz, who served as director of the Harvard University project on leadership, “when people operate with the idea that ‘leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader’s vision’ versus ‘leadership means influencing the community to face its problems.’”⁵

Living without clear answers and expectations (such as what it means to be a *good* pastor or a *vital* congregation) creates anxiety and discomfort in which people turn to the leader with the expectation that he or she will reduce the anxiety by providing clear direction. This is the assigned role of the singular leader who is hoped to and expected to be able to provide answers and calm fears. A leader with a clear vision is expected to galvanize followers to action—if not for great purpose, at least for reduced anxiety. We are familiar with the idea of the “lone-ranger” leader, the person who single handedly seems to come up with needed answers and clear directions. We are, however, also coming to terms with the reality that such leadership is rare and perhaps even inappropriate, if not impossible, in a complex time of deep change. Nonetheless, people seek the solitary leader who can thus calm fears. The temptation to want to play such a role as leader is constantly present for those given leadership responsibilities.

What we are less familiar with—or sensitive to—is the way in which leaders in complex organizations are pulled into the singular leader role despite being surrounded by others who form a leadership team or administrative structure. Deferral to the singular or highest status leader in this setting is identified by Jim Collins, former faculty member at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business and current management researcher, as the “genius with a thousand helpers.”⁶ The system may be more complex, the number of people involved may be larger, but the wish for someone to “make it right” does not subside, even in the heart of the leader who would like to be able to bring order and calm to a chaotic time. The temptation of the singular leader, either as the lone ranger or as the genius with a thousand helpers, limits the creativity and the inventiveness of the organization by creating dependence upon the limits of one individual to originate or sign off on all ideas about moving into the future.

The search or desire for a singular leader is commonly centered on the need for clear answers in an anxious time. This is Heifetz’s first alternative of leadership in which he speaks of leadership as “influencing the community to follow the leader’s vision.” In arenas where there

are clear problems and clear answers, this is a fully appropriate role for leaders to play. In places and times when clear answers are not available, however, it is the second alternative that Heifetz proposes as holding hope: “leadership as influencing the community to face into its problems.”

The Constraints of a Managerial System

In the current tension between management and leadership, it is important to become familiar with the assumptions and demands of management in order to understand the natural resistance that makes leadership difficult. Among the foundational assumptions of management are:

- A commitment to orderliness.
- Replication and sameness. For example, districts are assumed to be smaller replications of the structure and purpose of the annual conference, which itself is a smaller replication of the structure and purpose of the national church. District superintendents are assumed to have the same roles and responsibilities (and even exhibit the same passions for ministry) despite the differing needs of their own unique districts.
- Checks and balances. (See page 2.)
- Centralization. Authority is located in the primary governing body, and any person or part of the organization is not readily given authority to act on local issues. (For example, decision making is located in the appointment cabinet, and a great deal of time and energy are given to sharing information and including all members of the central body in debate and decision making without concern for their involvement or investment in the issue.) While practices of centralization provide a good deal of alignment within the organization, they also constrain and slow the amount of work the organization can do and produce rigidity rather than agility in the organization’s ability to respond to change.

Managerial systems turn to regulatory practices in times of great change as a means of fulfilling the assumptions noted above. In a 1992 essay, Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler offer three metaphors for the development of American denominations: from constitutional confederacy (1780s) to the corporation (1830-1860s) to regulatory agencies (1960s . . .).⁷ They note, as precursors to the present regulatory mode of denominations, the impact of the breakdown in the consensus between the national church and the people in the pew; the development of “cottage industries,” which began to replace the role of the national church as the primary provider of goods and services to the congregation; and the onset of cultural individualism, which gave freedom to every congregation to behave individually. The response of denominations, claim Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler, was to become more regulatory primarily because regulatory mechanisms work well and are “cheaper” than market solutions or system-wide negotiations.

The dependence upon regulatory responses should not come as a surprise since it is a cultural response to the messiness of deep change as experienced by an orderly and managed generation. During the same time period that books of polity such as the Presbyterian *Book of Order* and the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* grew from pamphlet and small-book size to large complex volumes more easily managed on CD discs, the Internal Revenue Code and healthcare regulations and practices have grown exponentially through continuous legislation. They are systems that have become rigid through the imposition of accumulated rules. The impulse to control through requirements, rather than provide clarity and tidiness, in fact creates a complexity that further constrains and inhibits the movement toward change. Middle-judicatory executives in a number of mainline denominations have expressed their concern that as the need for new ideas and new structures increases within their denominations, the primary response of national offices and national denominational staff people has been to request more reports and increased compliance (i.e., additional reporting and regulation). The need to control and regulate has the tendency to make change more difficult without adding any agreement or coordination to the efforts of change.

