

PORTRAITS OF PASTORAL LEADERSHIP: From Floating Logs to Preying Storks

Henry J. Schmidt*

Aesop tells the story of the frogs who wanted a king. They annoyed Jupiter with their request until he finally tossed a log into the pond. For a while the frogs were happy with their new leader.

Soon, however, they discovered that they could jump up and down on their leader and run all over him. He offered no resistance nor gave any response. He merely floated back and forth on the pond, a practice which finally exasperated the frogs who were really sincere about wanting "strong leadership."

So back to Jupiter they went, complaining about their log leader and appealing for much stronger administrative oversight. Jupiter was weary of the tiresome frogs, so this time he gave them a stork who stood tall above the members of the group. He certainly had the appearance of a leader. The frogs were quite happy with the new situation. Their leader stalked around the pond making impressive noises and attracting great attention. Their joy turned to sorrow, however, and then to panic when very soon the stork began eating his subjects.¹

The log as a "free rein" leader and the stork as an absolute autocrat represent extremes on the continuum of leadership styles in the church. The portraits between those extremes are both numerous and varied. As a Mennonite Brethren Church we have had a strong emphasis on brotherhood, consensus, and discipling. Of late we have experienced the shift from a multiple, lay-oriented ministry to a professional, pastoral-dominated system. The incongruity is beginning to show, and the question of leadership is becoming crucial again. The questions which are being raised deal not only with the character and

*Henry J. Schmidt is a doctoral candidate at University of Southern California and professor-elect at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno.

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direction of leadership, but with the selection, training, and style of leaders.

In my work with pastors during six years of evangelistic ministries, I have been both amazed and amused at what I have observed. It is amazing how quickly church leadership parallels business and secular models. It seems that cultural conditioning is more determinative than scriptural directives. It is amazing, too, how quickly the cry for strong leadership (“There shall be a king over us”) turns into a bitter complaint (“Who has made you to rule over us?”). At times I have stood in wonder at how locked-in and rigid leadership can become; at other times I have been pleasantly surprised at the creativity and flexibility which is exercised. I have found it both amusing and disturbing to watch the “power games” in the church and the subsequent rationalizations which legitimize these positions in the name of “a battle for biblical truth,” or “a battle for morality,” or a “battle for God.”

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Five portraits have emerged for me. In presenting these, I run the risk of oversimplification and overgeneralization. The portraits overlap. No pastor fits any one picture perfectly. Most of our pastors are a combination of several types and make changes in their own styles. Furthermore, each style has its strengths and weaknesses. There was a difference between Peter and Andrew, between Paul and Apollos, and between Timothy and Luke, but God used each of them to build his Church. While one style of leadership may be preferable at a particular stage of development in the life of a congregation, I am assuming that the measuring stick for any style of leadership must always be the biblical model of leadership as godly character, example, service, and relationship.

1. *The Floating Log*. The motto of this style of leadership is “minimum direction and maximum individual freedom of action.” The group makes decisions. The pastor recedes and is even reticent to discuss or appraise. For example, a pastor may act as a figurehead leader but occupy himself only with his preaching while others are left to work out the organizational details of the church. Decisions are made by indecision. The possible danger of such non-directive leadership is chaos. While many programs may be proposed, few are implemented; though goals may be articulated, they are seldom achieved. Lyle Schaller notes that this style of leadership in the local church may mean “that the institution is paralyzed, the lay leadership is frustrated, and the congregation is immobilized in the face of change.”² There are pastors, however, who lead effectively by a deliberate low-key, “floating log” strategy. For a church to function

harmoniously and progressively under such leadership requires an extremely high level of motivation, understanding, and commitment on the part of individual members. There is a distinction, then, between "floating log" leadership that arises out of inability or lack of direction and the "hang loose" leadership that is deliberately exercised by very capable pastors.

2. *The Playing Coach.* The pastor as playing coach is part of the team. This is collaborative, participatory, and shared leadership. Playing coaches motivate the team from within. They analyze and plan strategies with the other team members. They listen and are flexible, changing strategy as the need arises. They probe and test and float trial balloons. The playing coach pastor assumes that everybody on the team should have a say in decisions that affect them. He is willing to risk, to trust people, and to share his authority with others. The assumption here is that the best way to motivate others is to involve them in the decision-making process. This creates goal ownership and a feeling of shared purpose. The movement in decision-making is from within rather than from the top down. Because all have participated in the formulation of goals, all work toward their attainment. Pastors with this style tend to be relationship-oriented. They have a strong sense of identity and are not easily threatened. Their commitment to build the church gives them the freedom to train men to take their place. In adding staff members they can select superior persons in specialized areas without feeling threatened.

