

**LEADERSHIP: SYSTEMS, SERVANT, AND THE PARISH PASTOR**

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MARK RICHARD SUMMER

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 1989, I received an invitation that would change both my life and my ministry. I was invited to attend a lecture in New York City to be given by Dr. Edwin Friedmann, the author of Generation to Generation, which is a study of systems theory for congregations. The presentation was designed for all care providers. The audience was split equally between mental health professionals and clergy. As Dr. Friedmann began to speak, I found myself listening with increased interest. It was my first exposure to systems theory, and I was struck by how many of his ideas rang true to my experience. During the course of his lecture, Dr. Friedmann talked about congregational life as an emotional process, about how the dynamics of the whole group were greater than any one individual, about how clergy can be caught in the many overlapping triangles that are found in every parish, and about how the pastor needs to self-differentiate. The language was new and the ideas were provocative.

Of particular significance to me were Dr. Friedmann's comments about the need and challenge of leadership in parish ministry. I couldn't have agreed more. Much of what Dr. Friedmann was sharing about the congregation as a system, and the leadership role of the pastor within that system was clearly my experience in the parish. So many of the illustrations he used touched my own concerns and struggles. At the end of the lecture, I left the hall knowing that I would look at pastoral ministry and congregational life in a very different way. I had a taste and wanted more. I felt as though I had been handed a map to parish ministry. It didn't give me

step-by-step directions, but it did give me a lay of the land, a way of seeing the emotional landscape more clearly. Systems theory helped me to make better sense of my experience as a pastor and to understand the role I played as a leader in the congregation's life.

Friedmann's lecture came at a crucial time in my life and ministry. I had been in the ministry for twelve years, nine years serving a two-point parish in Maryland and three years at Zion Lutheran Church in Oldwick, New Jersey, where I am presently serving. I was a veteran parish pastor and, like other pastors, had my share of stories to tell. By grouping the stories together, I realized that many of them revealed patterns that repeated themselves again and again, and unlike fairy tales, not all the stories had happy endings. I also realized that parish ministry was emotionally draining, and as I looked at the coming years, I did not want to burnout or to make my family pay the price. Systems theory gave me a way to understand those parish stories in a new and helpful way. It gave me an insight into the emotional processes surrounding me as a parish pastor. It gave me a clearer understanding of my role as a leader in the midst of those emotions. Systems theory changed the way I functioned as a pastor. Over time, I have seen the benefits for my family, my congregation, and myself. All of this leads me to the purpose of this paper.

Since that first lecture nearly fifteen years ago, I have devoted a great deal of time to exploring systems theory and its implications for parish ministry. I am still learning and discovering. In my reading and study, one of the pieces that I have found missing, or at least not fully explored in systems theory, has been a bridge between systems thinking and the biblical witness. Certainly, systems theory has been applied to the parish and pastoral ministry, all of which, I believe, has been beneficial. However, the application has come out of the social

sciences, so the biblical witness has not shaped the insights or implications of systems theory. I believe that the two do not need to remain separate, that systems theory and the biblical witness are not only compatible with each other but that they are connected to each other in significant ways. I believe that systems theory can be found in and through scripture, and that the biblical witness can be an important tool in evaluating and applying systems thinking. The two can be brought into harmony as a model for parish ministry.

I realize that no single paper can provide all the bridges, and I have not attempted to do so. I have limited myself to one bridge, one piece of the puzzle. It is leadership. I want to explore the connection between systems theory's understanding of leadership and the biblical witness's understanding of leadership, especially Jesus' understanding as found in Luke 22:24-30. In Jesus' critic of authority in that passage, an image of servant leadership emerges that informs parish ministry. Servant leadership is one of many models of leadership found in the scriptures, but is the only one that I will be using. I am also limiting myself to looking for positive connections between the two models. Clearly, differences exist, but that is not the purpose of this paper. Finally, I bring to the paper a practical focus. I will use my experience as a parish pastor to support and illustrate points along with citing published readings and research.

To explore the connection between system and servant leadership, this paper will flow in the direction of my own discoveries about leadership as a parish pastor. I will begin with the concept of leadership as viewed from a systems perspective. I will borrow from the work of Dr. Edwin Friedman and Dr. Peter Steinke, both of whom have done a great deal of work with systems and the parish. I will begin to outline the broad strokes of systems theory by using Dr. Steinke's book, How Your Church Family Works. From that general description, I will move

to the specific implications of systems theory and then to the role of leadership within a congregation. Along the way, I will use my experience in the parish to illustrate the points being made. From systems theory, I will move to the concept of servant leadership as found in the Gospel of Luke, specifically to the words of Jesus as found in Luke 22:24-30. Those verses speak directly to the issue of leadership. In the general discussion of the text, I will again use a guide. This time it will be Dr. Peter Nelson whose book Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 has been particularly helpful to me. Using Dr. Nelson's insights, I will outline a specific understanding of servant leadership and again incorporate that understanding into my experience in the parish. Here, the framework is my own design. Though I read numerous books on servant leadership, no one book stood out as a guide. In many of them, Jesus serves as an example, but the connections are either indirect or based on his life rather than his words. Since my focus is on what Jesus said in Luke, I decided to keep my reflections based on the text.

In conclusion, I will draw positive connections between the two models of leadership as found in systems theory and in Luke's gospel. From that blended understanding, I will illustrate the connections through one final extended example from my experience in the parish. My hope is that the connections will be both compelling and helpful. Parish leadership for any pastor or lay leader is never easy. The models explored in this paper are meant to ease the burden. Neither model is complete and each has limits. Systems leadership can create the appearance of an emotional distancing that does not serve the pastor or the parish. Servant leadership is not a relational model that serves every situation. However, both models have been significant paradigms for me that continue to challenge and guide. Both have assisted me in my ministry

and have helped me become, in many ways, a more effective pastor even as I continue to discover and learn.