Technical versus Adaptive Work

In his study of leadership, Heifetz offers new insights and tools to the present generation of leaders who are faced by a changed environment and a new mix of challenges. In particular he differentiates between *technical* and *adaptive* work, each of which must be addressed by the leader.

Technical work is the application of known solutions to known problems. This is clearly managerial work and depends upon one of the most highly developed skills of managers—problem solving. The manager identifies the problem (and, by building consensus on the very identity of the problem, already has moved the system toward solution and change); identifies the alternate options available to address the problem (brainstorming); chooses the most likely alternative (decision making); and moves to implementation (action). The appropriate response to a known problem in technical work is *action*. Technical work, problem solving, is effective and works well. However, it works well *only if there is a problem*. The dilemma in the current moment is that leaders are often confronted with new questions and situations that do not lend themselves to old assumptions and practices. They cannot appropriately be addressed as known problems. They require new learning.

Because technical work and problem solving have been the primary tools of management for the past several generations, it is difficult for bishops and district superintendents in the current situation to resist searching for answers and enter into the more complex realm of learning. A well-proven adage of systems is that whenever a system does not know what to do, it does what it knows. And so leaders overuse their problem-solving skills even when confronted with a changed situation that cannot be defined as a “problem.”

Heifetz offers a second arena for leadership, which he calls *adaptive* work. Adaptive work is quite different from the problem-solving activity of technical, managerial situations. Adaptive work “consists of the learning required to address conflicts in values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face.”⁸ It is in this arena that Heifetz offers the alternative definition of leadership as “influencing the community to face its problems.” The appropriate response to adaptive work is not *action* (problem solving), it is *learning*. In order to address an adaptive situation, someone must learn something. In fully adaptive situations of deep cultural change it is common for everyone, including the designated leader, to need to learn.

When a bishop provides faithful leadership to move a conference to address a discerned call or need but conference leaders—the Board of Ordained Ministry or the Episcopacy Committee—pulls the bishop aside out of concern for people who feel left out or are displeased, it is an adaptive situation in which there are conflicts between the values people hold and the behaviors that they practice. When there is a widely shared call for excellence in pastoral leadership but the poorest performing or poorest motivated clergy still receive an appointment, it is an adaptive situation where there are conflicts between the values people express and the actions that they take. When, in a time of concern over church growth, large congregations in demographically supportive environments grow naturally yet the majority of conference attention and resources remain focused on the redevelopment of recalcitrant churches, it is an adaptive situation—conflict between the values people hold and the actions that they take. When the denomination claims the making of disciples (a focus on the change within the *individual*) is the driving mission but asks only for reports on the state of the congregation (a focus on the change within the *institution*), it is an adaptive situation. When bishops, district superintendents, and conference staff are challenged to provide leadership (complete with messiness and anxiety) but are rewarded only for management (orderliness and institutional harmony), it is an adaptive situation where there are conflicts between the values people hold and the actions that they take.

The task of the leader is not to pick up the daunting challenge of somehow finding the right answer or practice that will resolve these conflicts between values and actions. The task of the leader is to help the people face the adaptive situation and learn. As in all difficult moments, the starting point is finally to name the tension or conflict between expressed values and actual behavior. Not to name the tension is to remain trapped in a double bind.

Much more than a clichéd expression, a double bind is a debilitating trap for leadership. In his provocative work on the nature of order, anthropologist Gregory Bateson identified three essential elements to a double bind that must be present if the person is to be trapped and remain incapacitated:⁹

1. The situation or message must be important and cannot be ignored.
2. There have to be at least two competing and contradictory messages in the situation that cannot be held simultaneously in agreement.

3. The leader is not allowed to comment on the contradiction that is present and does not allow resolution.

For the leader to be faced with all three elements is to be constrained and to remain ineffective as long as the double bind remains unspoken. It is noteworthy to remember that Bateson is perhaps best remembered for his development of the double-bind theory of schizophrenia, a specific application of his study of paradox in communication. It is a schizophrenic situation. To be asked to provide leadership in a managerial system is a clear double bind designed to undercut change and faithfulness unless the competing values and behaviors are named and the people are helped to face the adaptive situation in search of new learnings.

