After the discussion today, it must strike you that each of us is coming at this issue of leadership from a different perspective. I suspect that we look at most issues either as a result of our fears or our hopes. Too often we approach the subject of leadership through the window of our fears rather than our hopes. A second observation is that we had some trouble defining leadership today. I’m going to add to the confusion by suggesting there are at least four dimensions of leadership. There are leadership roles or offices. There are leadership traits, such as the character traits Professor Leyrer presented to us this afternoon. There is a leadership gift. You can talk about the spiritual gift of leadership from Romans 12, but also the innate talent or gift for leadership, whether that’s charisma or however you want to define it. Then there are skills that can be taught. The ideal is that someone who has the character traits and the gift to lead that the Spirit gives, will acquire the skills to make him or her a more effective leader; and then that person will be placed in the role of leadership. Now what are the odds of that happening?

The other thing that struck me today is that there must be some reason why we are talking about this and why the rest of America and the rest of the Church is talking about leadership. With the decline of moral values in America, leadership became an issue in politics and business. With declining statistics in the church, pastoral leadership and lay leadership took on a whole new emphasis and urgency. I’m looking forward to the day when we talk about leadership in the church because we have so many places to go, not so many regrets over where we were.

There are many forms that leadership in the church may take: prophet, visionary, catalyst, planner, troubleshooter, encourager, director, model, shepherd and many more. There are innate gifts of personality that suggest leadership. There are acquired skills that enhance leadership. There are character traits that shape leadership. But in the church it is God who creates leaders, by an inner calling and by the call of his people, through experience and education, and above all in relationships - with Him first, but also in relationships of loving, serving, teaching and admonishing one another. When Paul speaks about those relationships in the church he introduces the concept with the words, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” More important than anything else is a man after God’s own heart, which is the way Samuel spoke of David in 1 Samuel 13.

Leadership in Christ’s Church requires faith deeply rooted in Christ’s promises, integrity shaped by the Holy Spirit through the Word, commitment to the mission the Savior gave his Church, passion for people both in and outside the church and then, a clear direction for the Church to take here and now. It is sad when godly people don’t know how to lead the church. But we can teach them skills. It is tragic when people who don’t know God lead the church. Especially if they have the skills.
I’m going to talk about observations from Parish Assistance: pastoral leadership, school leadership, lay leadership and then some general leadership issues. Any generalization is risky; and by lumping pastors into three categories, I’m certainly going to offend some and irritate many. Accept my apologies, please.

**Pastoral Leadership**

There are a small number of pastors whose gifts and personalities have made them instinctively strong leaders. Kathy Wendland talked about her experience of pausing in what you are doing and having people bump into you. There are pastors like that. Frequently these are also men who take continuing education seriously. They have a sense of vision and a will to persist and achieve their vision. They inspire and rally other leaders in the congregation. I might add that they have the courage to risk opposition and even antagonism. Without that trait they don’t remain leaders very long, typically. Their weakness, however, is that they don’t understand the dynamics of change. There is a lot of literature about leading groups through change and transition. I find that most instinctive leaders haven’t read the books and probably would be slowed down if they had. A lot of these pastoral leaders really don’t take strategic planning too seriously either. Their ideas get jotted down on a napkin at a restaurant; that’s the plan and away they go. Some of these leaders may not always practice servant leadership. When you have a strong sense of where to go, sometimes you forget a little about those who have to go with you. Instinctive leaders tend to be impatient.

There is a larger number of pastors who understand that they must assume a leadership role in the church. I’m going to refer to a survey I did a couple of years ago in five churches, with 240 people participating. One of the questions asked, “I think a pastor’s role should primarily be…” 77% of the people in elected leadership roles and 70% of the members chose, “strong spiritual leader.” The second choice was “motivating equiper for life.” Somewhat surprising to me, “compassionate Christian counselor” and “wise Bible teacher” hardly registered. I don’t think you would have gotten those results 20 years ago.

As I suggested, there are pastors who understand that they have to fulfill the role of leadership; but that realization may be driven externally by declining numbers, by conflict, or by a sense of stagnation. What these people often lack is a sense of vision and/or the will to drive that vision. “Where do we need to go?” is the unanswered question. They may lack skills to communicate a vision in ways that enthuse other people. Some of these pastors have administrative ability, but few understand how to lead a team of people. We are trained as solo practitioners. It’s a very difficult adjustment, if you’ve been the only pastor of a congregation for a length of time, to try to put together a team that you’re going to lead. This second group of pastors would usually like the Cliff Notes version of leadership training. They don’t have time to really develop these skills. I think a lot of these pastors tend to be frustrated. They have a sense of what’s needed, but they feel a little bit overwhelmed by everything that is required.

