
THE DISCOURSE OF LEADERSHIP AND THE PRACTICE OF ADMINISTRATION

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Churches face enormous institutional challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Particularly among those denominations that have been in ministry and mission for generations and have built hundreds of congregational facilities, schools and colleges, hospitals and homes, simply maintaining their institutional infrastructure and existing ministries is daunting enough. The further challenge of enhancing their strengths and commitments through a growing membership, all in the midst of the immense social changes of recent decades, would seem to require no less than significant transformation.

Many church executives, officers, consultants, and interpreters have viewed the contemporary situation as a crisis. Many have turned to the discourse of “leadership” as the catalyst for needed transformation. But often the turn to “leadership” has brought with it a framework of assumptions unsuited to the nature and purpose of churches as communities of witness and service.

In this article I argue, first, that the churches must address the discourse of leadership with savvy and critical analysis, naming its biases and sifting through its perspectives with care. Second, I argue that as the churches explore their own practices of administration, they will discover a rich resource through which they can undertake the constructive task of shaping their ministries and missions for contemporary contexts.

THE APPEAL OF LEADERSHIP

As the churches struggle with their institutional legacy, the promise of leadership has risen to offer hope for change. Books, workshops, Web pages, and church programs proliferate on church leadership. This is only part of a wider cultural trend. Thousands of book titles address themes of leadership. Hundreds of centers for leadership study and

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training have sprung up across the landscape, many of them on college and university campuses, and many associated with theological schools. Leadership is a growth industry that has continued to expand exponentially since the 1950s. As Joseph Rost put it in his book appraising leadership studies as a field, "Leadership has been 'in' for so long, I cannot remember when it was 'out'... it has taken on a mythological significance."¹

One could adduce many possible reasons for the appeal of leadership. Certainly the growing complexity of contemporary American society accompanied by global economic and cultural changes is daunting to all institutions. The term "leadership" itself suggests an aggressive approach to complexity and change, implying direction and control. Many persons who have a stake in a particular organization, whether stockholders in a business corporation or lay contributors to seminary scholarship funds, do not have immediate involvement in day-to-day operations of the organization they support. David Knights and Glenn Morgan have argued that "corporate strategy," often considered a mark of executive leadership, has sprung up as a discourse and activity to respond to that gap. "The institutional separation of ownership from direct managerial control" through public stockholding means that "the corporation has to articulate its objectives in a systematic way to this external audience."² Similarly, talk of leadership fills in the distance, assuring stakeholders that the organization has vital purposes and the right people to achieve them.

Social and cultural changes that have swept across the US over the past fifty years have created enormous anxiety about the continuing place of churches in the larger culture. Many authors have warned that the churches must adjust to living in an entirely new post-Christendom era, that a "new paradigm" of church and society is emerging, and that taken-for-granted worlds of assumptions are passing from the

¹ Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Praeger, 1991) 7. Bass & Stogdill's *Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 3rd Edition, by Bernard M. Bass, runs to almost 1200 pages of literature review (New York: Free Press, 1990).

² David Knights and Glenn Morgan, "Corporate Strategy, Organizations, and Subjectivity: A Critique" *Organization Studies* 12:2 (1991): 251-273.

scene.³ Established churches and their denominational institutions are labeled “dinosaurs” and ingrained practices are “sacred cows.”⁴ The churches need leaders, many authors announce, who can see the outlines of a new paradigm, learn from the “new science” that helps interpret (or console readers about) the chaos of perpetual change, and create new forms of Christianity for the future.⁵

In the dominant literature in both church and larger culture, leadership is the power to envision, create, initiate, change, and control. Leadership is the ability to attract, inspire, influence, guide, and direct others toward an objective. Leadership promises those who wonder *Who Moved My Cheese?* – what happened to the company that employed me for twenty years, where did my job description go in the new technology – that life is an Outward Bound adventure in which we can trust exemplars who excel in the ropes course, take risks, and model ways to turn crises into opportunities.⁶

Leadership resides in leaders, most publications insist – persons who are prepared and skilled in bringing organizations to achieve their strategic goals. Leaders exhibit certain attributes or traits that can be observed in successful or effective individuals who head organizations. One study by some of the field’s best-known authors, James Kouzes and Barry Posner, named five “fundamental practices of exemplary leadership” – challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and

³ Loren B. Mead brought this language to the forefront in his widely noted book *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (The Alban Institute, 1991).

⁴ See William M. Easum, *Dancing With Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) and *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere, By Anybody* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁵ Margaret Wheatley’s *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organization From An Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992) has enjoyed great popularity among churches and church consultants.