## CHAPTER 2

### AN UNDERSTANDING OF SYSTEMS

My first goal is to present an understanding of leadership as found in systems theory. To do this, I need to elaborate a basic background in systems theory. I will use Dr. Steinke as a guide, for out of that background, a pattern for leadership will emerge.

#### Systems Theory

Systems theory looks at reality by seeing not just the parts but more importantly, the interconnection of the parts to each other. System theory is a world of interrelatedness.<sup>1</sup> For example, look at a living organism. It has hundreds of parts. They can be listed, catalogued, and understood individually. However, a living organism is more than those individual parts. To understand an organism, one needs to see how the parts interact with each other. In a mammal, the brain sends messages to the lungs to breathe. The lungs supply oxygen to the blood. The blood feeds the heart. The heart pumps blood and needed oxygen to the brain. They are all interrelated or in other words, they are a system. Of course, this is just a simple example of a much more complex process, but it makes the point.

A congregation can be seen as a system. In my first parish, I became very aware of the grapevine. I didn't know the concept of systems at that time, but I could see that both congregations in my small two-point parish in western Maryland were interrelated both literally and emotionally. Everyone was a part of the "family", the system. If I visited one member of the congregation, everyone would know about it. It was as though

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<sup>1</sup> Peter L. Steinke, How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems (New York: Alban Institute, Inc., 1993), 3.

I had visited everyone. That one visit set the grapevine in motion through the rest of the congregation. This was the operation of a system and was a very positive dynamic. Of course the opposite was also true. If someone became offended by something I did or said, the same grapevine would be set in motion, but this time it would represent a negative dynamic. It soon became clear that I needed to view the parish as a whole rather than as individual “parts”. At the time, I didn’t use the language of a system, but the operation of a system is what I was experiencing.

## **Major Concepts**

### Loops

Systems theory thinks in loops rather than lines.<sup>2</sup> It does not think in a straight line where A causes B, but it maintains that A and B both impact each other. Every cause is an effect and every effect is a cause.<sup>3</sup> Linear thinking works in the physical world where there is a straight-line transfer of force. Hit a ball with a bat and the ball is launched into the field. However, linear thinking breaks down in the world of living things, the world of systems. Hit a person with a bat and the response will be greatly varied. The person may run away, the person may drop to the ground in tears, or the person may attack. Striking another person sets in motion all kinds of forces and possibilities that have the capacity to loop back around.

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<sup>2</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

One can see this dynamic in the parish. In my present congregation, one of the favorite ways of communicating has been the use of e-mail. This works well when the intent is simply to send information. Difficulties arise when people want to give orders for others to follow. An individual hopes that by sending orders to someone through e-mail, the person receiving those orders will respond positively. In other words, the orders will be followed. Of course, communication within a system is not linear and the response is not pre-set. People are amazed when e-mail doesn't work that directly, but the reason is simple. In a living system, the range of responses is much greater. Someone may indeed follow the orders laid out in the e-mail. Someone else may consider the orders and come up with another idea. Still others may be offended by being ordered while others may be confused or hurt. In some cases, e-mails may be returned to the sender. Thinking in terms of loops is a better paradigm in systems theory than thinking in a linear way.

### Patterns

Systems theory understands that when interaction takes place between the various parts, recognizable patterns emerge. A child asks for a cookie. The parent says "no". The child begins to whine. The parent gives into the whining and gives the child a cookie. The child is rewarded for causing a fuss, and the pattern of whining and reward is reinforced and repeated. This learned behavior becomes an established pattern. Systems maintain patterns, which is called homeostasis (literally, "to stay the same").<sup>4</sup> The principle is seen in biological systems. Physiologist Walter B. Cannon was the first to employ the term.<sup>5</sup> He recognized

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<sup>4</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

homeostatic mechanisms for the maintenance of temperature, salt, fluids, and blood sugar. The body regulates these components to prevent being overwhelmed by outside change or to restore the balance after the change happens.<sup>6</sup> Balance is needed for health. These same forces come into place in social systems and so there is the keeping of tradition and following rules.

This is certainly true within the parish. On more than one occasion I have heard the cry, “We’ve always done it that way.” This can serve a good purpose. Relationship systems require stability and so the balancing forces serve a purpose.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty is that these forces can also keep the range of responses narrow and less adaptable. This quality may be good biologically, but not socially. The child who whines and then is rewarded may represent a stable pattern of behavior, but not necessarily a healthy one.

This is also true for congregations. The parish that I presently serve has a long history of never incurring a debt. When I arrived as the pastor, borrowing money was not the way things were done. This approach stretches all the way back to the beginning of the parish. The tradition has served the congregation well, but it has also had the impact of limiting what the congregation might do in the future. A number of years ago, the congregation had to face a very significant issue. We were literally running out of room and had to consider a major building program. If borrowing money could not be an

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<sup>6</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

option, how would the congregation grow? How could the facilities keep up with the increasing demands of ministry? How could we expand our ministry? We hit a roadblock. In this case, homeostasis got in the way. Stable patterns are not always the best patterns.