Probably the largest number of pastors really don’t think of themselves as leaders. Some think they shouldn’t be and some think they can’t be. They generally see ministry as a one-to-one shepherding relationship with members. I had a “eureka” moment about a year ago. Somehow I got on the list serve for all the back and forth email with Bruce Eberle (the author of a previously published CHARIS article entitled “Pastoral Leadership: A Layman’s Perspective”). One pastor, writing for his pastoral conference, very eloquently stated a view of ministry in which the pastor is in a one-to-one relationship of shepherding with all his members. If that is your perspective, the congregation
Congregational Leadership

can’t grow beyond your ability to do one-on-one ministry with people. The concept of a team doesn’t fit and leadership isn’t important. Faced with a changing culture and declining numbers these pastors may even pit shepherding against leading.

These may be very good pastors, especially to those members who see the world as they do. They may be in denial about the state of the church, and they may even be angry about what has happened to our culture. Those who are my age were prepared for a ministry that largely, no longer exists. I think that there is some denial about how fundamental the change in culture and, therefore, the ministry is, and some anger. Some pastors may be hunkering down on the way to retirement. I remember hearing an address about finishing well. The statistics were that three quarters of pastors don’t finish well. That haunts me because it would be pretty easy to say, “I don’t need to learn this. I’ve only got five more years to go.”

Very rare is what might be called prophetic leadership, which consists of applying Scripture to an unhealthy situation in the church and calling people to repentance and a renewed sense of mission. I suspect if we had asked Professor Leyrer to do not a New Testament study of leadership, but an Old Testament study of leadership, we would have gotten a little different slant on this. The prophets tended to be called to leadership roles where they had to confront evil and call people to repentance. There is some of that in the New Testament epistles as well. I think it is a very rare kind of leader who is willing to step up and call something sin before anybody else sees it and say, “You have to repent.” I think this is what’s required for so-called “turnaround leadership”. That term is probably borrowed from the business world and a lot of those turnarounds have bodies splayed all over the pavement by the time the turnaround occurs, so maybe we don’t want to use the term. But there is an increasing amount of literature about turnaround churches. Tom Rainer’s most recent statistic says that 85% of churches in America are plateaued or declining. If that’s true, then it seems to me that the next generation is going to challenge us to develop turnaround leaders in churches - pastors who are capable of taking a declining situation and fundamentally changing the way people understand ministry, rekindling a sense of excitement about the mission of the Church, and then totally turning around what has been happening.

Everything I’ve read suggests that the amount of energy needed to do that is phenomenal. The faith, the strength of character, and the skills essential to turn around failing churches is uncommon. We in the confessional, Lutheran wing of Christ’s Church understand pretty clearly that the message of Christianity cannot be altered. We talk about the immutable, holy Word of God. But I wonder if we spend as much time thinking about how immutable is the mission of the church, not just the message of the church. We don’t get the right to change the reason for which the church exists and make it into “preserving my comfort zone.” This is the challenge in turnaround ministries - to say, “We will not change the Word of God and we will not change the mission Jesus gave his Church.” Everything else is up for grabs.

It’s difficult for pastors to reinvent themselves when a church grows. I’ve seen a number of situations in which there is a very effective mission pastor, the church grows, and then that growth is stifled because the pastor can’t manage it anymore. What happens is that the energy gets drained away from evangelism into relational and institutional things. What is necessary is that the pastor really renews himself to take the church to the next level. What to delegate, what to own, how to develop lay leaders and add staff. Redirecting time to be more effective, empowering people to care for each other, establishing priorities, organizing efficiently. All these skills have to be acquired and are instead necessary to build a mission into a large church. What often happens is that the growth
stops. The pastor gets frustrated because what he loves and what he does well, he doesn’t get to do as much anymore; and so he takes a call. To discover how you reinvent yourself as a pastoral leader is a challenge worth spending some time on.