3. *The Super Star.* In *The Problem of Wineskins* Howard Snyder has a penetrating chapter entitled, "Must the Pastor be a Superstar?" The superstar pastor can preach, counsel, administer, conciliate, communicate, integrate, and raise the budget. "He handles Sunday morning better than any quizmaster on Weekday T.V. He is better with words than most political candidates. As a scholar he surpasses many seminary professors. No church social function would be complete without him."³ The superstar pastor has the final say on matters, but he is wise enough to know that he needs a following and that enthusiastic support is better than grudging obedience. For this reason he works hard at "selling" his people on the soundness of his direction and the benefits they will receive. The superstar style is linked to a personality that has charisma. Peter Rudge makes the point that such leadership has its focus in an "intuition" which the pastor articulates and the people latch on to. He writes:

It is a gathered community of the enlightened who draw their inspiration from their prophetic leader; all parts of the organization adhere to him as pieces of metal to a magnet. . .The charismatic approach involves cutting at roots from the past, overthrowing

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formalism and launching out afresh. The approach thus has a flexibility by which to meet new situations; it can articulate the forces in social change, and so it can be closely attuned to the environment, although this is not necessarily true with all intuitions.⁴

There are handicaps and dangers in this style. First, if the pastor is a superstar, then the church is an audience and not a body. Secondly, there simply are not enough superstars to go around, so what happens to all those pastors whose gifts qualify them for ministry but whose style is not the superstar variety? Thirdly, there is the danger that leading by "image" and "personality cult" will be without depth and content.

4. *The Big Daddy.* The big daddy is leadership with a dominant father figure in a family relationship. Big daddy is viewed as one who can "fix things" and "make it better." He represents the voice of experience, authority, and wisdom. The identification between pastor and people is strong. Big daddy is much like the "benevolent dictator" in society. While there are some similarities between big daddy and preying stork in terms of being more autocratic, the style and motivation differ drastically. The former identifies with his followers and is committed to their best interests and welfare. The latter tends to remain aloof and to amass power for his own ends. Big daddy leadership can be very paternalistic and cause overdependence, but its strength lies both in the direction and commitment which it brings to the group. Richard Wolff observes that this style of leadership must constantly guard, on the one hand, against the extremes of weakness due to an "exaggerated identification with the group" and on the other a "disguised dictatorship" in which paternal authority and wisdom are never open to question.⁵

5. *The Preying Stork.* The preying stork is the authoritarian pastor who makes all the decisions for the group. Armed with superior knowledge, experience, expertise, and power, he unilaterally chooses what he thinks is best for the members of the church. Such leadership announces and pronounces more than it consults and listens. This style of leadership in the church has its parallel in society in such forms as the "big boss" politician, the military general, and the corporate executive. The pastor functions as the chief executive of the church. Persons in the church are viewed as servants of the organization and as a valuable means of achieving personal and organizational goals, but all the lines of power converge at the top of the pyramid. The pastor at the top is the vital figure in the organization since its activity depends upon his initiative and drive. Everything is under his direct control. Every project begins and ends with him. The assumption is that people will not do anything unless they are told. Innovation is discouraged. The leader sees himself as indispensable. Decisions are

made quickly and executed efficiently. Emory Bogardus describes such a leader as one who

knows what ought to be done, what he wants to do, and he drives ahead to that end. He commands and organizes. He captivates and paralyzes. He exercises great freedom in acting as a law unto himself. If he doubts, he never discloses his doubts. If he makes a mistake he rarely acknowledges it. Autocratic leadership requires a special kind of public—the hero-worshipful public which is impressed by pomp and authority. It is sentimental, strongly suggestible, and easily controlled by a dynamic person.⁶

The mass suicide in Guyana under cult leader Jim Jines is a current illustration of a preying stork. Em Griffen warns that the danger of an autocratic style is that “the leader and his followers might automatically assume he has a direct pipeline to God and therefore all his decisions have a divine stamp of approval (‘my way is Yahweh’).”⁷

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN

The implications of this typology of pastoral leadership among Mennonite Brethren are numerous. My personal experience has demonstrated to me that our churches have all five types of leaders. We have a sprinkling of floating logs, big daddies, and preying storks. We have a limited number of superstars and a growing number of playing coaches.