### Functioning Positions

System theory looks at how the whole is wired together.<sup>8</sup> In every system, each part functions in a particular way in relation to all the other parts. This is called functioning positions.<sup>9</sup> There are three common patterns that are found for individuals within a system. Those patterns are called complementary, contrary, and similar.<sup>10</sup> In a complementary arrangement, the two individuals fit together. One person is the caretaker, and the other one is the care receiver. One person is the leader and the other one wants to be led. In a contrary arrangement, the two individuals are in contention with each other. One person wants to take risks, and the other person does not. In a similar arrangement, the two individuals are in agreement with each other. Both are risk takers or both are cautious. All relationships are arranged in these patterns.

In the parish, one can see these functional positions. People have roles to play in the life of the congregation. For example, there is always a complainer. No matter what idea is proposed, the complainer's function is to moan and groan. The pastor's often thinks that if that one person would leave, the congregation would function so much better. What happens, of course, is that if that person leaves for one reason or another, someone else takes his or her place. In the congregation I am serving, there was a gentleman who always complained about how much money the church was spending, particularly on utilities. On the day of his funeral, I

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<sup>8</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

thought I might have heard my last complaint about fuel costs. Of course, that didn't happen. Another person filled the void and became the complainer. Systems theory understands that this is an ongoing dynamic within every system.

### Emotional Processes

In systems theory, what distinguishes relationship systems from other systems is the concept of emotional processes. All relational systems are emotional fields that operate according to the same principles.<sup>11</sup> Relational systems are driven by and organized by two forces: the need to be separate and the need to be close.<sup>12</sup> There is a clear tension between the two, because each pole represents an extreme in relational systems. When people are too close, there is fusion. Fusion is an intense emotional attachment between two or more selves where there is an extreme emotional reaction between the people involved and where there is an experience of loss or gain of self in the relationship.<sup>13</sup>

This dynamic was true in my first call. In that small two-point parish I served in Maryland, both congregations were in many ways closed and fused communities. What happened to one person in the church seemed to happen to all, so the congregations often reacted emotionally as a whole. For example, the idea that the youth group might have an independent event was a new and unsettling concept. New people in the congregation found it very difficult to break into this closed and fused community. For example, my wife was asked by the one congregation to join their women's group and was given the role of corresponding

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>11</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Bethesda: The Edwin Friedman Estate, 1999), 250.

<sup>12</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 10.

secretary. She gladly accepted both the invitation and office and was ready to serve. There was one problem. She was never informed when or where the meetings were held. This may seem funny, but it also speaks to the issue and potential problems of fusion in a system.

The other end of the spectrum is when there is too much distance between the “parts”. In this case there is an emotional and relational cut-off. Two or more individuals become so separate that they lose contact with each other. Congregations offer examples. In my first parish, a church war had broken out many years ago around the issue of parking. Parking had always been limited. The church sat on a hill surrounded on two sides by a cemetery, on a third side by a narrow road with a steep grade, and on the final side by a field. The owners of the field were members of the congregation. And they wanted to donate a part of the field to the church for parking. However, another family raised some suspicions about this seemingly generous offer. A fight between the two families broke out in the congregation, and words and accusations passed between the two groups. The family that wanted to give the land took back their offer and subsequently built a fence between the properties. The two families remained in the church, but would not talk with each other. The feud lasted for years. The wounds remained and the separation went on. In this case, there was a clear cut-off between the two families. In systemic theory, they were initially too close, but after the fight, they were too far apart.

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<sup>13</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert, Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions (Minneapolis: CNRONIMED, 1992), 183.

## Anxiety

In systems theory, there is tension between the two poles of fusion and distance. The question is how to navigate between the two, how to be both independent and interdependent, and how to stand-alone and still need others. This tension can be a source of great anxiety, and this anxiety is the emotional engine that drives all relational systems. This anxiety seeks balance, seeks homeostasis. It is more of a determining force in relational systems than facts, logic, or good sense.

A good example comes from my present call at Zion. A number of years ago, the decision was made to introduce a second service with the hope that it would attract additional people to the church and would serve as an opportunity to explore other liturgical settings and styles. There was excitement over this idea, but it also created anxiety. The anxiety was connected to the shift in closeness that would take place. The two services would divide the congregation into two separate groups. People would not know each other and, for many, knowing each other was a critical element in being a church. The idea of a second service disrupted the balance, the “homeostasis.” The anxiety that was produced from this concern became the major obstacle in establishing the second service. In fact, it is an issue still to this day.

Anxiety: Acute and Chronic

In systems theory, there are two types of anxiety - acute and chronic. Acute anxiety is crisis generated and is situational and time-based in nature.<sup>14</sup> In the parish, people get anxious around Christmas. There is too much to do and too little time to do it.

People can be overcome by this anxiety. They lose perspective, become more reactive, and can take their anxiety out on others. This kind of anxiety passes with time. January arrives and life returns to normal.

Chronic anxiety is habitual.<sup>15</sup> Social psychologist Carol Tavris has said that in chronic anxiety “the human chime mechanism chimes too often, as if a drunk carillonneur couldn’t keep his hands off the church bells.”<sup>16</sup> The church can be chronically anxious systems. People are under tension all the time and there is a fundamental loss of perspective. Everything tends to be blown out of proportion, and change is very difficult if not impossible. Anyone who introduces change is suspect. In this chronically anxious system, it is the craziness of Christmas every day.

In my first parish, the one congregation was chronically anxious about surviving. Everything was viewed through that lens. For the members of the congregation, thinking about change was very difficult because change implied risk, and risk implied potential loss. In that congregation, no loss was acceptable when survival was on the line. This reaction was evident in how the congregation treated visitors when I began my ministry. Instead of extending a warm greeting to visitors, the congregation gave them a cold shoulder. Why? One would think that being concerned about survival, they would welcome visitors with open arms. However,

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<sup>14</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

chronic anxiety changed the perception. People in the congregation were worried that the visitors might be a call committee from another church who were there to hear the pastor and extend a call. Chronic anxiety shaped and molded the congregation.