This last item observation probably ought to be prefaced with a quote from Max DePree whose little book called Leadership is an Art is a gem. Max DePree is a Christian who was the CEO of a Fortune 500 furniture company. This is his definition of leadership: “A leader’s first task is to define reality. His last task is to say thank you. In between a leader is a servant and a debtor.” There’s something about pastors that we don’t really feel comfortable saying “thank you.” I think there’s this fear that we’re going to somehow contaminate the motives of our people for serving. In a number of our congregations, the pastor doesn’t feel comfortable expressing appreciation to volunteers and staff. It’s not something we do well, but it is a skill we could acquire.

Even more pronounced is that most pastors don’t feel comfortable spending time one-on-one behind the scenes with gatekeepers and powerbrokers to enlist their support or co-opt them in major decisions. It sounds too political. The reality is that there are other people who have recognized leadership abilities; and if they aren’t all on the same page, the pastor as leader is facing opposition. There has to be some behind-the-scenes discussion if you’re ever going to put together a leadership team that will accomplish something. I think there’s an antipathy toward this because we’ve made the word “political” dirty when it doesn’t always need to be.

Lay Leadership

Too many people who are effective leaders in the business world aren’t effective leaders in the church. Some are frustrated by what I call “hyper democracy.” The cultural inertia of a congregation slows everything down. These people are used to moving fast and things just don’t move that fast in the church. Some of them refuse to hold offices because their position description sounds too much like “attend meetings.” Some can’t translate what they’ve learned in the business world to their leadership in the church because they don’t understand the dynamics of a volunteer organization. You get frustrated when you can’t command. A few can’t lead because their spiritual immaturity, their acerbic personality, or their impatience with people has undercut their ability to be a spiritual leader.

There’s very little continuity in lay leadership in the church. Elected leaders tend to have short terms. When congregations rotate the president of the congregation every year or two, you have absolutely no continuity. We do that same thing in every other area. The evangelism chairman is there for two years and then we move him to something else, with absolutely no regard for the concept of spiritual gifts or the ability to develop the wisdom and experience to actually lead one area of ministry. As a result congregations have learned to wait aggressive leaders out. As one member said to me in an interview, “He’ll get over it.” With a different agenda and different style of leadership every year or two, there’s no possibility that there could be effective lay leadership.

There’s a lot of study being done on the effect of long and short term pastors, but I have yet to see any study done on the effects in the church of short term lay leadership. I think it’s hurting us.

In a significant number of churches it will be necessary to cultivate new lay leaders. The long term leaders can’t see what must be done or they lack the will to get it done. I can’t tell you how often I’ve tried to encourage a pastor who is frustrated. He has gatekeepers, not lay leaders. “There’s only one thing you can do, and that’s generate a new group of leaders. Start in your Bible class and raise
them up to where this church needs to be.” Sometimes that old guard is just old and you know they don’t want to assume the risk that goes with making change. In many cases they don’t see the need for change. It may be very hard to have effective lay leadership without generating a whole new generation of leaders.

In the past we did mentor leaders. I think that was largely because they were the sons of the congregation who were going to be there for years. Now those kids grow up, go to college and move some place else. I don’t think people feel it’s worth their time to invest in mentoring new lay leaders. If we don’t do that, we lose the wisdom of the past, and we may lose a whole generation that has the ability to take us where we need to go. The concept of mentoring leaders is underappreciated in the church.

In few churches is there a good position description for president or chairman nor, for that matter, any of the other offices. What that person who holds the paramount lay leadership position in the church actually is supposed to do, I’m not sure is understood many times. So, instead of focusing their energy on what’s going to make a difference, church presidents end up putting out fires and trying to keep the institution somewhat stable. If only we could write a description for chairman of the congregation that said in big letters, “JUST MAKE A DIFFERENCE.” I think that most presidents of congregations don’t honestly know what they’re supposed to do.

Some lay leaders want short cuts, thinking that they can simply install a program that is effective elsewhere without careful adaptation, as though it were software you can install. The thinking is that if there’s a church where this is working, we should do it here. Maybe we all like to believe there are shortcuts. But the culture of the congregation, its history, its core values, and so many other things, you have to understand if you’re going to adapt a program to a particular congregation. People get frustrated and then blame programs from Synod because we can’t make them work in our congregation.