⁶ Spencer Johnson, M.D., *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1999) has been on best-seller lists since its publication and has spawned a small industry of derivatives and spoofs.

encouraging the heart.⁷ Max DePree, corporate executive and author after whom the center for leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary is named, concluded his book *Leadership Jazz* with a “checklist” of twelve “attributes of leadership” including vision, presence, and so forth.⁸

Leaders contrast sharply with managers, according to many authors such as John Kotter or Lovett Weems. Managers maintain institutions, control processes, conduct staff and budget procedures. Leaders produce movement by establishing direction, aligning people, and motivating and inspiring them to new visions and expanding goals.⁹

With this last, the logic of much leadership studies literature begins to show its circularity. The persons from whom American society usually expects leadership serve in administrative positions and carry management responsibilities for helping an organization fulfill its purposes. In their case a leader is the name for an especially good or effective administrator and manager, one who does more than maintain the status quo. A less than good or effective manager is just a manager or actually a bad manager, and certainly not a leader. As Rost put it, “equating leadership with achieving organizational goals causes insurmountable conceptual problems when relating leadership to management” since leadership and management have the same end in view. The confusion of leadership and formal position in an organization makes it difficult to speak definitively about what constitutes either leadership or administration. Similarly, the common phrase “effective leader” is redundant, for an ineffective leader would not, by definition, be a leader. “Leadership does not exist unless it is effective.”¹⁰

Trait theories of leadership are especially plagued by conceptual problems. Every list of such traits insists that leaders are persons with a vision for the future of the

⁷ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

⁸ Max DePree, *Leadership Jazz* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1992).

⁹ John P. Kotter, *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs From Management* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 4-5; Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Church Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 34.

¹⁰ Rost, *Leadership*, 77.

organization or community they lead. But common sense tells us that such a trait is meaningless outside the context of what an organization or community envisions for itself. The landscape is littered with executives and administrators who had one idea of the direction an institution should go but were unable to attract participants to follow that vision. Every list of traits also insists that leaders build teamwork. This suits our democratic, participatory sensibilities. But common sense tells us to ask what would be the opposite. No one advocates autocracies. Moreover, to carry out the sports metaphor, a football team is entirely different from a cross country team. Just as the role and style of coach and players varies widely, so the meaning of team will vary with the culture of the organization and the dispositions of participants.

The fundamental problem with trait theories is the logic of attributing organizational outcomes to the actions of individuals. Most leadership literature assumes that leadership resides in certain persons, and that other persons in the organization are followers. Profiles of "great leaders" of organizations continue to proliferate. Consider the current spate of books about Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric who is said to have turned that company around. The fact that thousands of workers lost jobs in his reorganizations and acquisitions, that much of the corporation's worth exists only in the paper value of companies acquired, and that he has retired from the corporation with enough income to pay hundreds of ordinary employees for a lifetime, cannot overshadow the American fascination with the powerful executive who can get things done and move large organizations to achieve goals.¹¹ Books about Welch will join a towering pile of publications that, in Rost's words, portray leadership as "great men and women with certain preferred traits influencing followers to do what the leaders wish in order to achieve group/organizational goals."¹²

¹¹ The list begins with Welch's autobiography: Jack (John Francis) Welch, with John A. Byrne, *Jack: Straight From the Gut* (New York: Warner Business Books, 2001). Also see Janet Lowe, *Welch: An American Icon* (New York: Wiley, 2001) and Robert Slater, *Jack Welch and the GE Way: Management Insights and Leadership Secrets of the Legendary CEO* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999). The latter has been supplemented with Robert Slater's *The GE Way Fieldbook: Jack Welch's Battle Plan for Corporate Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

¹² Rost, *Leadership*, 91.

Americans are even more intrigued with the stories of entrepreneurs, people (almost always men) who initiate and drive forward their original enterprises. Even though their traits often run counter to the preferred lists for leaders, since many entrepreneurs are obsessed with their goals and tyrannical in achieving them, they receive widespread notoriety and acclaim for their successes.¹³ This is as evident in the religious sphere as anywhere. T. D. Jakes, Bill Hybels, or Pat Robertson can generate entire industries of video, audio, computer, and satellite venues often accompanied by huge assemblies on traveling tours, massive direct mailings to potential contributors, and linkages to corporate enterprises. Hybels, for example, not only claims to be *Rediscovering Church* through the Willow Creek mega church he started in suburban Chicago, but has co-authored a book with popular business consultant Ken Blanchard purporting to describe leadership principles from the Bible that are applicable in any organization.¹⁴ Their book joins many other titles such as *Jesus CEO* that adapt trait theory to the life of Christ and implicitly give leadership a nimbus of divine approval.¹⁵

Indeed many business corporations and other institutions appear, in the words of Rakesh Khurana's recent study, to be looking for a CEO who is, if not Jesus, at least a "corporate savior" or "messiah." Such persons by definition must be hired from outside a company perceived by its board of directors to be in "crisis" and in need of a person whose

¹³ For the surprising revelation that many entrepreneurs are "misfits who need to create their own environment" and thus exhibit a marked need for control, accompanied by "suspicion of others" and "an overriding concern... to be seen as heroes," see the often-quoted article by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries, "The Dark Side of Entrepreneurship" *Harvard Business Review* 63:6 (November-December 1985): 160-167.

¹⁴ Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) and Kenneth H. Blanchard, Bill Hybels, and Phil Hodges, *Leadership by the Book: Tools to Transform Your Workspace* (New York: William Morrow, 1999). Ken Blanchard was the co-author of one of the all-time best-selling business books, *The One-Minute Manager* (New York: William Morrow, 1982) with Spencer Johnson, author of *Who Moved My Cheese*. Blanchard also published, with Sheldon Bowles, the more recent *Gung Ho! Turn on the People in Any Organization* (New York: William Morrow, 1998) which promises to "increase productivity, profits, and your own prosperity."

¹⁵ Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995). Jones runs a consulting firm whose mission is to "recognize, promote, and inspire divine excellence."