#### Anxiety: Ruin or Salvation

In systems theory, it is understood that all relational systems become anxious.<sup>17</sup> By their very nature, relational systems are always unstable to some degree.<sup>18</sup> With any group of people there will be anxiety, and the larger the group, the greater the potential for anxiety. Churches are not immune. The most common trigger that creates anxiety revolves around issue of loss or change.<sup>19</sup> Of course, loss and change upset the stable patterns and homeostatic balance of the system. In this sense, anxiety can be the ruin or salvation of a relationship system.<sup>20</sup> It is a signal that something is happening. A child who always loves school suddenly decides that she hates it. She won't get dressed in the morning. She argues about getting on the bus. There are tears when the bus arrives. The rest of the family becomes anxious because of this change in behavior. This anxiety can serve as an alarm that something is happening that needs tending. Conversations begin. A teacher is called. A principal is informed. The child's family becomes involved. The child's resistance to school is addressed. The underlying issues are discovered and solutions are put in place. Anxiety has motivational power and can provoke change. It can prod and push us toward innovation or transformation. However, it can also work in the opposite direction. When anxiety reaches a certain intensity, it can prevent the very change that

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<sup>16</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

it wants to provoke. What is stimulus becomes restraint. People “lose their head” or “cool”. In other words, they lose their awareness and composure. They become too reactive to be responsive.<sup>21</sup>

Anxiety has been a motivational power for the congregation that I am serving. In recent years, there has been an increase in the anxiety of the church. The issue has been that the church is growing larger. It has become a mid-size or program size congregation, which means that the system has needed to change. How the congregation functions with 200 on a Sunday is quite different from when there was 80. The rise in anxiety served as an alarm. Five years ago, a Ministry Task Force was begun to address the concern. In a very intentional way, we addressed the places where we were experiencing the most anxiety. We made a list and called those anxious places, sticking points. There were seven all together. They included the mission of the church, the role of the pastor, the sense of community, the need for lay leadership, the need of organization and accountability, the role of worship, and the addition of staff. Our points of anxiety could have easily become barriers; however, they became places where we decided to focus our energy and effort. Our sticking points were now seen as opportunities for growth and ministry. The Task Force offered recommendations for each concern raised. Those recommendations were then shared with the council and then the rest of the church. This approach of tackling the sticking points reduced the overall anxiety in the congregation and allowed us to move ahead in a significant way. In this case, anxiety proved to be positive.

Of course, as in all systems, the potential for the energy to go in the opposite direction is always present. The move to weekly communion at Zion serves as a good example. More

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 14.

frequent communion represented a change in the worship life of the congregation, and so there was anxiety. For those who worshipped at 8:30, the anxiety was much less, because at that service, there was no long-standing tradition concerning communion and many of the newer members came from congregations where weekly communion was practiced. For those who worshipped at 11:00, the story was different. There was a long-standing tradition of monthly communion with the more recent addition of festivals. The anxiety at 11:00 was much higher. At the Worship and Music Committee, I outlined the theological arguments that led to weekly communion at 8:30 and shared with the committee that this was the direction of the church in general. I would not force the issue but wanted it to be considered. I felt strongly about weekly communion being offered every Sunday, but in keeping with the church statement on communion practice, it did not have to be at every service.

The committee got very close to deciding that weekly communion would become the practice at 11:00. In fact, a vote was taken and passed to make the move. However, the anxiety and therefore the resistance grew too intense. There were concerns about the committee's decision being rushed and not including everyone. Those concerns had some merit, but the real issue was the emotional reaction to the decision. In the end, the Worship and Music Committee decided to take back the vote and return to the traditional practice. Much later, the committee voted to implement the move to weekly communion at a slower pace. The present practice is for communion to take place the first of the month, all festivals, the two penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, and all through the summer, when there is only one service. Here is an example of anxiety working in the opposite direction. The anxiety of those

who attended 11:00 worship impacted the direction of the congregation and led to a decision to step back.

### Triangles

Systems theory is about triangles, because systems create anxiety and anxiety is emotional pain.<sup>22</sup> There are many times when the object of a relational system is to remove the anxiety (pain) rather than to deal with the concern that prompted the anxiety. The most common way to achieve this is to bind the anxiety through an emotional process called triangling.<sup>23</sup> The anxiety is put on another person, or another person is put in the middle of the anxiety. The idea is simple. Two people (A and B) are fighting over an issue. The anxiety between the two rises and becomes uncomfortable. To relieve the anxiety, one of the people involved, usually the one who feels the most pain (A), draws a third person (C) into the situation rather than confronting the individual (B) with whom he or she has the conflict. He or she (A) pours out their concern, their hurt, and their anxiety. This creates a triangle between A, B, and C. C now carries the emotional weight of the conflict between A and B and often feels the need to fix the situation, to step-in between A and B and reconcile the two of them. Unfortunately, this becomes a thankless job which neither A or B appreciates. C has the illusion of control, but he or she is powerless, for C cannot do the work for A and B. All C can do is carry the anxiety. In other words, C winds up being worried sick or a frustrated rescuer. The solution is for A and B to deal directly with each other and to work towards reconciliation. The individuals in any system who are most likely to be triangulated are those who are in a

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<sup>22</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 47.

responsible or vulnerable position.<sup>24</sup> In families those who are triangled are often the children, and in congregations it is often the pastor.