Adaptive work is not tidy. In his theory of change from a systems perspective that takes into consideration the insights of chaos theory, organizational consultant John Scherer notes that in order for change to be birthed, two “parents” must be present—pain and possibility.¹⁰ There must be a discomfort sufficiently strong to make the people want to be different and a possibility promising enough to support the people through change. Walter Brueggemann once commented that the central task of leadership is to manage the hopes and the fears of the people. Indeed managing hopes and fears—pain and possibility—in a congregation, a conference, or a corporation is a spiritual task of great faithfulness. Scherer demonstrates that if the leader can surface the appropriate pain, hold clearly the possibility of what can be, and help people let go of old assumptions, then the people will enter a stage of chaos—the truly creative environment where change happens. It is a change that the leader can neither anticipate nor control. Turning first to contemporary literature, this creative place of chaos is described in Michael Crichton’s novel *The Lost World*. The character of Malcolm is the voice of systems theory in a novel of prehistoric dinosaurs that are reclaimed and cloned from ancient DNA to live in a contemporary jungle. Malcolm explains:

Complex systems tend to locate themselves at a place we call “the edge of chaos.” We imagine the edge of chaos as a place where there is enough innovation to keep a living system vibrant, and enough stability to keep it from collapsing into anarchy. It is a zone of conflict and upheaval, where the old and the new are constantly at war. Finding the balance point must be a delicate matter—if a living system drifts too close, it risks falling over into incoherence and dissolution; but if the system moves too far away from the edge, it becomes rigid, frozen, and totalitarian. Both conditions lead to extinction. Too much change is as destructive as too little. Only at the edge of chaos can complex systems flourish.¹¹

But along with being a literate people, we are also a biblical people so it is not difficult to turn to our own sources to realize this same truth. The biblical word commonly used to express chaos is “wilderness,” which is the creative place where people are changed. This is where the Israelites wandered with Moses for forty years during which time they were transformed from slaves into a nation. Without the wilderness, without the wandering, without the chaos that made

them trust in God, they would have arrived in the promised land as unchanged slaves with no purpose other than to escape their oppressors and no other identity than as an oppressed people. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness with the promise that there could be a straight path. The wilderness is where Jesus was sent to put away his role of carpenter in order to begin his public ministry as Son of God. It may be helpful to recall that the wilderness is required. In Mark's gospel, as soon as John baptized Jesus in the Jordan and the voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus as God's son, we are told that the Spirit immediately *drove* Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Wilderness, chaos, change is neither tidy nor comfortable, which underscores the true difficulty of adaptive leadership in a system designed for problem-solving management.

The Question of Purpose

One of the foundational observations of historian of science Thomas Kuhn in his study of scientific developments was that when a paradigm shifts everything goes back to zero. Kuhn writes, "The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm. Rather it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals."¹² That is to say that nothing can be assumed. Everything must be challenged. This was the experience of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa over the past generation. In fascinating conversations with the Alban Institute, several congregational consultants from the South Africa University of Stellenbosch sought help in learning how to engage congregations in visioning. Their congregations did not know how to raise questions of purpose and discern call. The consultants recognized that their congregations did not know how to vision because they had not had the need to raise such questions in the past. In many, if not most congregations, the cultural system of apartheid provided the purpose for a congregation to be the place where cultural and colonial values were to be maintained and enforced. This was all the purpose that many congregations needed, and it went unquestioned. When apartheid was dismantled, congregations for the first time had to ask the foundational but unfamiliar and disorienting questions of purpose: What are we called to do? What are we to produce? It has been difficult for many.

Some would argue that the mainline Protestant church in North America has gone through a similar paradigm shift in which the congregation (as well as the middle judicatory and the national church) lost its place as spokesperson for a dominant culture. The church now needs to find its new place in a complex network of competing and often unchristian cultural values where there is acceptance of a wider variation of expressions of the Christian faith and where a newly multi-faith nation is developing. Like the South African experience, everything goes back to zero, and the fully adaptive question of purpose becomes primary again. Such adaptive questions of purpose now also belong to the national church and conference as old assumptions prove limited and fall away.