Too many lay leaders lack a good understanding of the mission of the church. That makes it difficult for them to recognize what’s off course. It also makes it difficult to rally people toward missional goals. The unspoken mission of a lot of churches is preserving the institution and keeping people happy. Do you understand that? “We pay the bills. We keep the buildings in good repair, and then we’ve done our job.” Or, “Nobody is griping too loudly here so we must be doing a good job.” The job is to keep peace and to keep the institution going. Nobody intends to change the mission of the church. That is just what happens over a period of time; and it takes a very strong lay leader to say, “This isn’t what the church is about.”

School Leadership

Two things seem to separate effective school leaders from the pack. The first is continuing education, preferably a Master’s degree in some area of School Administration. People who have done graduate study come back and see things they couldn’t have otherwise. Secondly, they need sufficient time to be a visionary planner, sensitive team builder, and skilled communicator. We ask most of our principals to do this with the last twenty minutes of the week; and you can’t lead a school that way. Where principals have some release time, it’s almost always inadequate; and it gets eaten up with administration, not leadership. In a time where our Lutheran schools have seen declining enrollment at a rate that since 1990 is 23%, we need school leaders. Sadly, the way we’re structured, it is difficult for a principal to be a leader.
Because teachers have been put into a rectangular box and then removed from the dynamics of congregational decision making, very few of them have a vision of ministry beyond their classroom. The result is that sometimes it is the teachers themselves who become the opposition to overcome in order to take the church or the school somewhere. These are not bad people. We've given them no investment in what the church is doing, and then we can't understand why they don't see where the church of school needs to go. Teachers by their very nature love kids. They love their teaching ministry. But if we don't give them some stake in the rest of the congregation's ministry, what we may find is that teachers are holding back our schools. The teachers can't see where we need to go.

In some congregations, strong leadership in the school will be perceived as a threat by pastoral and lay leaders. There's a history of two competing fiefdoms, church and school, that becomes exacerbated when funds are short. Leadership in funding the ministry of the school is really not embraced by most principals. With declining funds available and expanding areas of ministry necessary, we have to figure out how we're going to fund Lutheran elementary schools, beyond simply the church's budgetary offerings.

We've lived with this strange inconsistency that a pre-school is fully paid for by parents. At the Lutheran high school level, it's about 65% paid by parents. But in between is the expectation that Christian education is free or close to it. When the congregation attempts to achieve kingdom balance, this becomes a very divisive issue. Some principals have understood that part of leadership is figuring out how you're going to fund the school. There are very few pastors who see as a part of their leadership funding the ministry of their congregation. We've historically said, "Pastor, you take care of the spiritual stuff and the lay people will take care of the material side of things."

In a growing, expanding ministry, the senior pastor is going to own some responsibility for funding. That might mean that he has to take over effective stewardship training. He may have to see to it that those whom God has blessed materially, way beyond what the rest of the congregation is capable of doing, are being personally cultivated for gifts for ministry. St. Paul urged Timothy to do just that.

Too few school leaders understand the importance of cultivating healthy relationships with their constituencies. There are multiple constituencies: teachers, parents, children, members of the congregation, leaders in the community. Inadequate communication is, I think, backed by the assumption that everyone knows how valuable a Christian school is. In this generation, we have to re-sell Christian education. Most parents don't understand the Christian in Christian education, or they wouldn't be pulling their kids out at sixth or seventh grade because we don't offer all the extra-curriculars, or the science labs. I think part of the decline in our Lutheran school enrollments is that people don't understand or appreciate Christian education the way they once did.

Few young men enroll at Martin Luther College to become principals. Most view being a principal as a dirty job that somebody has to do. Few set out to become a principal. The mission is to be a teacher. Our training isn't designed to prepare school leaders. If we're going to place expectations of leadership on principals, we can't make being a principal something like, "I have to do this and I don't have time." You can't be a leader in a school when your it just means more work. We've got to create the time and the continuing education to allow those men to be leaders.
General Thoughts on Church Leadership

There's too little understanding of different leadership styles, often described as “situational leadership”. There are many people who really believe that leadership is entirely an innate gift. You either are one or you aren’t. Most of the literature has four leadership styles: dictatorial, authoritative, participative and consultative. The style you use is based on two things: How competent is the group you’re leading to do what they’re being asked to do? And how committed are they to that task? If you have no commitment and no competence, then the best style is dictatorial. On the other hand, if you have highly competent and highly committed people, then the best style is consultative (i.e., get out of the way and if they need your help, they can find you). To understand that there are situations that call for different styles of leadership is a skill you can teach. We all have a default style of leadership and that’s probably the way we function most often.

