

# Principles of Christian Leadership Revisited

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Members of the parish and larger community look to pastors for consistent leadership principles. Some have asked me directly. Others have wondered what I believe in, what I hold as sacred, how I come to decisions, and how I attempt to lead the church to fulfill its mission and vision. Some insight...

1) First and foremost, **we are disciples of Jesus**. Jesus is the source of all my strength, the focus of my faith, and the foundation of the church. Jesus and his Spirit works through the lives of each other to reveal his will and direction. **I expect this to be true of all church leaders.**

2) **Seek input and build consensus**. God is at work in the lives of others, so we need to listen and observe God working and speaking in the lives of as many as possible. Because the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of all people, we need to know their thoughts, hopes, insight, experience, and dreams.

As the pastor, I seek out ways to meet with people, one-on-one, and in small groups, to receive input, listen and learn. I sow seeds, cast out ideas, and listen for responses. I pool together the input of many, combine it with God's will for my life, and form a vision of God's will for the collective whole. I attempt to share the vision of the collective whole as widely as possible; in sermons, newsletters, meetings, e-mails, etc. I avoid with all my will acting unilaterally, without consultation, or without prayer.

3) **Every person has specific God given gifts and talents**. We need to seek to break down barriers that prevent these gifts and talents from being shared in the mission and ministry of the church. Therefore, I believe one of the greatest challenges of the church in the future is to remake itself, from being a permission with-holding hierarchy, into being a permission giving incubator and fertilizer for God's mission and ministry to germinate.

4) Establish a **priority for making decisions**: 1) Relationships between individuals and with God is primary. We exist by God's grace to be in relationship. 2) Programs serve to build, strengthen, and deepen relationships with each other and with God. 3) Buildings and Grounds serve to facilitate the programs, which in turn, serve to build relationships.

Many conflicts can be avoided when we keep these priorities straight AND when we help others keep these priorities straight.

5) **God has already given us all that we need to fulfill God's mission and ministry for our church:** money, talent, energy, people. Everything. With out exception.

I believe this with every fiber of my being. We run short of money or talent when we haven't been faithful in opening opportunities to our members to share their God given money or talents. We run short of money or talent when we fall into the temptation of being greedy and we try to withhold more for ourselves. We run short of money when we try to manipulate our giving, maintain ownership once it's given, or give for any reason less than the pure praise of God.

6) There is an old rule in my house: **"Just because you can, doesn't mean you should."** Temptations skew our decisions daily. There are many things we can do. Most things lead us away from following Jesus and being his witness. But there are only a few, selected things we *should* do. We should discern God's will for our life and for his church. We should follow the will of God, always, everywhere, without exception. We should always attempt to draw closer to Jesus; learning his ways, seeing the world through his eyes, becoming more like him every day.

7) I learned a principle of management in a leadership development course I took for my college fraternity that I still employ today, **"Praise in public. Scold in private."** When things go badly, don't embarrass the person at fault. That only makes you feel better in the short term and drives enmity between the two of you in the future. Scold only for the purpose of empowering the person at fault to do a better job next time. People are motivated by praise resulting from a job well done. Praise often. Praise a lot!

8) Something my mother taught me: **"If you make a mess, clean up after yourself before you start something new."** This is as true of a messy room as it is of a messy relationship. Laziness and apathy are two of the most hurtful temptations church members face. Fundamentally the issue is attitude: is my purpose to serve others, or to serve myself? I believe God calls us into the service of others.

9) Something Friedman (the great system theorist) taught me, **"Don't get involved in a mess between others."** He calls it "being triangulated." There is a tendency to get sucked into the conflict between others, because we want everything to be all right. I resist being triangulated with all my energy. I will re-direct the initiative, invite each of the conflicting parties to bring their dispute to an end, and pray for guidance for resolution. But please don't ask me to take sides or make the conflict go away.

10) **"Ultimatums are divisive and destructive."** Ultimatums are the foundation of dysfunctional relationships, systems, and churches. It happens a lot in religious systems, churches, and communities that I've been a part of throughout

my experience. If someone doesn't get their way, they threaten to leave, and, usually threaten to take their money with them. It is better to be poor and small than to put up with this kind of destructive behavior.

11) **"I can't force others to behave; neither can I make a dysfunctional community right."** Unfortunately, uncivil behavior, injustice, dishonesty, and struggles for power are tolerated in the church more than any other place in society. Toleration becomes enabling. The only thing a pastor can do is to identify the problem for what it really is. It is the community's responsibility to make corrections. Corrections can't be made until the issue is properly, honestly articulated. It is the role of strong pastoral leadership to name the issue based upon past and current reality.

12) **"It is more important to be honest, than to be polite."** Our natural tendency is to do just the opposite. The Christian response must always be truth; yet I observe communities of faith making extraordinary efforts to avoid confrontations, at the expense of honesty. Truth becomes the first victim of being nice. Politeness is killing churches! Politeness allows dysfunctional behavior to take place. Politeness encourages the continuation of conflict. Politeness enables a cycle of violence to continue.

13) At a dear colleagues funeral a number of years ago, I learned one of his favorite sayings **"Don't *Should* on yourself; likewise, don't *Should* on others!"** Leave your excuses at home. I don't want to hear them; neither does anyone else. Likewise, Jesus tells us to take the log out of our own eye before we tell others to take the log out of their eye. Simply be true to your faith. You'll be much happier.

14) **I expect excellence out of myself, and I expect excellence out of everyone else, in the mission and ministry of the church.**

"But we're a volunteer organization..." is a lousy excuse and it makes me red hot when I hear it used. Effort that is less than 100 per cent isn't worthy of the God I've come to know and experience in my life. If you come to know that God desires you to do something, and you agree to do it, then do it as best as you know how and with the highest quality you can give. Excellence requires making church time a priority.

15) **Be humbled. It's a privilege to serve in the mission and ministry of Christ's church!** It's not a right. We aren't a democracy. The Lay Leader is not in charge. I'm not in charge. All of us submit ourselves to the leadership of Jesus Christ.

No one has earned a place at the table. We are here... solely because of the grace of God. Perhaps we only appreciate it once we've lost it, or almost lost it. I'm a different man, and a different pastor (and I believe a better pastor), after

walking through the valley of the shadow of death myself. In an instant, life as we know it can end. We exist because of God's grace, and God's grace alone.

I know that my principles of leadership will not make me popular or without controversy. God has not called me to be popular. God has called me to be a pastor of integrity; to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Persecution for faith doesn't happen so much at the business end of a gun in a far away land, as it does at the hands of critics in local churches. Evil is very real and actively at work in the fabric of communities today, and it is much more hideous when it's at work in the church. It is my role as pastor to acknowledge evil, confront it, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, to overcome it.

Neither do I expect everyone to have the same principles or characteristics of leadership as I have. When I talk about consensus building with some people, I might as well be speaking a foreign language. What I do expect, however, is for the members and friends of the parish I serve to be open to my efforts to teach and practice my values as the pastoral leader. By my words and example, and by the grace of God, I expect the transformation of the body, I expect the transformation of people, and I look forward to the completion of the Kingdom of God!