We now need to ask again:

- What is the purpose of the national church and the annual conference?
- Who is the “client” of the annual conference—the national church, the clergy, the congregation, or the individual Christian?
- Is the vitality of congregations to be measured by institutional standards or by the changed lives of individuals?

Questions of purpose can be asked in multiple ways but are of central importance at a time of deep change. Raising and helping people face such questions is fundamental to faithful leadership. Without clarity of purpose we do not know to what to give ourselves, and so we settle for giving ourselves to what we know.

The Need for Clear Outcomes

A well-known adage attributed to Edwards Deming, the industrial consultant credited with turning around and rebuilding Japanese manufacturing following World War II, is that a system produces what it is designed to produce. If you want something different, you must change the system. Deming’s significant contribution was to develop principles for the needed change in a system.¹³ In part he pointed out that the natural temptation and the more common response when there is stress in a system is simply to work harder with the hope that it will make the wanted difference. He points to the futility of setting goals as a way of motivating people (i.e., setting a goal of a 10-percent increase in average attendance at worship in the next year), because without changing the system any increase or decrease related to the goal is simply the product of random variation within the limits allowed by the way the system is designed. He points to the limits of mandatory training—“fixing people”—(i.e., increased standards for ordination, legislated training for clergy and laity, redevelopment training for all congregations), because the newly trained, “fixed” people still work within the designed limitations of the unchanged system. He discourages the use of performance evaluations because of the arbitrariness of measuring performance within a system over which the person has little or no control. Until changes are designed into the system itself, what is produced continues to remain unchanged—except for the random positive and negative results that already are designed into the upper and lower control limits of change that any system accommodates but cannot control.

One sure key for changing a system to get different results depends upon *clarity of the intended outcome*—what the system, in fact, is expected to produce. The reality, however, is that many systems do not know what they actually produce. That seems especially true of voluntary associations such as congregations and conferences where, in the current cultural moment, there is little consensus about their proper purpose.

Without clarity of outcomes it is not possible to know how to change the system to produce different results. Take for instance the example of a restaurant. A quick assumption may be that the outcome of a restaurant is food. But generic and fuzzy outcomes do not offer help for the leader to know how to design a specific restaurant to get the clear outcome wanted. Consider

two very different but more sharply focused outcomes possible for a restaurant. One desired outcome may be a memorable dining experience. If that is the outcome, then the owner must design a fine gourmet restaurant. Yet another equally viable but very different outcome for a restaurant may be quick and inexpensive meals. For this, the owner would have to design a fast food restaurant that would be very different from the fine restaurant. For example:

- If quick inexpensive meals are the outcome, then hiring priorities for staff focus on the manager who can keep the system rolling efficiently no matter who is flipping the burgers. But if a memorable dining experience is the outcome, then hiring priorities for staff focus on the chef who will prepare food that demands notice and will become the topic of table talk.
- If quick inexpensive meals are the outcome, then standardized ingredients that do not change and do not interfere with the efficiency of production are used. But if a memorable dining experience is the outcome, then the menu changes to reflect the finest ingredients the chef can find. A note is put on the menu that preparation will take even longer than usual, which makes the customer even more appreciative of the product.
- If quick inexpensive meals are the outcome, then effectiveness is measured by the number of meals sold. A thirty-second timer is placed above the head of the worker to help keep delivery of the meal within a set time limit. But if a memorable dining experience is the outcome, then effectiveness is measured by counting the number of compliments to the chef, the number of repeat customers, and the food reviews in the local newspaper and regional magazine.
- If a quick inexpensive meal is the outcome, then the walls are painted with bold colors like red, orange, and yellow, and bright lights encourage customers to eat fast and keep moving. But if the outcome is a memorable dining experience, then sumptuous surroundings, attention to privacy at the tables, and a background setting of music become important to encourage the customer to linger and enjoy the “experience.”

The contrast could continue, but in each case it is the difference in the clear outcome that determines the appropriate way to design the system. It is the outcome that determines what resources are used or not used, where attention will be focused, and what measures of performance will be evaluated. As Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, writes, one must “begin with the end in mind.”¹⁴

Without clear outcomes it is difficult to know what is to be done, where resources are to be placed and what is to be measured. A clear understanding of the purpose of a congregation, conference, or denomination, therefore, is critical to knowing what is to be produced. There now appears to be multiple candidates for the primary outcome of an annual conference:

- A well-managed institution.