One of the clear implications of triangles is that they oppose change.<sup>25</sup> Triangles lock in the anxiety in a system without bringing resolution. The buck is passed, and no answer is found. The system becomes captive to its own emotional process unable to adapt or change.<sup>26</sup> The goal becomes escaping from the pain of anxiety rather than learning from it.<sup>27</sup>

Pastors are caught in triangles all the time. I remember a few years ago when two members on the church council were in real conflict with each other. The issue was over a handicap accessible bathroom in the church. One person felt we needed to move quickly to address this concern, and the other felt that the council, and in particular, this other council member was cutting corners in making the bathroom happen. The bathroom issue was the presenting problem of something much deeper. I became triangled between the two. I was contacted by one of the council members and informed that I needed to solve the issue between the two of them, or they would not be able to continue to serve on the council. I tried to reach out to both of them and make peace between them, but was unable to do so. I had lunch with the council member who did not call to discuss the situation. He told me he was not going to change his position, that the conflict might mean that he and his family would leave the church. With some real insight, he told me it would probably hurt me more than it would hurt him. There was truth in his words. I felt as though I had failed. I began to lose sleep over the situation. I didn't want to go to Council meetings. In my frustration, fortunately I called my

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 51.

Bishop. After an extended and helpful conversation, another course of action was taken. The issue was taken out of my hands and brought to the Church Council as a whole. The good news is that I was removed from the triangle, and the council put a process of intervention and discipline in place. The problem was resolved.

What I discovered was that in being triangled, I experienced the pain of both individuals who were in conflict, but could bring no resolution. My role as peacemaker was doomed from the beginning. I could not be the lone conduit of communication between the two of them in a conversation they needed to have with each other. Unfortunately, that conversation never took place, but through the action of the Council the church was able to move through the issue and break the triangle.

### Sabotage

Systems theory is about sabotage. If triangles are the way individuals relieve anxiety within a system, sabotage is another alternative. Change in any system creates resistance or, in the language of systems theory, reactivity. Sabotage is a direct attempt to return the situation to the status quo, to “homeostasis”. While a military analogy might seem too aggressive for some, it serves the purpose. An army has won the battle, not after it has invaded and captured a country but only after it has successfully withstood counterattacks. Lest this sounds too hostile, what needs to be added is that most sabotaging initiatives are mindless.<sup>26</sup> There are some acts, of course, that are intentional and become a serious crisis.<sup>27</sup> Sabotage is a fact of life in all

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<sup>26</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Friedman, A Failure of Nerve, 304.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

systems and is a major concern when it comes to leadership. Anyone who is perceived as initiating change will be the target of sabotage.

A clear example of sabotage can be seen in the move to two services at Zion. As I mentioned, this change set in motion some resistance within the congregation. The real weight of that resistance did not appear until a year later at the Church Council. At our monthly meeting, there was a discussion about providing an opening worship experience for Sunday School. In the middle of that conversation there was a surprising turn. The conversation moved from Sunday School to a discussion about the early service and whether we should continue it. Concerns were raised again about the church being split into separate congregations, that people didn't know everyone anymore, and, a new wrinkle, that leading a second service on Sunday was too much for the pastor. I was surprised by the third concern, because I was the one who initiated the second service and I did not feel it was too much. In fact, I felt very good about the second service. Though surprised, I tried not to react emotionally. I renewed my commitment to the second service and outlined the reasons I continued to see it as a significant addition to our ministry. A lengthy discussion followed. Fortunately, the decision of the Council was to keep the second service, and the attempt at sabotage did not succeed.

#### Self-differentiation

Finally, and in some ways most importantly, systems theory is about self-differentiation. How does one navigate the emotional processes in any given relational system? How does one not get caught in the anxiety of wanting to be both close and separate? How can one allow anxiety to serve as a helpful warning rather than a roadblock? Murray Bowen introduced the

term self-differentiation to talk about this balancing act between the two opposing forces at play in every relational system.<sup>30</sup> It is “being separate together” or “being connected selves.”<sup>31</sup>

Peter Steinke describes self-differentiation this way:

- defining yourself and staying in touch with others
- being responsible for yourself and responsive to others
- maintaining your integrity and well-being without intruding on that of others
- allowing the enhancement of the other’s integrity and well-being without feeling abandoned, inferior, or less of a self
- having an “I” and entering a relationship with another “I” without losing your self or diminishing the self of the other<sup>32</sup>

Others have defined it in similar ways. Edwin Friedman defines differentiation as a direction in life rather than a state of being that leads to:

- The capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system
- Saying “I” when others are demanding “we”
- Containing one’s reactivity to the reactivity of others (which includes the ability to avoid being polarized)
- Maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others
- Knowing where one ends and another begins
- Being able to cease being one of the system’s emotional dominoes
- Being clear about one’s own personal values and goals
- Taking maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming others or the context<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, Family Evaluation (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), pp. 89-111.

<sup>31</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Friedman, A Failure of Nerve, 236.

In systems theory, self-differentiation becomes critical to one's own mental health and is the key to understanding leadership in a systems model. Leadership is about affecting change, and self-differentiation is the way change can happen. A leader sets the direction knowing there will be resistance, and self-differentiation allows him or her to

keep a hand on the wheel and not turn back.