My theology of the church leads me to reject the preying stork as a valid style. In spite of religious garb and pious rhetoric, it is the corrupted secular model of leadership which Jesus addressed when He said to the disciples, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. . .but it is not so among you” (Mark 10:42-43). In the history of Mennonite Brethren our strong leadership in such men as B.B. Janz, A.H. Unruh, J.B. Toews, and others, has been the big daddy rather than the preying stork model. Even though in current culture and church life the trend is shifting away from autocratic leadership, the church today needs big daddy pastors and leaders because of their wisdom, experience, direction, and stability. Big daddies will have to be more flexible than ever before, since they must function in an open brotherhood, lest they become either dictatorial or anemic through over-identification.

Churches that opt for a floating log style may in fact be reacting to their experience with storks and daddies and may consequently flounder in matter of identity and direction. They could benefit greatly from the counsel of a sensitive big daddy. The playing coach most closely approximates the biblical concept of leadership and is most consistent with our emphasis on brotherhood, discipleship, and

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consensus. One problem is that the playing coach style requires more effort, cooperation, patience, and time to become functional.

With our culturally-oriented production mentality we gravitate to superstars and storks in the name of efficiency. The successful superstar pastors with their mushrooming attendance, budgets, buildings, and programs merit careful analysis. Success must stand the test not only of fruits but roots, not only of pragmatism but of biblical faithfulness. The appeal of superstars is evident from the viewing and following that such men as Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Robert Schuler, Jerry Falwell, and Bill Gothard have won in our congregations. That appeal is also evident in the attempts to import notable superstar pastors from other groups as well as from the numerous "calls" to other churches which our own outstanding pastors receive.

These portraits leave a host of questions unanswered on the local church level. For example, to what extent is leadership style related to theological positions, geographical location, educational level, and local tradition? Do certain types of leaders reproduce their "kind" in the congregation? Is there any cyclical pattern of pastoral leadership through a series of styles over a period of time? When a church has had a superstar or an autocratic leader for a time, must there always be a "sacrificial lamb" or a "tragic divorce" between the church and the next pastor they call? How seriously do churches and prospective pastors evaluate, before the call is extended, the style of leadership that is needed at that particular juncture in the life of the congregation? How does the influence of our tradition (brotherhood, priesthood of all believers, diversity of gifts in the body, etc.) and our culture (democracy, majority rule, individualism, etc.) affect our concept of leadership? What does the increasing structural hierarchy of multiple staff and of implementing the elder system (both of which reduce congregational responsibility for real decision-making) indicate about the future style of leadership? And what does the short tenure of associate and youth pastors in our churches communicate concerning our understanding of team leadership, plurality of gifts, and building together?

On a pastoral level two further issues surface immediately. First, the acceptance of the corporate executive as a model for ministry does not square biblically. Administration is important, but according to the Scriptures it is not the primary role of the pastor. While some pastors enjoy this aspect and would hesitate to relinquish it, others despise administration but feel forced to spend fifty percent of their time at it. Something is amiss. I concur with Carnegie Calian in his lamentation, "Pastors have neglected their task as the grass-roots theologians within the community. . . . Pastors have undermined their vital role as opinion makers in society. Harried, tired, and ill-prepared, they have

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become an inarticulate voice in a world seeking purpose and hope.”⁸ Secondly, there is a question of how prophetic and forthright pastors are willing to be on current issues when their physical sustenance and vocational security are in the hands of those who carry the “confidence vote.”

Portraits are developed in a “process” over a period of time. Once developed, they also need refining and “touching up.” I am committed to this “process” of leadership development in the context of brotherhood. It may mean adding new portraits to the family album. But I keep reminding myself that it is a family project.

ENDNOTES

1 Kenneth O. Gangel, *Competent to Lead* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 9.

2 Lyle Schaller, *The Decision Makers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 185.

3 Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), pp. 81-85.

4 Peter Rude, *Ministry and Management* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1968), p. 26.

5 Richard Wolff, *Man At The Top* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1969), p. 22.

6 Emory S. Bogardus, *Leaders and Leadership* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1834), p. 21.

7 Elm Griffin, “Why Some People Become Leaders,” *Eternity*, 28 (May, 1977), 24.

8 Carnegie Samuel Calian, *Today's Pastor in Tomorrow's World* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1977), p. 118.