- Clergy certification, deployment, resourcing, and care.
- The making of disciples.
- Well and equitably managed interest groups.
- Vital congregations.
- The survival and development of congregations.

Conferences are complex organizations working with multiple demands and so will find their fingers necessarily in many or all of the above areas at some time and at some level. Without a clearly identified and articulated *primary outcome*, however, the conference leaders will not know how to hire and deploy staff; develop budgets; direct prayers and attention; provide leadership development and placement; and do evaluations to make the primary outcome happen. Without a clear primary outcome, resources and attention more commonly get spread and diffused across the multiple and often competing voices in the system and the system remains unchanged and ineffective.

One additional note—without clear outcomes in which we know what we want to produce, we do not know what to measure in order to track our success and effectiveness. Not knowing what to measure as an *outcome* in a system commonly leads to measuring the *inputs* directed into the system. The hope is that putting enough resources into a system will produce something of value out the other end. So clergy measure the hours and the number of days, the meetings attended and boards “sat on,” books read, and sermons preached as evidence that they have put a lot into the system. So congregations and conferences measure the number of dollars gathered or spent, the number of staff employed, and the number of programs offered as evidence that they have put a lot into the system. Without clarity of what we are to produce, we end up measuring not the output produced, but the resources consumed.

Making a Critical Distinction

Resources and outcomes are easily confused. An outcome is something one wants to happen or something to be produced. A resource is something needed to accomplish that outcome.

Congregations frequently confuse significant resources such as budget, staff, or a building as outcomes. This confusion, for example, often lies at the heart of the familiar depression and disappointment that congregations experience at the completion of a new building. Consider how a congregation, in getting clear about its call and purpose, might determine that it is called to connect more deeply with its surrounding community. In doing the homework, the leaders find that they will need a large gathering space and recreational facilities, which require a new building. The new building is a resource needed to address the outcome of ministry with the community. However, the designing, funding, and constructing of the new building require such energy and attention that the building’s completion begins to appear to be an outcome of its own. Once the construction is complete, the congregation may commonly experience depression because of their tiredness, but more importantly because they produced a

significant “outcome” but nothing changed—their ministry simply continued on as it was. It is likely that the leaders, in their work on the new building, lost sight of their real outcome of community connection. They forgot that there was a reason for which they needed the resource of a new building.

Some resources such as staff, facilities, budgets, and structure are expensive and demanding and can easily be construed as outcomes within themselves. Conference leaders must likewise be clear about what are outcomes and what are resources. Because of their prominence, expense, or importance within the conference, confusion about being an outcome or resource often revolves around:

- Conference structure.
- Conference staff.
- Compliance with polity.
- Clergy—their preparation, certification, deployment, resources, and care.
- Apportionments.
- Congregations.
- National church programs and requirements.

To confuse resources and outcomes can produce situations in which leaders become poor stewards of resources, mistakenly protecting them rather than using them for mission. As William Sloane Coffin observed, “Most churches don’t like to be rocked; they prefer to lie at anchor rather than go places in stormy seas. But that’s because we Christians view the church as the object of our love instead of the subject and instrument of God’s.”¹⁵

Challenging and Changing Norms

The key differentiating question to distinguish between managerial/technical work and leadership/adaptive work, writes Heifetz, is “Does making progress on this problem require changes in people’s values, attitudes, or habits of behavior?”¹⁶ As noted above, technical work is the application of known solutions to known problems, and it can be done within the boundaries of the values, attitudes, and behaviors already present in a managerial system. Adaptive work, however, requires learning—new ideas, new values, new behaviors—and it depends upon a willingness to challenge and change established norms in order to provide an environment in which the new can grow.

Norms are the established ideas, values, and behaviors that are rooted in organizations and determine how the organization works or does not work. Norms are the informal, usually unwritten, agreements and rules of the organization. For example, the “rule” of not taking a cup of coffee into the sanctuary of a congregation may not be written anywhere, but the new member who mistakenly carries coffee there quickly finds out that it is not to be done. Having already agreed upon a norm such as not carrying coffee into the sanctuary, the congregation usually does not have to revisit or rehearse the agreement; it is simply enforced. Not having to rehearse the rule or agreement allows the norm to remain hidden yet still function powerfully as a

determinant of action. In fact, the reason organizations establish norms is to avoid having to rehearse decisions time and time again. Once the norm about coffee is established, members do not need to talk about it; they need only to frown at the person who brings Starbucks into sacred space. The organizational advantage of hidden norms is efficiency. Not having to rehearse what already has been decided frees the organization to do new work that still will be guided by the established norms. Norms are tacit. They operate below our conscious attention. They form limits and boundaries along with efficiency and stability.