“charisma” will inspire confidence in investors. Ignoring the contingencies of institutional and historical context, and even downplaying the CEO’s experience with a company’s particular business, boards look for an individual who can “single-handedly sav[e] a troubled corporation.” Thus a “closed market” of charismatic CEOs has been “socially constructed” around investor faith that certain individual traits of “leadership” can transform companies.¹⁶

Such popular trends substantiate the claim of organizational psychologist Burkard Sievers that leadership talk, as it separates leaders from followers, managers from workers, is a form of deification. “Converting men into gods... who take part in the immortality of their firm” through its profits and products, the symbolic language of leadership attracts the ambitions of some, feeds the fantasies of others, and leaves the remaining ordinary workers to “the fate of ephemerals who ... are surrendered to hopelessness and mortality.”¹⁷

The fascination with individuals as leaders masks fundamental conceptual problems with attribution theory. To attribute the movement or productivity of an organization to a sole leader or even leadership team is an exercise in explanatory control. As Sonja Hunt put it in an incisive article on “The Role of Leadership in the Construction of Reality,”

The tendency to make inferences about causes of events and behavior, based upon fragmented information and the internalized semantics of social reality, has been formalized in attribution theory...The “fundamental attribution error” is to attribute happenings to the characteristics of the actors in the situation rather than to contextual variables...The tendency to seek for an agent of events predominates in cultures and history... persons as origins imply reversibility of that which, considered as a product of ineluctable social forces, might be more pessimistically viewed as irreversible.

¹⁶ Rakesh Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), x, 23, and chapter 2 *passim*.

¹⁷ Burkard Sievers, *Work, Death, and Life Itself: Essays on Management and Organization* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 170.

Moreover, the list of traits and decisive actions attributed to leaders becomes a kind of “vocabulary of legitimation,” in Hunt’s words, that reflects the aspirations and wishes of an organization more than its historical reality. “The creation of ‘leaders’ arises out of the need for meaning and the tendency to make inferences within the confines of the prevailing explanatory systems.”¹⁸ The traits attributed to leaders, and the organizational successes attributed to leaders exercising those traits, mirror the organization’s image of itself. As Sievers argued, leadership traits express the myths through which an organization can “reduce the present chaos of the world into manageable cuts,” “decrease the anxiety... of unlimited contingencies,” and affirm the unity and continuity of its purposes.¹⁹

Academic research on leadership often colludes with the organizational search for legitimation. Much research shares the premise that Western societies are experiencing a “crisis of leadership” that threatens their social structures and institutions. Once that premise is accepted, research is then committed to reporting sagas of “great” leadership in an effort to break “‘the code of leadership’ and unlock its secrets.” The researcher who can then announce the code to the world has just made a career.²⁰

Some authors on leadership have tried to move beyond trait or attribute theory to a broader exploration of practices that mark successful organizations. This shifts the discussion away from an exclusive focus on individuals and their

¹⁸ Sonja M. Hunt, “The Role of Leadership in the Construction of Reality” in Barbara Kellerman, ed., *Leadership: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984) 157-178. Both quotations are from 170-171. As Khurana put it, “In the United States, the cultural bias towards individualism largely discounts the influence of social, economic, and political forces in human affairs so that accounts of complicated events such as wars and economic cycles reduce the forces behind them to personifications (as when people attribute the performance of the economy to the actions of Alan Greenspan).” *Corporate Savior*, 23.

¹⁹ Sievers, *Work*, 185, 188.

²⁰ Marta B. Calas and Linda Smircich, “Reading Leadership as a Form of Cultural Analysis” in James G. Hunt, B. Rajaram Baliga, H. Peter Dachler, and Chester A. Schriesheim, eds., *Emerging Leadership Vistas* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1988) 201-226. Quotations are from 224. Khurana identified three schools of academic research on CEOs: a “leadership” school that attributes firm performance to executive qualities; a “constraint” school that argues for the dominance of contextual factors (politics, markets, competitive pressures) over executive action; and a “contingency” school that stresses the features of particular situations in which individual actions made an impact. *Corporate Savior*, 21-23.

influence, and toward an interpretation of organizations as operative, instrumental “cultures” that express collective assumptions, norms, expectations, and ways of doing things. This step toward realism about human sociality continues to be shaped fundamentally by market assumptions, however. Beginning in 1982 with the bestselling *In Search of Excellence* by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, this more “cultural” approach has focused on “excellence” or the identification of “best practices” – now a buzzword among consultants and business writers. So while leadership is not conceived so individualistically, success is still identified and measured by “benchmarks” of “excellence” that represent (organizational) traits.²¹

Authors typically identify these marks of what “excels” without clear, critical criteria. They claim to notice them first as observations in field studies. They then extract the marks from their context, assimilating them into distinct named categories consolidated from a variety of situations, and finally market them as commodities that can be used in any organization. Commodification and exchange of leadership traits (individual and organizational) has expanded into the churches as well. Two recent publications, funded by a corporate foundation, purporting to identify *Excellent Protestant Congregations* and *Excellent Catholic Parishes*, together with web sites, conferences, and related study materials so that others can adopt these “best practices,” are as exemplary of this trend as anything in the business world.²²

Like leadership studies generally, such approaches fail to take seriously the profoundly contextual nature of organizational purposes and the socially shared practices of nurturing those purposes toward fruition. As sociologist Arthur W. Frank argued in cautioning against categorization of

²¹ Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). The best of the business literature on organizational culture calls upon leaders to create “lasting institutions and processes that will continue after your generation is gone,” recognizing that companies that prosper over long periods of time are “premier institutions” that outlive even the most charismatic leaders. See James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Business, 1994).

²² Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) and *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001). The author described his work as a kind of Michelin Guide to churches.

individuals for therapeutic management, “aggregation into categories sacrifices the quality of embodiment” that characterizes everyday life. Aggregation of data into types and categories reduces complex interrelationships and contingencies to objectifications that fragment and oversimplify reality as an organization’s participants actually experience it.²³ “Leaders” are urged to force organizations into the grids of typologies and measure them by “objective” marks of “success” and “excellence,” rather than seeing how their own “leadership” grows out of an organization’s communal heritage and values as it seeks to extend its purposes into current situations.

PROBLEMS OF LEADERSHIP AND GENDER

The recurring theme of the heroic and excellent, along with the presupposition that leadership is by definition marked by some kind of aggressive attainment of territory and turf (“market share” in the business world, “bold mission thrust” in church lingo) and by commodified productivity (“sales volume” in a business, “winning people to Christ” or “making disciples” who are then enumerated in statistical reports of the churches), are among the indicators of the overwhelming masculinity of the leadership industry. The vast majority of books on leadership in the churches or the wider society are written by men. Only a relative handful of women do consulting with businesses or church organizations. Women’s publications in organizational and leadership studies can be summarized and appraised because they still comprise a number manageable for the reader.²⁴

²³ Arthur W. Frank, “The Pedagogy of Suffering: Moral Dimensions of Psychological Therapy and Research With the Ill” *Theory and Psychology* 2:4 (1992): 467-485. The quotation is from 474. Sociologist Richard Harvey Brown and other scholars have argued that social scientific studies of organizations generally, in their own valuing of rationality, predictability and control as the very test of the scientific legitimacy of their findings, have served only to reinforce those values in the organizations studied. The title of a major journal in the field, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, founded shortly after World War II, is indicative of this research ideal.

²⁴ For a *tour de force* of synthesis of women’s contributions to organization studies, see Marta B. Calas and Linda Smircich, “From ‘The Woman’s’ Point of View: Feminist Approaches to Organization Studies” in Stewart R. Clegg, Cynthia Hardy, and Walter R. Nord, eds., *Handbook of Organization Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 218-257.

Women have attained some places in business school faculties, as they have in theological schools. A few women, such as Judy Rosener at Harvard Business School or Sally Helgesen, an independent researcher, have published studies on female executives that have been effective in offering widely noted alternative models or paradigms of leadership. The movement from pyramidal authority structures to webs of relationships that they describe in executives such as Frances Hesselbein during her years as CEO of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. are mirrored in similar studies of female clergy. Lynn Rhodes and Judith Orr are among the handful of women who have attempted analyses of how female pastors conduct their administrative work, highlighting the less hierarchical and more interactive styles of the women they studied.²⁵

Many male authors have duly absorbed values such as listening, relating, communicating, and including, into their lists of traits of the ideal leader. But this veils the continuing truth that these traits, identified as feminine in the dominant culture and through studies of female executives or pastors, are considered admirable when exhibited by a male executive or pastor, and weak or subsidiary when associated with a woman. Joyce Fletcher's superb study of women in an engineering firm described their "relational practices" such as doing whatever it takes to help a project as a whole succeed (whatever their individual contribution might be) and helping others learn. While women often excel at these practices because of the dominant socialization patterns in American society, Fletcher warned that relational practices are regularly either "disappeared" as naive or absorbed into organizational objectives in a way that "leaves the masculine logic of effectiveness unchallenged."

If "building webs of connection rather than hierarchies" is useful only in helping achieve organizational goals, Fletcher

²⁵ See Judy B. Rosener, *America's Competitive Secret: Utilizing Women as a Management Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Sally Helgesen, *The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership* (New York: Doubleday Currency 1990); Lynn N. Rhodes, *Co-Creating: A Feminist Vision of Ministry* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987); Judith Orr, "Administration as an Art of Shared Vision" in Christie Cozad Neuger, ed., *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 118-142. Given the paucity of women in CEO or senior pastor positions, however, generalizations about feminine executive traits are difficult to substantiate.

argued, then feminine practices cannot challenge the “instrumental, masculine perspective” that drives most organizations.²⁶ Relational practices will not be considered “real” leadership, and leadership advocates will continue to prize such traits as vision, drive, and influence. These traits perpetuate the American masculine myth of the self-sufficient, “self-starting” individual who can shape the course of history, creating his own reality, picking and choosing among institutions or acting entirely without them. This myth, so evident in iconic Hollywood portrayals of the American West, suppresses the reality that human beings are constitutionally social and profoundly shaped and sustained by social practices.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES AND LOGIC

Leadership discourse directly expresses the organizational culture in which it is advocated. Where rationality and productivity are the norm, leadership will by definition be expressed as rational decisiveness that brings measurable growth and success. Where sustained relationships of mutual support are the norm, leadership will express relational skills of listening, affirming, and inclusiveness. No organization exhibits a completely uniform ethos; most are a continually shape-shifting blend of assumptions and values. Expectations of leadership are thus equally shape-shifting and ambiguous.

