
SONG, POETRY, AND MOVEMENT—

CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF *RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP*: *A REFERENCE HANDBOOK*

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During a march led by the First African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Seattle, one of our alumnae approached me and asked if we were offering any courses on church planting yet. She was excited that this was the newest and most creative effort her denomination was currently considering for renewal and revival. As we marched in solidarity with “Black Lives Matter,” we discussed this—she from her denominational leadership perspective, and me from my religious leadership faculty perspective. As I continued the march with several thousand others, I pondered how mostly white, liberal, Protestant churches search for ways to attract others to their congregations.¹ And I wondered if anything the annual meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership considered in April 2015 offered hope to pastors and congregants in terms of growth, creativity, and renewal.

Subsequently, I researched the topic online only to find that *Christianity Today* boasts almost 236,000 people followed their article on “planting an organic church.” At the same time, “How to Plant a Church” touts 33,600 followers on Twitter. Several other Web sites consider “five ways” or other ways to *plant* churches. I asked myself again: Is this the only type of creative religious leadership we acknowledge today?

As this issue of the *Journal* summarizes, the assembled members of the Academy of Religious Leadership

¹ Countless articles have been written that chart the drop in church attendance among mainline Protestant traditions. David Eagle’s article, “The U.S. Mainline Protestant Context” in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, cites many references that document this numeric decline. See pages 5–9 for his thorough examination of this topic.

considered creativity and its contribution to religious leadership at the 2015 meeting. The articles speak for themselves in relation to the topic. As the editor of a two-volume work, *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, I facilitated the final session of the two-day conference. Having distributed several individual chapters of the handbook, I asked the members to read two chapters: one that more or less summarized religious leadership, and one that might provoke creative thought about where God might be leading us as religious leaders. The list of chapters included titles such as Barbara G. Wheeler, “General Trends and Emerging Models Across Christian Denominations”; David E. Eagle, “The U.S. Mainline Protestant Context”; William Svelmoe, “Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Megachurch Movements”; and Lovett H. Weems, Jr., “Pastoral Leadership in Mainline Protestant Churches.” I submitted these as credible and valuable summaries of where the churches are and have been. The other chapters included topics I thought might offer some traction as we considered how to be creative in contemporary contexts: Stephen Sprinkle, “Gender, Identity, and Inclusive Leadership”; Soong-Chan Rah, “New Forms of Evangelical Leadership”; Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, “Postcolonial Insights for Religious Leadership”; Anthony B. Robinson, “Innovations in Mainline Protestant Leadership”; Bill Grace, “Spirit-Inspired Leadership and the Common Good Worldview”; and Mark Lau Branson, “Religious Leadership for Social Change.”²

None of the chapters in this handbook (out of ninety-seven total) actually addressed creativity in religious leadership. Indeed, as we prepared for the conference, I confronted my own lack of imagination about this topic and its potential for offering a full section for the handbook. We had covered many types of contexts, denominational and interreligious traditional leadership expectations, feminist and cultural critiques, as well as education and formation for

² All of these chapters are taken from *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013).

leadership, and the impact of religious leaders on society and the public square. Yet, nowhere did I or my editorial board address the connection between creativity and religious leadership.

During the last session of the conference, we attempted to make ourselves more creative by engaging in what one of my doctoral students named *artistic practice*. That is, we sang, we moved (not quite dance, but movement), we breathed together, and we recited poetry. All of these are aspects of what this student named artistic practice. Her dissertation,³ soon to be catalogued, argues that the very practice of art releases new creativity and impacts how leadership affects those it serves.

As the groups gathered to discuss the chapters, we witnessed a bonding with those who had offered controversial insights to a body that was quite diverse in its theological understanding. When we rose to sing together—in parts, of course—the bond strengthened in a tangible way, allowing the many viewpoints to raise praise to a God we all acknowledge. I began to think again of the acts or disciplines related to creativity—the expansion of thought, the tension of holding something and releasing something, the practice of doing something not quite familiar, the process of putting disparate things or ideas together. All of these produced a transformation within each person and the group as a whole. We were weary, and now we felt refreshed. We were anxious about ideas that were contrary to our experience and belief systems, and now we were more understanding of others. We were hesitant to accept, and now we experienced compassion and empathy. We prayed differently, with different images of the God we all espouse, and we sang prayer together to the God who is love.

As I write this today, I'm reminded again of the march for "Black Lives Matter." Protestants, Jews, Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, and nonbelievers marched as one. We sang, we chanted. We heard poetry, carried banners, and

³ Wyatt, Amy, *Cultivating Creative Spiritual Leadership: The Role of Art-Making as a Spiritual Practice for Ministers*. Unpublished dissertation (Seattle: Seattle University, 2015).

proclaimed our belief that God made each of us and we matter. People preached. People talked and walked. We created, connected, communicated.

Certainly, there is more to ponder, practice and say. We are in a time of sea-change in all institutions⁴ we know. Howard Gardner names the *creating mind*⁵ as one of the five minds leaders need today. He describes the process of creativity as singular, working in a particular domain, within a social field or context. As religious leaders, we challenged ourselves to consider how we can foster practices that will assist us in seeing multiple perspectives and diverse representations of the same entity, and pose questions that move us to new insights and deepened understandings. As coeditor of this *Journal*, I hope that you, the reader/religious leader, find sustenance for your own creativity, challenge to move into unknown and ambiguous territory, and encouragement for your journey.

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⁴ Houle, David, *Entering the Shift Age* (Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2012).

⁵ Gardner, Howard, *5 Minds for the Future* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008).