Because they are tacit, norms become deeply embedded in our ideas, values, and behaviors and are both powerful and difficult to change. They are very powerful tools that protect and stabilize the organization but can also produce rigidity and resistance to change. The presence of coffee in a sanctuary may only be about the expense of cleaning carpets. The norm, however, also may be saying something quite powerful about decisions regarding appropriate behavior in sacred space. The consequence of having such norms about appropriate sanctuary behavior is significant. With heavily enforced norms it is neither trivial nor inconsequential that congregations seeking change in forms of worship have embattled conversations over coffee cups, plastic water bottles, sneakers instead of shoes on the acolytes, guitars instead of organs, or clergy dressed in business casual instead of robes. These may all be tests of deeply held agreements that are, in fact, hard to challenge because the norms themselves are not easily seen.

Movement on changing worship practices to serve changing generational needs, however, depends upon leaders being able to change established norms. Similarly, movement on adaptive issues in the conference requires challenging and changing some deeply established norms that have guided past generations of leaders, congregations, and practices. For example, deep change in a conference or in the national church may need to challenge some or all of the following norms that can be described as assumptions:

- *The assumption of scarcity* in which we believe we have limited resources over which leaders, subgroups, and programs must compete. The assumption of scarcity constrains us to give attention only to those resources that are limited such as people, money, and energy. This assumption blocks attention to our access to less limited resources such as prayer, time, creativity, and passion.
- *The assumption of egalitarianism* in which we assume that “all”—all congregations, all clergy, all lay leaders, all members, all agencies, all committees, all social justice issues, all subgroups—must be given a fair share of resources. Coupled with the assumption of scarcity, this assumption creates a competitive arena in which importance and effectiveness in the system is measured by the amount of resources garnered, not by what is accomplished with them. This assumption is also emboldened by the similarity to—but not necessarily the complementarity with—the gospel demands of social justice.
- *The assumption of representative democracy* in which it is assumed that everyone has both a decision-making voice, as well as the responsibility to use that voice to

represent the issues and concerns of the part of the system—the subgroup—with which the person is aligned. The mistaken use of the principle of democracy leads to assumptions that “if I say it, you must do it.” A representative democracy encourages participants to “represent”—that is to speak only for their part of the whole. Under this assumption, it is very difficult for leaders to speak about the mission of the whole and to align the parts as necessary to make mission happen.

- *The assumption of harmony* in which harmony in Christian community is mistakenly defined as agreement. Everyone is assumed to have the right to be satisfied. Dissatisfaction is seen as reason to challenge and stop leadership. While sometimes flip in his writing and humor, Lutheran pastor Wally Armbruster is also succinct. He notes that harmony is not everyone singing the same note at the same time. That is monotony. Harmony is when everyone sings his or her own note and then listens carefully to others in order to blend together.¹⁷ Under Armbruster’s definition, dissonance and dissatisfaction not only have a place in the system but provide a clear reason for people to work with one another creatively.
- *The assumption of entitlement* in which rights and access to resources are assumed. Congregations assume the right of survival and the right to access resources whether they demonstrate passion or potential for ministry. Clergy assume the right of appointment commensurate with lifestyle whether they demonstrate commitment or gifts and graces for ministry. Conference staff, programs, and agencies assume the right to be resourced whether they are effective in producing the results intended in their purpose.

Like all norms, these assumptions hold a history and a purpose that developed for natural and even necessary reasons. They come from decisions made at an appropriate time for appropriate cause. But, if not challenged, they also may now be experienced as constraints on leadership’s turning toward the new in the future.

Once again it is critical to assert the importance of outcomes. In each case it is difficult, if not impossible, to challenge a norm if there is no clearly identified outcome to provide purpose and reason and redirect the attention and resources constrained by the norm.

Leveraging Change

The dominant assumptions in most denominations and middle judicatories have been grounded in the idea that the church, the conference, or the denomination as a whole cannot move ahead until all parts are ready and able to move together. Much attention, therefore, has been given to “fixing” incompetent or unmotivated leaders; redeveloping recalcitrant congregations; or resourcing congregations, agencies, and committees that have slipped below the threshold of change. The effect has been to hold leaders accountable for people and conditions over which the leader often has no control. The effect also has been to keep our attention on our weaknesses not on our gifts, on our threats not our opportunities.