²⁶ Joyce K. Fletcher, *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12-14, 96, 105. Fletcher has been joined by Joanne Martin of the business school at Stanford and other scholars in a gender critique of the bureaucracy theories of Max Weber that have been so dominant for a century. In describing an ideal type of organization governed by rationality, division of labor and specialization of tasks, substitution of office for person, and production of written records, these authors argued, Weber devalued the role of practices usually associated with the feminine in Western societies. Not only was his language about bureaucratic organizations entirely male, but his ideal model served to legitimate and reinforce the organizational practices it purported to describe. His insistence on the inevitability of (his model of) bureaucracy elevated it to the stature of the only workable organizational form in modern societies.

Richard Harvey Brown has advocated understanding bureaucracy itself as a praxis, that is, a socially constructed model of organizational purpose and task. This construal of bureaucracy both relativizes it as one of many possible organizational cultures and liberates it from its hegemonic stature in modern societies, to be an often useful if limited form of organizing and directing work. This opens space for legitimizing other forms of organization, such as those constituted by relational practices. See Brown's article “Bureaucracy as Praxis: Toward a Political Phenomenology of Formal Organizations” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 23 (September 1978): 365-382.

Yet organizations are also distinct cultures, in more than the simplistic instrumental – and readily manipulable – sense conveyed by Peters and Waterman and other business writers. As cultures, organizations come to focus in certain symbolic objects or forms that capture their identity and purpose. They tell paradigmatic stories of their founding or turning points in their history that seem in retrospect to be critical moments. Over time they develop characteristic ways of working, of addressing a changing environment. They express basic outlooks and assumptions about the world that are reflected in the work styles and attitudes of their employees and constituents.

Viewed from the perspective of organizations as cultural systems that evolve over time in constant interaction with larger social and cultural environments, leadership is a profoundly significant myth. The term and whatever expectations cluster around it express what the organization names as most meaningful about its purpose, most true about the world it is trying to affect, and most compelling about its aspirations. Discourse of leadership is a kind of shorthand symbolic language into which an organization's culture is compressed. Often leadership captures for constituents what the organization most values about what it is trying to accomplish.

Organizational cultures also express an institutional logic. While this logic is most evident in the way an organization thinks through problems, it is more generally threaded through an organization's central purposes and reason for being. As Roger Friedland and Robert Alford described it, the "central logic" of an organization is "a set of material practices and symbolic constructions [that] constitutes its organizing principles." Organizations structure and defend themselves by their logics, and their logics provide constituents a manageable but limited focus for their own choices and interests.²⁷

Friedland and Alford offered as examples the logics of larger social institutions such as capitalism (accumulation and

²⁷ Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford, "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions" in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232-263. Quotation is from 248.

commodification) and family (community, loyalty, reproduction). Their concept is more useful, though, in interpreting concrete and specific organizations. Every organization comprises multiple logics with one usually dominant. A commercial corporation may have as its central logic an expanded productivity that brings a larger market share for its product. Yet other logics such as a family-like loyalty to the organization may also be embedded in its culture and practices.

The discourse of leadership extends these logics, and executives are often those expected to reconcile conflicting logics in the organization. For example, in the United Methodist Church, a Protestant denomination of about 8.3 million members in 35,000 local church congregations in the US, bishops are regularly projected as leaders by reason of office. They stand at the meeting point of multiple logics. They are elected in representative assemblies of clergy and laity (logics of representation, participation, and inclusiveness), expected to serve as pastors of the pastors (logics of community, covenant, and care), asked to oversee and chair governing bodies of church agencies and institutions (logics of corporate bureaucracies), invited to preach or bless and dedicate programs and facilities (logics of liturgy and sacramental symbolism), and mandated "to lead" the churches in ministry and mission (logics of entrepreneurship and strategic planning). That the bishops are regularly "worn out" by these competing logics and their accompanying expectations is little wonder, nor is the perpetual conflict of these logics in all church bodies a surprise.²⁸

The discourse of leadership is itself contested, then, particularly when it functions as language for a constituency in an organization that is advocating dominance for a new or previously less central logic. Acclaim for certain leaders and resultant demands for that kind of leadership among all office holders, managers or executives in an organization is an overt expression of the logic being advocated. To return to the United Methodist Church example, in recent years the governing church-wide representative assembly (General

²⁸ "Worn out" is a term from the original Methodist language world, referring to being worn out from travelling – the trademark of itinerant Methodist preachers and bishops. This language and the organizational logic it expressed is still echoed in the polity of contemporary Methodist denominations.

Conference) has adopted two language sets clearly asserting expectations for leadership. One is a definition of the church's mission as "making disciples of Jesus Christ." This phrase is the symbolic banner of church growth throughout evangelical Protestantism and now appears as a mandate for every governing body and office of the United Methodist Church. It conveys definite expectations and values of leadership such as initiative, innovation, strategic planning, expansion of congregations, and growth in membership numbers. It is grounded in a logic of church as enterprise. Its exemplars are male pastors of congregations with over 5,000 members who tell a saga of their congregation's beginnings with a dozen people in Bible study in someone's living room and its astonishing growth in just a few years.

