

## **LEADER AS CATALYST: TWELVE PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**

By Titus Presler

We know the church needs leadership, and we recognize a good leader when we experience one. As a church, though, we tend to be less clear about how to form leaders, whether in congregations, dioceses or seminaries. Unsure about what leadership is, we often stop with critiquing poor leadership models, such as the autocratic warden who won't delegate, or the vacillating rector who doesn't take a stand.

We need a positive and comprehensive understanding of what leadership is. So what does it mean to lead? And what does Christian leadership look like?

To lead is a very old verb in English, dating from before A.D. 900, and its roots are northern European, not Latin or Greek. According to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, the Old English verb *laedan* was a causative form of the verb *lithan*, which meant to go or travel. *Laedan*, then, meant to cause to go, or cause to travel. Today, the verb to lead means to go before or with, to show the way.

Building on these meanings, I suggest that a leader is a person whose presence and vision catalyze vision and commitment in others. The pivot of that understanding is the act of catalyzing. In chemistry, a catalyst is a substance that causes a reaction among other chemicals. The catalyst does not do the work of the reaction alone, but the catalyst does get a process started.

Similarly, in a group of people, a leader is a person whose presence and vision catalyze vision and commitment in others. Personally and incarnationally present, a leader is one who shares a vision that catches the imagination of others. They participate in shaping the vision, through which they see a possible future. As people commit to a shared vision, they mobilize with the leader to act, and together they work to implement the vision.

This understanding seeks to describe leadership in all human endeavors, as well as in the church, and it includes diverse leadership styles. Some leaders are up front, others lead from behind the scenes, and so on. The definition of leader as catalyst does not prioritize or assume any particular style, but it focuses our attention on what the central leadership function is. The definition also describes leadership across cultures, for it fits with the life of groups in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania.

What, then, does *Christian* leadership look like? The Christian leader is a person whose presence and vision catalyze in others a vision for life with the triune God and a committed engagement with God's mission in the world. An effective Christian leader energizes people for vision, commitment and action with God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

But how? What particular understandings and approaches make for effective leadership in the church? Here are twelve principles that can be helpful for Christian leaders, whether they are laypeople or clergy. These can be helpful in parish ministry groups or vestries, committees or diocesan offices, free-standing church agencies or the church's legislative assemblies.

### **1. Understand the church as the Body of Christ**

As the company of all faithful people, the church is more than an agency or an institution, however weak and fallible it may be. The church is a mystical reality, a manifestation of the continuing presence of the incarnate Christ. As Paul advised the Corinthians, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12.26). The Christian leader needs to be aware always that the church has a vital role in the drama of what God is up to in the world. God uses many channels, so the church is not the only expression of God's work, but God does treasure the church as the Body of Christ, and so should we.

### **2. Acknowledge Christ as the head of the church**

Trusting in the Holy Spirit, the church chooses leaders by selection or election and develops procedures through custom, consensus or voting. The central leader, however, is always Christ, whose presence relativizes all other leaders and procedures. The Christian leader must be open to being guided by Christ's will as discerned through prayer and by others in the body. "Speaking the truth in love," writes the author of Ephesians, "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4.15).

### **3. Realize that Christ has sent you out on mission**

The risen Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20.21). Sending and being sent in Christ is the heart of mission. We tend to think of the disciples as followers, but Jesus chose them to be leaders. Leaders understand that the church exists to carry out God's mission in the world, not to maintain or exalt itself. It is the only institution, said Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, that exists primarily for the sake of its non-members. "The church exists by mission," said theologian Emil Brunner, "as fire exists by burning." So the Christian leader must always be asking, "What is God sending us to do?"

### **4. Receive God's presence and vision in prayer**

Vital ministry arises out of vital prayer. Recall how "in the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1.35). God is your companion in ministry, so be available to God in prayer. The particular things God is calling you to do can never be read off an organization chart, a manual of theology or even a mission statement. Needs change, people have specific gifts, and God is dynamic. So trust God for the vision in prayer that will light the way forward and sustain you on the journey.

### **5. Listen and look for the needs of people**

“When Jesus saw the crowds,” Matthew tells us, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9.36). Listen to what people say. Hear the hurt behind the angry remark. Look for the wounded places where people yearn for healing. Learn from the past, because it conditions everything in the present. Take counsel with others about the direction and health of the body as a whole.

### **6. Exercise initiative**

It sounds obvious, but a leader is someone who acts. A leader’s presence and vision catalyze the commitment and action of others. That quality requires willingness to speak and to step out, which means taking initiative. Moses, Miriam, Deborah, David, Amos, Mary, Peter, Lydia, Paul, Phoebe – all these were willing to act and let their actions draw others. They often felt fearful, as we do, but they couldn’t lead without stepping out. The effective leader listens, defers and collaborates. The effective leader also expresses initiative through acting.

### **7. Convene people for discernment**

Convening people to meet and take counsel together is the crucial first initiative a leader should undertake. Luke tells us that after Pentecost, the earliest Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2.42). Time pressure, old wounds and natural reticence often make people reluctant simply to spend time discussing an issue and exploring options, but a group cannot become a community without talking openly, sharing hopes and fears, and developing a vision together in God's presence. Catalyzing such shared life is an essential task for the Christian leader.

### **8. Minister as a servant**

To minister is to serve. Our English word ministry translates the Greek *diakonia* in the New Testament, which means service. Recall Jesus’ words: “Whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all,” and “I am among you as one who serves” (Mark 10.44; Luke 22.27). Serving does not mean groveling or hiding your light under a bushel. It does mean attending deeply to the needs of others and putting the interests of the whole before one’s own. As leaders serve, rather than dominate, Christ’s light shines both within and beyond the community.

### **9. Discern gifts for ministry**

Christian leadership means drawing people together and being a midwife for the ministry God calls forth from them. Effective groups include diverse people, and the effective leader discerns and welcomes the particular gifts of each person. “Now there are varieties of gifts,” said Paul, “but the same Spirit . . . and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one” (1 Corinthians 12.4-6). Rejoice that not everyone is the same and that many have gifts that are not yours. Help each person to rejoice in his or her gifts, and ensure that they are used in the mission.

**10. Form companionship in community**

Jesus “appointed twelve, to be with him” (Mark 3.14) – not first to do something, but simply to be with him, to form a community. Remarkably, that community of companions catalyzed a movement that today reaches around the world. Companions share bread together, and so they share a life and a journey together. As a leader catalyzes the vision and action of others, they become companions with one another, the Body of Christ doing mission in the world. Community sustains mission, and mission is the fruit of community. Put another way, mission without community burns out, while community without mission dies out. The Christian leader nurtures the symbiosis of community and mission.

**11. Delegate authority**

Beyond involving people in tasks, companionship in mission means empowering people with authority to discern needs and make decisions. The church’s history began with Jesus delegating authority: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8). There’s always too much work for any one person. Sharing ministry enhances and multiplies it. Christian community grows as power is shared and contracts when power is hoarded. The secure leader delights in delegating authority.

**12. Minister in love**

Authentic ministry is the fruit of love, not of obligation or obsession. Although seeing needs and weaknesses, the effective leader is first of all in love – in love with God, in love with people, in love with the church. Jesus’ new commandment is just as central for leadership as it is for life in community: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15.12). The love we share is the reconciling, healing and life-giving love we have experienced in Christ. Love is the source, the environment, the content and the fruit of true Christian leadership.

*This article is an edited and expanded version of "Leader as Catalyst: Eleven Principles of Christian Leadership," which appeared in The Vestry Resource Guide (New York: Episcopal Church Foundation, 2004). Copyright by Titus Presler 2008.*