A leader is the agent of change, and in systems theory change is not an enemy. In fact, change is necessary at times for health and vitality. All living systems need to grow and adapt. Systems need change as well as stability.<sup>34</sup> The forces of stability (homeostasis) have already been outlined. These forces are formidable and unfortunately can lead to stagnation and death. This can be seen in the parish. Vital congregations have declined or died, because the surrounding community changes and the congregation is unable to adapt or change. In systems theory, leadership becomes the key to change, and self-differentiation is the primary component of leadership. This kind of leadership will be explored in the next section of this paper.

### **Summary: Putting the pieces together**

I have outlined the key pieces to systems theory, but it is important to see them working as a whole. In other words, we need to see them as a part of a system. Here again, the parish serves as an example. When I entered the ministry, I thought of the church as a collection of individuals and families. What I discovered is that the church is much more than a collection of individual parts. Aside from the theological understanding of the church as being a community that is called, gathered and empowered

by the Holy Spirit, every church is more than the sum total of its participating individuals. Every church has its own way of doing things, its own character, its own personality. What is fascinating is that character or personality continues down through the years even as the people in the life of the congregation change. Every church has its own dynamic, energy, and emotional process. In other words, every church is a system.

One of the two congregations I served in my first call was known as the “church built on spite”. It is not a reputation any church wants, but the truth of the matter is that down through the years that dynamic was a part of the life of the congregation. The cast of characters changed, but the emotional process remained the same. The reputation and the behavior that led to that reputation continued. The system and its characteristics perpetuated themselves.

As a system, every congregation is a community of loops. No decision or action is linear in nature. Every action impacts the rest of the congregation. What is decided at the council meeting is played out in the parking lot, and then in phone conversations, and is still rebounding at worship on Sunday. The loops go round and round and give expression to the idea that whatever happens to one person in the congregation impacts everyone else. This is true whether the event is positive or negative.

Within every congregation, there are roles to be played. Some members are complainers, others are instigators, and still others are peacemakers. The list of roles goes on and on. The system fills the roles. They are not tied to any one individual. If a particular person is unable to continue in a role, someone else will emerge from the group to take that person’s place. The role is more important to the system than any individual.

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<sup>34</sup> Steinke, How Your Church Family Works, 52.

Within every congregation there is an emotional process that guides the system. Two forces drive the process - the need to be close and the need to be separate. If you look at the history of any congregation, there is this movement between the two. Often the close years are remembered as the “golden years.” There is the desire in every congregation to be a “family”, to be “one.” This desire for closeness creates its own set of problems when the congregation is too close and becomes “fused.” At the same time, there is a force to keep people separate. Every church has more than one story of the congregation being at odds or coming apart. Every church remembers the splits and fights that have shaped the life of the congregation. This movement to separate also creates its own set of problems. These are often more apparent than the issues with closeness.

In the midst of this ongoing emotional process, every church, like every other system, seeks stability. Patterns are a way of creating and maintaining stability. Patterns are recognizable, knowable, and comfortable. “It’s the way we’ve always done it.” Every congregation has patterns that manifest themselves in worship, in Christian education, in property issues, even in potluck dinners. The one piece of advice that every pastor is given when entering the parish is to wait a year before introducing anything new. It is important to see how the congregation operates, what the patterns are, before there is any talk about change.

Change does not come easily to any congregation. As a system, the church wants “homeostasis”, stability. Movement in any direction creates anxiety. Churches often speak of a buzz in the congregation when it becomes anxious. Anxiety is the fuel that motivates the church to respond. The response may be to resist the change or it may be to make the change. Resistance is the more usual course of action. The anxiety can be met by the use of triangles. It

is the emotional process of putting somebody else in the middle. Church leaders and certainly pastors are often caught in the middle when a battle takes place within the life of the congregation. The point of the triangle is not to resolve the situation but to find somebody to carry the emotional pain and blame. Beyond triangles, the resistance to change can take the form of a variety of sabotage from passive-aggressive behavior to direct attacks. In the story of every church there are examples of this kind of resistance. Again, it is the system at work trying to “protect” itself. This dynamic is greater than the individuals who may be resisting.

Of course, change is a possible choice for every congregation, but change takes effort and time, and requires effective leadership both lay and pastoral. A self-differentiated leader in the life of the congregation can help be that agent of change. This is a leader who does not get caught up in the emotional process of the congregation. He or she is able to set goals and not be deterred by resistance, sabotage and triangles. He or she stays connected to the congregation, but is not determined by the community. By remaining engaged, not too close (emotionally reactive) but not too far (detached), he or she helps to lower the anxiety for the rest of the church and allow for the greater possibility of change.

With these broad strokes of systems theory in place, I would like to move to the specifics of leadership as understood in systems theory. As mentioned, the key is self-differentiation. The next chapter will explore what is meant by that term and in particular, what it means in the life of a parish pastor.

## Chapter 3

### LEADERSHIP THROUGH SELF-DIFFERENTIATION

Systems leadership focuses on self-differentiation. Self-differentiation means that a leader takes primary responsibility for his or her position as “head” and works to define his or her goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the group.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the leader’s job is not to make or force people to follow, but to set out in a clear direction and invite other people to join. This avoids a polarity between leader and follower. The response of others in the system to follow or not to follow is their responsibility. Their decision needs to be a response to challenge rather than to threat. In the end, a systems leader facilitates lasting change by focusing on modifying his or her own behavior rather than the behavior of others. One of the additional benefits of such an approach is that it promotes self-differentiation in others. A systems leader who knows this is better able to resist the temptation to force or will others to follow his or her ideas and goals.<sup>36</sup> Systems leadership requires a paradigm shift away from taking responsibility for how others function (over which there is little or no control) to taking responsibility for one’s own functioning (over which there can be control).