The second language set now appears in definitions of ministry and is attached to the descriptions of every office of ministry. The primary term is "servant leadership," which is not defined in official church documents. The church's *Book of Discipline* suggests the ministry of Jesus Christ as model for this leadership, but describes no actual practices or situations that illustrate or interpret it. One might surmise that use of the term, also widespread in Protestantism, appropriates the school of leadership studies associated with the late Robert Greenleaf (executive of AT&T and devout Quaker). If that is the case, the term conveys a logic of service to larger organizational purposes, in particular the way an organization advances the common good of communities and society more generally. The leader in this model is directing her or his gifts and abilities toward fulfillment of an organization's contribution to the common welfare. Exemplars are those who have served lengthy terms on boards of trustees of effective institutions or have initiated programs and agencies of service to wider communities.²⁹

Both of these discourses of leadership and their accompanying logics are a form of advocacy being championed by certain constituencies within the church. Leadership talk puts in symbolic language the intent of those constituencies to make the logic they favor dominant in a complex organization. In striking ways they complement and

²⁹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

balance each other. The first emphasizes aggression, territoriality, and gain. The second stresses consensus, humility, and self-giving. The church implicitly states that it will consider as leaders those who practice both these sets of traits and their associated logics.

Through its adoption of these two languages, United Methodism has chosen to diminish other logics that have also been formative in the church's heritage. For example, a sacramental logic of pastor as priest and representative of the ministries of all Christians no longer appears in the *Book of Discipline* in any elaborated form. Moreover, the church has not heeded the voices of women warning of the consequences of a free-floating language of "servant leadership." The term has shifted in popular use from Greenleaf's emphasis on the trusteeship of organizations externally focused on social goods to a preoccupation with internal organizational styles. Many organizations have adopted the lingo in order to reinforce values of participation and consensus. But if the leader is only a consensus-builder, argued management scholar Shirley Roels, deferring to the wishes of the group and serving as "a conduit for the desires of followers," she or he may erode the organization's capacity to gather its resources and address its continually changing environment.³⁰ Who is serving whom in "servant leadership" remains vague and subject to the whims of ideological parties or assertive personalities in the churches. Language of "servant leadership," along with "team building" or its predecessors such as "quality management groups," can mask the realities of power relations in any organization. This is particularly an issue for women, whom men in the dominant culture often expect to be deferential anyway.

Churches and church organizations clearly exhibit, then, diverse borrowings of "secondary logics" that guide and govern them. To some extent, as Harry Stout and Scott Cormode argued, these are simply "patterns of overlap and imitation" of other institutions "that grow from human beings'

³⁰ Shirley J. Roels, "Organization Man; Organization Woman: Faith, Gender, and Management" in Shirley J. Roels with Barbara Hilkert Andolsen and Paul F. Camenisch, *Organization Man Organization Woman: Calling, Leadership, and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 17-79. See particularly her discussion of servant leadership on 49-50.

simultaneous membership in diverse institutions.”³¹ At worst, however, churches not in sustained conversation with their own heritages and practices may be all too susceptible to what Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell termed “institutional isomorphism” or the tendency of organizations toward homogenization under similar environmental conditions. The authors’ hypothesis that “the more ambiguous the goals of an organization, the greater the extent to which the organization will model itself after organizations that it perceives as successful,” may be particularly applicable to the churches, whose vocation as “stewards of God’s mysteries” (I Corinthians 4:10) is inherently ambiguous.³² Yet the churches also can trust and carry forward their own constitutive practices, in particular the practice of administration.

FROM LEADERSHIP TO ADMINISTRATION

The multiple agendas of leadership talk and its commercial assumptions make it a problematic discourse for church organizations. What communities of faith need in order to thrive is neither the heroic and idiosyncratic visions of entrepreneurs, nor bi-polar leader-follower dynamics that stir them to seek experts who will rescue them from perceived decline, nor the patter of egalitarian jargon that masks power relations. If communities of faith are going to employ the language of leadership – and given the dominant commercial culture of Western societies, they surely will – then they must adopt a balanced approach that is both critical and constructive. They will need to draw deeply on their heritage of theology, polity, and practice to construct an understanding of leadership that is both critically shrewd about organizational assumptions in contemporary society and authentic to the churches’ identity as institutions.

³¹ Harry S. Stout and D. Scott Cormode, “Institutions and the Story of American Religion” in N. J. Demerath III, Peter Dobkin Hall, Terry Schmitt, and Rhys H. Williams, eds., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62-78. Quotations are from 73.

³² Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields” in Powell and DiMaggio, *Institutionalism*, 63-82. Quotation from 75. Quotation of the Bible is from the New Revised Standard Version.

For a balanced approach the churches can turn to a practice that has been constitutive of Christian communities from the beginning. The churches can explore the possibilities of a rich and nuanced understanding of administration as a practice of advancing organizational purposes and institutional flourishing. The term in church context may help clarify the organizational logics central to the nature and purpose of the churches, and demonstrate the significance of the churches' heritages and cultures for expressing their ministries. Moreover, the churches' understandings and practices of administration have much to contribute to the larger discussions of leadership continuing in all organizations today.

The term "administration" contains in itself an orientation to its practice. For one thing, it is by definition a form of ministry. Administration is an expression of *ministerium*, the Latin translation of the New Testament Greek *diakonia* or service. It is a form of diaconate in which members of the community of faith are in ministry with each other and in the wider community and world. It is a form of service to the intentions and purposes of God in the world as communities of faith can best understand them.