Communication is a major issue in leadership. Too often financial reporting isn’t either crystal clear and understandable or circulated widely enough. Then leaders lose trust not surprisingly, with people who are older because the builder generation tends to be very frugal and, now that they’re on fixed incomes, is very suspicious of the “spendthrifts” who have replaced them in the church. If you don’t communicate very transparently, especially on matters of finance, you risk losing a following in the major, important things you want to do.

In the Wisconsin Synod there are many leadership gifts among women that are neither recognized nor employed. I probably don’t have to say a lot more because Kathy (Wendland) said it so eloquently this afternoon. Separating the biblical headship principle from what is merely a male dominated culture is very important if we are going to balance what Scripture says about headship with what it says about spiritual gifts in the church. These are two truths, and you can’t simply isolate one from the other.

Raising levels of constructive discontent with the status quo and offering a vision that inspires optimism is a delicate balancing act. When do you quit doing the first and start doing the second? Constructive discontent ceases to be constructive when you’ve got very unhappy people. But no one goes anywhere if they aren’t appropriately unhappy with what is. A leader’s job is to make people unhappy with what is. You can do that by accentuating the gap between what is and what should be. Here is what God says, and this is what’s happening. You can do that with data. You can do it with narrative. But you’ve got to sell the problem. You have to raise some discontent. Then, at the critical point, offer hope and direction that people can grasp. That balancing act in leadership is difficult to acquire.

The culture of our Church makes it difficult to accomplish what Jim Collins in his book, Good to Great, describes as “getting the right people in the right seats on the bus and getting the wrong people off the bus.” The call system, for some good reasons, makes this challenging. Even in lay leadership I think it’s pretty hard to get people into the right seats on the bus when we don’t know what their spiritual gifts are and we have no clue what their passion is. It is critical that we put people in the right places to serve in our congregations. What we just don’t really spend much time thinking about is, is this a square peg in a square hole?

There is a culture of mediocrity in the church that is willing to accept something less than excellence and sometimes even something less than faithfulness. Somebody used the word “accountability” earlier. That’s really what this is. I think it’s been too easy to write off excellence as one of those
business terms that we shouldn’t us in the church. But if this great God who gave his life for us is whom we serve, then he deserves excellence. Sometimes we settle for an excuse, in ourselves and in others, for what is far less than excellence.

Church leaders seem to have trouble establishing priorities. When working in God’s kingdom, it seems somehow presumptuous to say that some things are more important than others, at least for now. Last summer’s convention was a perfect example of that. A floor committee was asked to establish a priority for the synod, and it recommended North American outreach. People came to the microphone and asked, “Does this mean that outreach is more important than other things?” That’s what priority means. The assumption is that all areas of ministry are equally valid, and nobody can ever make a priority decision. As a result, the only kind of planning we do is extrapolative. “We’ll try to do more of what we’ve always done harder, faster, whatever, with fewer dollars.” But priority is a very important principle. People who have no priorities aren’t leaders.

Conflict management is a leadership skill that few have learned. The result is that some molehills become mountains. Some issues become divisive when they don’t need to be; and we allow “alligators” to derail ministry because we don’t know how to deal with conflict gone over the edge. It’s too easy to turn challenges into excuses. Leaders refuse to make excuses.

There’s a price to pay for being a leader. That price includes long hours, opposition, frustration, self-doubt and more. A leader has to be willing to pay the price. That’s something we have to say upfront.

What God does with the church may not be what his leaders plan. If there’s anything I’ve learned in Parish Assistance it’s that God has a sense of humor. Just when you think you have it figured out, He blesses in ways that you never anticipated. Christian leaders are always prepared to be surprised by their Lord. Grace is the overriding principle that the head of the church employs in leading us. As Jesus bore patiently with “slow-to-get-it” disciples, so leaders of his church today employ gracious patience with God’s people. There are two words for patience in the New Testament. One of them is patience with people and other is patience with what is. I’ve never prayed for patience with what is. I always want to be patient with people, but I think a leader is always impatient with what is less than God desires.

Finally, the truth of Scripture still leads Christ’s church and the power of Scripture still impels Christ’s Church. All talk about leadership must come back to these twin principles.
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