The addition of the Family Worship at Zion serves as a useful example. It was one of those times that I felt good about the process of change in our congregation and the leadership I provided as pastor. Working with the Worship and Music Committee, I wanted to expand our worship on Sunday. We had two services on Sunday morning at 8:30 and 11:00. I noticed

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<sup>35</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 229.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Matthews, “Leadership: Hope for Family and Church” (paper presented at the J. C. Wynn Lecture at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York, November 5, 1998): available at [http://www.leadershipministry.com/j\\_c\\_wynn\\_lecture.htm](http://www.leadershipministry.com/j_c_wynn_lecture.htm); Internet.

that a good number of people were attending Sunday School with their children, but were not attending worship at the church. Many of their children had never experienced the liturgy. It was my desire to address this group by providing a liturgy designed for children and their families. The service would take place once a month right before Sunday School. A sung-and-response liturgy was composed. Explanations were provided for the various parts of the service. Hymns were selected not only for the liturgical season but also with children in mind. The sermon was directed to a younger congregation.

Family Worship was introduced two years ago as both a worship opportunity and a teaching moment. Looking at the process of change, I clearly had a goal in mind. I shared my vision starting with the Worship and Music Committee. I would then share it with Christian Education, the Church Council, and the congregation at large. I tied it to our mission statement, “Making Disciples and Growing in Faith”. I invited people’s participation but left the decision up to them. We would begin offering the service and see who would join us. Starting with that first Sunday, I reported back to the council and the congregation what was happening at Family Worship. I wanted people to know about the service even if they chose not to participate. I was committed to holding Family Worship for one full year before an evaluation would take place. The evaluation would be in terms of the initial goals and not filtered through the emotional resistance to change. The result has been that Family Worship has taken off and has become a vital part of the worship life and ministry of our congregation.

In systems theory, the emphasis is upon the functional position of the leader within the system rather than his or her personality.<sup>37</sup> This is another paradigm shift. Personality is often seen as a key characteristic of a leader. Dr. Friedman, in his book Generation to Generation, calls this the charismatic approach to leadership, which he defines as trying to make the most out of an indefinable, magnetic personality.<sup>38</sup> He argues that the charismatic style of leadership has strengths. In the parish, it can unify congregations, create enthusiasm, galvanize congregations for action, lift emotional systems out of the doldrums, and in a short period of time produce an efficient organization.<sup>39</sup> While many good things can happen, there is also a downside. A charismatic approach can also polarize, because the personality of the leader tends to personalize the issues.<sup>40</sup> There is the problem of succession and the issue of creating clones rather than individuals among the followers.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the leader is perpetually forced to over-function, constantly balance all the triangles, and, in the long run, paradoxically finds that his or her functioning becomes dependent on having a church to lead.<sup>42</sup> A systems leader avoids these pitfalls. Issues are less personalized. Succession is not an issue because the position is the decisive factor, not the person. There is less cloning and more self-differentiation. Over-functioning becomes less of a problem since the leader is no longer responsible for the functioning of the entire system. The leader's task is to function as leader in ways that benefit the whole system. The willingness of

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<sup>37</sup> Friedman, Generation to Generation, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 226

others to join in that task is left to them.

I will use myself as an example of the point, but in this case it is a negative one. In my first call, I believed in the charismatic approach that Dr. Friedman mentions. Both congregations I was serving had critical issues they were facing. My plan was to take this deeply troubled and divided two-point parish on my shoulders, and through my own energy, effort, and enthusiasm I was going to carry them to the “Promised Land.” The parish united behind me and moved from survival to growth. There was a renewed sense of hope. All of this was good and exciting. However, the price was costly. Issues became personal. People began to believe and enforce the idea that any vote against a new idea was a vote against Pastor Summer. My style also handicapped any pastor who followed me. So far there have been two, and both have paid the price for not being “Pastor Summer”. A number of Pastor Summer groupies were formed during those years. People who would do anything I asked. However, what I really wanted was for them to take initiative on their own. On a personal level, I did over-function. I tried to take care of all the emotional needs within the parish. I became emotionally entangled with the highs and lows in the church. My sense of wellbeing was tied to those highs and lows. I paid a personal price for my style of leadership and so did my family. A move away from a charismatic approach to one of functional positioning has been of great help. I have a role to play that is important to the life of the congregation, but it is not the only role. The functioning of the church does not rest on my shoulders.

Self-differentiation is not to be confused with selfish individuality or independence.<sup>43</sup> As Murray

Bowen stated:

A major quality in the differentiation of self is complete selflessness in which “doing for others” replaces personal selfish goals. Jesus Christ has been a model of the total selflessness. . . . A well-differentiated self in families has to get beyond the selfish promotion of self. One has always to be aware of “the other”. . . . When selflessness becomes a thinking model, largely separate from the feeling process, it can become a vehicle for a special form of differentiation. With that orientation, true selflessness, devoid of selfishness, can become part of the differentiation itself.<sup>44</sup>

The more differentiated the self, the more natural the concern for others becomes. The focus is not to take responsibility for others (excluding those who are incapable like young children) but to become responsible to others.

In leadership through self-differentiation, there are three interlocking components. First, the leader must stay in touch.<sup>45</sup> This is the most important component. Movement and change happen when a leader stays connected with the group. A leader needs to be out front, but not too far. There needs to be a relational connection. Pastors understand this relational connection. In fact, for many pastors, it is the relational connections that provide the most personal satisfaction in doing ministry. Most pastors enjoy the image of being the shepherd of the flock, the person who cares for the members of the congregation.