The prefix "ad-" is significant as well, bearing the sense of "to" or "toward." Ad-ministration suggests a focus or direction, an intention of ministry. In the most general sense this implies service directed toward fulfilling the organization's purposes. Drawing on the churches' scriptural and traditional language of ecclesiology, then, administration may be defined as the practice of bringing to focus the intentions of the people of God for ministry and building up the community of faith in its witness and service in the world.

Administration is a constitutive practice of Christian community. Like other constitutive practices such as liturgy, hospitality, formation, and care, administration embraces more than simply current action or activities. It describes a pattern of actions that have a history. Current practitioners can draw upon the experience and wisdom of Christian communities over time. They inherit, reform, and extend institutions and polities that carry forward their traditions.

Similarly, while administration is practiced in local, particular places, it extends traditions common to many times

and places. A congregation or church agency expresses not only its own intentions for ministry but carries forward purposes generated through forms peculiar to its broader confessional or denominational heritage. In a more universal sense as well, a local Christian community expresses through its administrative practice an image of who it trusts God to be and what it believes God's intentions to be for the world.

Thus administration is not just an individual intent, choice, or act, but an expression of a whole community. Administrative practice may be exemplified or most clearly expressed in certain offices of the Christian community (particularly ordained offices) but belongs to the vocation of the whole people of God gathered in particular places.

Administration is among the practices that constitute the church, that is, bring it into being and make it what it is. The people of God as a human community is always coming into being and extending its witness and service in a continuous process of formation and re-formation. Like other practices, administration draws deeply on traditions and institutions that have emerged from generations of Christian community. Administration is at the same time continuously building up the community and extending its ministries in current contexts.

Practices are not given whole or complete. Rather, they come to fullness through the practice of them. Through the continuous practice of administration, the churches address the challenges of particular contexts, wrestle with appropriate ways to adapt and integrate the influences of surrounding institutions, and struggle with conflict among differing images of faithfulness and logics of organization.

The practice of administration is both formal and informal. Some arrangements of governance are expressed in polity, written in books of order and sustained by rituals and traditions that legitimate a church's forms of authority. But in many ways administrative practice is less canonical than informal. "Communities of practice" form in churches and church organizations in response to changing needs and contexts. Not necessarily corresponding with canon or office, these "vital interstitial communities" are often most effective in

collaboration to organize work and solve problems.³³

The churches' central logic for constructing the practice of administration is embedded in biblical language of stewardship (*oikonomia*). The Greek term already contains in itself the image of the house (*oikos*) as a space that makes certain functions possible (shelter, food, rest, and so forth). Stewardship embraces the economy of the whole household to the end that its resources are used fully and justly and that its purposes flourish. Household economics is hardly a settled pattern, to be sure; stewardship must be worked out among differing conceptions of what makes a household just, orderly, and generative. Here again, gender is a particularly acute issue for the household of faith, as many women and men seek a justice grounded in equality and participation, rather than the hierarchy and patriarchy evident in some forms of Christian community.³⁴

New Testament images are helpful in conceiving of stewardship. The Apostle Paul used the image of the builder as the one who creates or constructs the foundation and spaces of the household within which the community of faith will live (I Corinthians 3:9-10). He also suggested the image of the gardener planting and watering. The garden, too, is a space. It must be marked out, tilled, planted, tended, all with an eye to making something possible. "You are God's field, God's building," Paul wrote to Corinth – a space that must be well managed and cared for if God is to create something there. "Only God ... gives the growth." (I Corinthians 3:6-9)

Ethicist Larry Rasmussen summarized the Christian practice of "shaping communities" in a way that extends biblical images of stewardship. "Proper ordering, as any gardener, cook, orchestra conductor, or housekeeper can tell you, is basic to good living... thriving, not to say surviving, requires the creative ordering of freedom." Rasmussen suggested the image of "choreographer" to grasp the tasks of administration. "Shaping communities is not just a single

³³ John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, "Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation" *Organization Science* 2:1 (February 1991): 40-57. Quotations are from 49-50.

³⁴ For Christian feminist advocacy of stewardship as an economics of God's radical transformation of the world, see Letty M. Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979) and *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.”³⁵

These images put us at nub of the tension between administration and what American society often seems to mean by leadership. The ecclesial images of administration are about creating a space in which fruitfulness can flourish through cultivation of the community’s resources and removal of obstacles to the community’s thriving. But this does not satisfy advocates of leadership. Impatient with waiting for architects or with tending a garden and watching for signs of growth or with letting people learn the dance, the dominant voices call for someone to lead – that is, to make, to create, to innovate. The purpose of leadership, they insist, is to direct people to produce a tangible output. The prevailing social image of the entrepreneur comes closer at this point to what many people seek for organizations, in particular the churches.

The difficulty with entrepreneurialism is its premise of enterprise. Churches as communities of witness and service are not first of all human enterprises or inventions. Churches do not make or produce in the sense that we would normally understand in what Rost termed “the industrial paradigm” so dominant in American society.³⁶ Churches are communities called into being by something beyond themselves. They are communities of reception. They are an organized response to something already given.

Churches are constituted by a logic of gift. They arise from the premise of God’s gift of life, and everything they do is grateful response in stewardship of that gift. This is not an exchange relationship on which commerce is based (although American commercialism continually tries to make gift-giving a form of exchange). Churches are constituted by practices of seeking and giving signs of God’s presence in the world,

³⁵ Larry Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities” in Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 119-132. Quotation from 120-121. I am indebted throughout my theological discussion of administration to one of the few “classic” texts in the field of church administration, Thomas C. Campbell and Gary B. Reier, *The Gift of Administration: Theological Bases for Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

³⁶ Rost, *Leadership*, 27.

responding to God in mercy, companionship, justice, care, and peace.

