

SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP IN MINISTRY

Editor's Introduction



Leadership has long been central to the task of supervising, mentoring, and training religious professionals. The term “leadership,” in one form or another, often appears in the mission statements of the seminaries and training programs associated with the readers of *Reflective Practice*. As the Editorial Board reflected on leadership as the theme for the 2018 issue of this journal, two issues surfaced, each with several associated questions. First, have seminaries and training programs been effective in the task of training leaders for professional ministry? Is it time we do a critical self-assessment? Is the way we do supervision, mentoring, and training appropriate to the goal of preparing leaders? Second, what do we mean by leadership? What are the models of leadership most suited to religious work in the twenty-first century? A corollary to this latter question might be, Are certain styles of leadership more appropriate for certain racial or cultural groups or certain kinds of ministry than other leadership styles? Have we prepared leaders adequately for the particularities and diversity of the contexts that they will serve in?

The subject of leadership has taken on a sense of urgency among Christian denominations in the United States in the last seventy years. During this time, the mainline Protestant churches, which used to dominate American religious and civic life, have gradually declined in membership and influence. Some conservative Christian traditions have grown, whereas other traditions, such as the Roman Catholic, have changed demographics without much overall change in numbers. Meanwhile, many non-Christian religions have grown in the United States, as well as the group known collectively as the “nones.” In this context, Protestant church leaders have pressured seminaries and training programs to place a greater emphasis upon the training of leaders, not scholars or pastors or even chaplains but *leaders*. This question brings back into focus the first question: Have seminaries and training programs been effective in the task of training leaders for professional ministry? And if seminaries and/or training programs were

to refocus on leadership skills as the primary goal of theological education and the criteria for success, how would those seminaries and training programs change? For this thirty-eighth edition of *Reflective Practice*, we invited writers, scholars, and practitioners of the arts of ministry to reflect on these questions and issues.

Several models of leadership have been floated as a solution or as a panacea for the malaise afflicting mainline Protestant Christianity or Christianity in general. For a time, the term 'servant leadership' was posited as the appropriate biblically based model of leadership. In the cultural context of capitalism, others have suggested that entrepreneurial leadership skills are what the church needs—Christian leaders who are more competitive, innovative, self-funded, and self-starting. Similarly, some denominational leaders have looked to the world of business for an understanding of leadership suitable to the challenges of the times. The term 'adaptive leadership,' often associated with the work of Ron Heifetz at Harvard Business School, has proved to be a helpful description of the unique traits required to navigate rapid, complex, systemic changes. Finally, drawing on the biographies of key historical figures, James McGregor Burns in his 2010 book *Leadership* introduced the concept of "transformational leader." There may be other models of leadership. These are just the ones that come to my mind and that have spanned my fifty years in professional religious work. In the first section of this volume, the writers address these various models of leadership, propose others, and explore what is distinctive about religious leadership.

Mary Hess, professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary, begins this discussion by observing that we live in a time of increasing social, political, and cultural complexity, fueled by digital media. In her essay titled "Adaptive Action as a Form of Reflection Practice in Pastoral Leadership," she argues that the result has been "dynamical change," change that is unpredictable and disruptive of established patterns of meaning and that creates unexpected outcomes. What kinds of skill sets must effective pastoral leaders have in this era of complex change? Among her helpful suggestions, Hess highlights the ability to "stand in inquiry" and work with and enlarge containers of meaning. She concludes her essay with some pedagogical modes for reflective practice in complex systems.

Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi is director of the Center for Analytics, Research and Data for the United Church of Christ. In her essay, "Nurturing Leadership Development for the Now and Next: A Denominational Perspective,"

she reports on the results of her research and analysis of trends related to leadership in the United Church of Christ and the attempts by this denomination to address or improve the leadership skills of its ministers. One of her findings is that congregational vitality does not depend as much on the pastoral skills of the minister as it does on her or his general psychological maturity, ability to discern, and openness to change.

Barbara Blodgett is assistant professor of pastoral leadership at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky. In her essay entitled "Practicing Curiosity," she argues that learning to be a leader boils down to learning to be curious, learning to ask the right questions. Blodgett introduces readers to a grid she developed in which she clarifies the differences between spiritual caregivers and religious leaders, in particular the fact that they fundamentally ask different questions. Her essay then shifts to an interview format, wherein she invites five theological educators to reflect on this insight and how they teach or could teach seminarians to be more aware of the kinds of questions they ask and how to ask different kinds of questions. The result is a fascinating and rich conversation on how leadership skills might be taught in a theological institution.

John E. Senior is assistant professor of practical theology and religious leadership at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Senior begins his essay, "Discernment as Practical Wisdom: Toward a Disruptive Practical Theology of Ministry Leadership," by reviewing the ambiguities of the term 'leadership' and the complexities of the current leadership crisis. He posits the question, Is there anything distinctive about a ministry leader? He argues that the distinctive element, especially from a Christian perspective, is discernment. He then reviews some of the recent literature on the related concepts of pastoral imagination and practical wisdom. In his conclusion, he urges theological field educators to look for wisdom not in academic institutions but in the wisdom of local ministry leaders who are already being innovative and leading the way forward.

Tod Bolsinger, who is chief of leadership development at Fuller Theological Seminary, reflects on where and how pastors learn to be innovative and entrepreneurial leaders, leaders who can respond to adaptive changes that are occurring to religious organizations today. Reflecting on his own experience in CPE, he suggests in his essay "Learning at Death's Door" that the core skills seminarians acquire in CPE, if properly reframed into an organizational context, are the same skills that make for innovative leaders. In

that regard, he identifies and explores three core skills: differentiation, empathy, and relationship building.

I recognize that this crisis of leadership is largely limited to the United States, although to a lesser extent it impacts all ecclesiastical institutions in Western cultures. Thus, many of the essays included in this volume have a uniquely American or Christian slant. I invite our non-Christian and non-U.S. readers to reflect on their own crises of leadership and share the insights this volume offers them in their religious and cultural settings. I would also suggest that the leadership crisis is larger than Protestant Christianity. Similar crises of leadership permeate business, educational, and governmental institutions in the United States and in many other Western nations. Perhaps some of the issues and insights identified in this volume have applications to a variety of non-religious settings.

Scott Sullender
Editor



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