Yet there are people, congregations, and groups who do know how and have the passion and potential for doing ministry in this changed and constantly changing culture. These people, congregations, and groups are leverage points available for producing known and clear outcomes. A lever is a tool to move something otherwise immovable, and a leverage point is where the tool is placed so that when “cranked,” it gives the most powerful result. While the conversation is still very much a part of ongoing adaptive learning, there is a growing consensus among those who work with congregations about where some of these leverage points are located. What follows is a partial and summary list of natural places of growth and change at the congregational level that are based on cultural compatibility, the development of new learnings and practices, or the natural power of passionate people. Some measure of these leverage points already exists in all middle judicatories.

- *Large congregations with an average worship attendance of more than 500 people.* In a culture that honors size, choice, and diversity, such congregations will naturally have the potential to hold the attention of new generations of Christians and grow naturally with their communities.
- *Midsized congregations ready and willing to break through the attendance plateau of 150-250 worshippers.* Breaking through this plateau demands an intentional commitment, requiring changes in practice by all leaders in a congregation. Experience continues to support the observation that breaking through this plateau opens the congregation not only to numeric growth but also to expanded ministry.
- *Midsized congregations able clearly to identify their own purpose and gift for ministry and then develop that gift.* There is growing evidence that “practicing congregations” do ministry out of the strength of their gift and are able to call to those with, or in need of, that gift. Rather than numeric growth, these congregations demonstrate growth in discipling individuals and developing healthy community.
- *Small-membership congregations willing to experiment with breaking clergy dependence.* While these congregations seem harder to find, they do experiment with ways in which some form of ministry is understood to be the outcome of their efforts. Too often the procurement and minimal support of a clergy person (a resource) is mistakenly seen as the outcome of the small congregation.
- *Parenting of new congregational starts by healthy midsized and large congregations.* Because of the natural missional development of ministry in a congregation that can form an offsite or new congregation, parenting is being regarded by a growing number of leaders as a resource-efficient model of new church starts that also strengthens the ministry of the parenting congregation.
- *Clergy and lay leaders with clearly evidenced passion and potential.* Even at a moment when many decry the quality of leadership available for congregations, there are those people who clearly evidence strength or the potential for strength in leadership. Challenging, resourcing, and mentoring these people (as opposed to

“fixing” broken leaders or training “all” leaders) is an effective and productive use of resources to produce identified outcomes.

- *Givers of large financial gifts whose passion and perspective are larger than the mission of their own local congregation.* Anecdotal and experiential evidence continues to support the conclusion that many of the most gifted of our members in congregations do not respond to calls for leadership or stewardship because the church does not offer challenges large enough, work worthy enough, or results productive enough. So these people redirect their attention, their time, and their money to private and community charities. There are people in our conferences wanting to do and to give more but have no one to talk with them about their passions or to help them find direction for their resources.

Surely this is a partial list of the people and places where ministry can grow in new, natural, and continued ways. However, for any conference, presbytery, diocese, or synod effectively to use such leverage points, appropriate resources and attention need to be directed to them. This requires that resources and attention directed in other areas must be refocused. Redirecting attention and resources to leverage points in a managerial system, as well as choosing which leverage points are appropriate, is very difficult and requires:

- Clearly understood outcomes that provide purpose and reason to redirect attention and resources.
- The challenging of established institutional norms that would constrain the leader’s ability to redirect attention and resources.

What Does Leadership in a Managerial System Require?

As identified, this paper has a limited perspective—using organizational and systems theory. Nonetheless, the case needs to be made that such “secular” ideas and tools are supportive of spiritual leadership when used faithfully for purposes of mission. Corporate leaders bring the tools of their faith to their workplace when they seek a vision for their company, sit in prayer groups with their colleagues, and worry about the soul of their corporation. It is likewise appropriate for church leaders to bring the insights and practices of commerce and the sciences to be used in response to the call of the Spirit.