If administration is based on a logic of giving, does this mean that churches have no place for industriousness, for initiative and innovation? Hardly so, for the effective management and expression of the wealth and diversity of gifts that churches enjoy calls for enormous energy and focus. The flourishing of Christian organizations requires “an entire community of discernment ...in which the discernment of one person is tested against that of another,” in the words of Michael and Deborah Jinkins. Only thus can a community work through its differences and fully grasp how its gifts and strengths best fit together for the fulfillment of its purposes.

The necessity of discernment suggests that administration is not only a practice, but an art. It begins with paying disciplined attention to the stories, symbols, rituals, and language through which an organization expresses itself. It entails “connection with *this* specific time and place, *this* culture ... *these* people in *this* moment.” The art of attention intends “to sense the pulse of a community, to comprehend the dynamics of identity, public trust, and moral purpose among a people – what they hope, what they desire, and what they fear, and how these hopes, desires, and fears guide their thoughts, their loyalties, and their plans.”³⁷

Administration is an art of discerning and naming the images that guide an organization, that both express its internal solidarity and its sense of purpose in the world external to it. Administration mines the depths of an organization’s heritage in order to identify its enduring strengths and resources, as well as its wounds and failures. The administrative art then makes the turn toward acknowledging the organization’s limits even as it seeks to adapt and extend the organization’s strengths to enable its purposes to flourish in changing contexts. This creative

³⁷ Michael Jinkins and Deborah Bradshaw Jinkins, *The Character of Leadership: Political Realism and Public Virtue in Nonprofit Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 63, 65. See also Thomas Edward Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation: An Invitation to Congregational Reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 57-74.

process will generate new strengths, new stories, symbols, rituals, and language of the organization's living tradition.³⁸

Who practices the art of administration in the churches? Do we not finally have to return to the question of leadership: Who will lead the processes of management, discernment, and fulfillment of purposes? I would argue in closing that what members and stakeholders of churches and church organizations often mean by "leadership," and what they ordinarily want when they speak of "leadership," is what I have described as the art and practice of administration. To be sure, every church and church organization identifies administration with certain offices. These offices, though, are most effectively viewed as focused, embodied expressions of the administrative practice circulating through the whole community.³⁹

This conception of leadership as an administrative, communal activity through which an organization learns deeply about itself and its environment and reaches a common sense of how its purposes can thrive, resonates with some contemporary insights of authors addressing mainly commercial and governmental organizations. Ronald Heifetz, for example, locates leadership in "the gap between the values

³⁸ For discussion of images that bear the corporate character of a congregation, see Carl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation: Images that Shape Your Congregation's Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 1-9, 87-95.

³⁹ Much has been made of organizational "leaders" being persons of vision, and candidates for administrative offices are often asked, "What is your vision for the church and for this organization?" But vision is socially constructed. It is painted from the pigments of an organization's culture and context. The visions that come to full expression are widely shared in the organization. They draw upon an organization's heritage and capture the aspirations of its participants. See Weems, *Church Leadership*, 37-68.

Parallel to talk of vision, much has been made of the significance of what James MacGregor Burns called "transforming leadership" that can "shape and alter and elevate the motives and values and goals of followers." But what effective administrators mainly do is bring to focus the resources for transformation already present in an organization and its stakeholders. Transformation is a relative term in any case. While Burns's concept was based in a hierarchy of values addressed to the whole sweep of society and thus seemed grandiose and even imperialistic, many business authors have reduced his idea of "transforming leadership" to little more than simple stories of "turning the company around." James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 425-426. Rost pointed out how authors such as Peters and Waterman misused Burns, ignoring the political and ethical dimensions of Burns's "transforming leadership" and thus reabsorbing Burns into the industrial paradigm; *Leadership*, 83.

people stand for and the reality they face” as leaders help their organization consider “a change in values, beliefs, or behavior.” Leaders nurture their institutions to engage in the “adaptive work” necessary “to mobilize people to face, rather than avoid, tough realities and conflicts.”⁴⁰

A “learning organization,” in Peter Senge’s companion concept, seeks to imagine systemically the relationship between its purposes and the continually changing environment in which it finds itself. Those identified as leaders are the primary mentors and teachers within a community of learning that together must discern how it can best focus its service in its current situation. Senge called the “shift of mind” necessary for a systemic and communal imagination for learning no less than a metanoia or transformation from typical organizational thinking.⁴¹

For the churches, organized around the metanoia of witnessing to the Reign of God, no term could be more native than transformation. The churches hope to give signs of God’s Reign through administration of their communal life and work in ways that express mercy and justice. Grounded in their constitutive logic of gift, they must seek to discern their gifts and build upon their strengths through the art and practice of administration, so that their witness and service may flourish.

⁴⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 20, 22.

⁴¹ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990), 13. Indicative of the lack of conversation between scholarship in organizational studies and the churches, Senge used the term metanoia with only incidental reference to its centrality in Christian faith and traditions. One might say the same of the proliferating fad of mission statements for everything from grocery stores to the post office, a secularizing and commodifying of language native to the churches.