This paper has tried to offer a strong argument that the demands of leadership are different than the requirements of management. Along with differences in the skills and ideas needed for leadership, there is a difference of spirit that is required. The leadership demands of the spirit require courage. Change is neither predictable nor controllable. Leadership requires walking into unknowns that feel dangerous. In a marvelous telling of the moment when the Israelites reached the edge of the Red Sea with the Egyptians in pursuit, the Hebrew Midrash recounts how the leaders sat on the bank arguing who would step into the unrelenting waters first. Finally, impatient with the debate, Nason, son of Amminadab, stepped out on his own and plunged into the water. It was only when Nason appeared to be drowning that God instructed

Moses to hold his rod over the sea and split it.¹⁸ Courage is required of Nashon to jump into unparted waters, for Moses to lead people into a desert with no exit strategy, for leaders to make discerning choices to identify and resource outcomes with no guarantee of success.

The demands of the spirit also require inquiry over control. If the appropriate response to adaptive situations is learning over action, leaders must risk “not knowing.” When paradigms shift, the only way to lead is by being clear about not knowing what to do and being willing to learn, to look again. New learning, by definition, requires risk and cannot be controlled. In the 1970s, during a time when there was concern over whether the human potential movement was providing experiences that were actually helping or damaging people, a research project was mounted to answer the question. Insightfully, one of the conclusions of the project was that damage and growth, discomfort and learning, are difficult to distinguish because learning inherently cannot be controlled and requires the dismantling of the known.¹⁹ Inquiry can only be risked; it cannot be controlled.

Finally, the demands of the spirit also require trust that allows room for God. Lone-ranger leadership—either singularly or in the guise of the genius with a thousand helpers—is an effort to provide answers and control. Having clear answers and being in clear control mean that there is no room, no empty space, kept open for the surprise of God’s presence. The notion of adaptive leadership (learning leadership) means leading without knowing where one is going or, more appropriately, without knowing where and how things will come out. To lead in such a way depends upon a trust in God that purpose will be given to the risk, meaning will be brought to the work. To live in such trust requires discernment of a future that is stronger with conviction than it is with proof. To lead only when the path is known allows no room for God, no space for the movement of the Spirit—which is where change is encountered. It is not easy to move into the desert with no food; it is not comforting that when manna does appear, it is so uncommon that it needs to be explained. The journey depends upon trust, and transformation by the hand of God depends upon the journey.

The story of the exodus serves us well in this moment of denominational and congregational change. It took both Moses and Aaron to get the people through. Moses embodied leadership. He sought out the big questions, spoke with God, and carried a vision so bright that his face shone even when he was not sure in which direction to walk. With him was Aaron who embodied management. He organized, made judgments, and planned the next day’s trip rather than the destination. Not only were both needed, but they had to walk together closely. As one rabbi friend commented, suggesting a more contemporary Midrash, it was only when Moses (leadership) and Aaron (management) walked side by side that the people were faithful. When too far separated, with Moses on the mountaintop and Aaron below in the valley, confusion set in. Aaron organized the people to begin making the images that were breaking the very commandments that Moses was receiving.

What does it mean to be asked for leadership in a managerial institution? It means that as important as Aaron and his managerial strengths were, the people could not have found the

promised land with him alone. It means that Moses needed to listen beyond the grumbling of the people that began forty-five days into a forty-year trip. It means giving attention to the purpose and destination—trusting in the presence of God.

¹ Edward Leroy Long, Jr., *Patterns of Polity* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 29.

² Long, 31.

³ Gil Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998), 14-16.

⁴ Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2003), 3-6.

⁵ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994) 14.

⁶ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001), 45-48.

⁷ Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, “The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation” in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 307-331.

⁸ Heifetz, 22.

⁹ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1972), 202-212.

¹⁰ John Scherer, “The Role of Chaos in the Creation of Change,” *Creative Change* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 19-20. The contrast between managerial problem solving and the need for leadership appropriately to address pain and possibility is treated at greater length in Rendle’s *Leading Change in the Congregation*, 77-100.

¹¹ Michael Crichton, *The Lost World* (New York, NY: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1995).

¹² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 84.

¹³ Edwards Deming, *Out of Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986), 23-24.

¹⁴ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* ((New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 96.

¹⁵ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: John Know Press, 2004), 140-141.

¹⁶ Heifetz, p. 87.

¹⁷ Wally Armbruster, *A Bag of Noodles* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Press, 1972), 5.

¹⁸ Reuven Hammer (translator), *The Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 92.

¹⁹ R. Kaplan, S. Obert, and W. VanBuskirk, “The Etiology of Encounter Group Casualties,” *Human Relations*, 1980, 33, 131-148.