Staying in touch is more difficult than it would appear to be. The temptation for a leader is to play it safe and never take a position, which allows the leader to stay connected with the

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<sup>43</sup> Friedman, Generation to Generation, 229.

<sup>44</sup> Murray Bowen, “Systems and Spirituality: Bowen Systems Theory, Faith and Theology” (paper presented at the Conference of Theology, Washington Theological Union, July 1987) quoted in Lawrence Matthews “Leadership: Hope for Family and Church” (paper presented at the J.C. Wynn Lecture at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York); available at [http://www.leadershipministry.com/j\\_c\\_wynn\\_lecture.htm](http://www.leadershipministry.com/j_c_wynn_lecture.htm); Internet.

<sup>45</sup> Friedman, Generation to Generation, 229.

group but never lead. Here the shepherd never has the flock leave a familiar pasture. The other temptation is for the leader to take a position and lead but to disconnect from the group because of resistance and sabotage. In this case, the leader is willing to lead, but does so angrily and all alone when the troops have second thoughts. Here the shepherd leaves the familiar pasture, but resents the sheep.

The second component is the capacity and willingness of the leader to take non-reactive, clearly conceived, and clearly defined positions.<sup>46</sup> The leader is not trying to define the followers.<sup>47</sup> The leader is not attempting to force his or her opinion. The issue or conflict does not become a test of wills, and there is no desire to overthrow the resistance. People will follow because of their need and desire for someone to lead and move forward. The better self-defined followers will respond to this style of leadership by taking their own non-reactive position, which may or may not agree with the leader. The more dependent followers will initially react and try to re-triangle the leader.<sup>48</sup> They will be the source of sabotage.

This willingness to take a stand and to hold on to it without being drawn into a battle is essential in parish ministry. The move to the second service at Zion illustrates the point. When the voices of opposition arose against the second service saying that the church was becoming divided and that we were losing our identity, it was tempting to give in to the concerns and return to one service. It was also tempting to fight back and become very reactive and make the whole issue a battle of wills. Neither alternative

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 230.

would serve the church. In the end, the clearer my position and the more willing I was to hold that position, the more effective I was as the leader. I did not waffle. I believed that the second service was an important step for us to take as a congregation. I also did not get into a battle with those who resisted the change. I was not going to give up on the proposal but neither did I cut myself off from those who opposed the move. Instead I invited ongoing conversation. I understood their concerns, but I did not share their fears. I was at peace with our decision to move to the second service and tried to encourage everyone to join in this new adventure. I believe that my not being reactive was helpful to the congregation, even to those who were resisting. Now, the second service is a part of our identity as a congregation, and it would be difficult to imagine returning to a single service.

The third component of leadership through self-differentiation is the capacity to deal with sabotage.<sup>49</sup> When there is resistance, the temptation is to return to the original state or homeostasis, which means that the leader gives up on his or her goal and purpose. Consequently, there is no movement, no change. Everything remains the same. Or the leader can maintain his or her position by becoming rigid and dogmatic. He or she cuts himself or herself off from the group. In this case, again there is no movement, no change, and the leader gets lost in the sabotage and resistance, like the captain of the ship during a mutiny. In dealing with sabotage, it is crucial for the leader to distinguish between process and content. To help keep this perspective, the leader must have the

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<sup>49</sup> Friedman, Generation to Generation, 230.

ability to be playful, not becoming too serious or too anxious.<sup>50</sup> This kind of leadership is not easy. As Dr. Friedman noted, “Many leaders have the capacity to stay in touch, fewer have the capacity to differentiate their selves, fewest have the capacity to remain connected while remaining self-differentiated.”<sup>51</sup> Dr. Friedman calls this unique capacity, a “non-anxious presence”.<sup>52</sup> The effect can be explained this way.

To the extent that leaders and consultants can maintain a non-anxious presence in a highly energized anxiety field, they can have the same effects on that field that transformers have in an electrical circuit. Transformers have no moving parts. They reduce the potential in a field by the nature of their own presence and being and the field they, in effect, create. This is not a matter of “breaking a circuit”; it requires staying in touch without getting “zapped.” Anyone can remain non-anxious if they also try to be non-present. The trick is to be both non-anxious and present simultaneously.<sup>53</sup>

One of the keys to staying non-anxious is the ability to be paradoxical and playful.

The capacity of clergy to be paradoxical, challenging (rather than saving), earthy, sometimes crazy, and even “devilish,” often can do more to loosen knots in a congregational system than the most well meaning “serious” efforts. Again, this is not because being paradoxical affects the content in the heads of others (reverse psychology), but because the act of being playful frees others by forcing them out of their serious “games.”<sup>54</sup>

This dynamic can be seen in my call to Zion. The Call Committee made it very clear that they wanted a strong leader. They said they wanted someone who had a vision and sense of direction. They wanted someone who was not afraid to take a position. In the call process, I was questioned about my understanding of stewardship, worship, evangelism, and education. In particular, they wanted to know the direction I would be leading the congregation in these various areas. I told them that I was more than willing to lead and had some initial ideas, but the

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<sup>50</sup> Friedman, Generation to Generation, 230.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>53</sup> Friedman, Failure of Nerve, 117.

vision and direction would need to wait until we had a chance to work together. They assured me that they were a congregation waiting and wanting to follow. I had been in parish ministry long enough to realize that their assurances would only go so far. With leadership there is always resistance. It's one thing to say you want a leader and it's another thing to follow. Most of the time people will follow only if you were going in the direction they wanted to go in the first place. I still remember that first council meeting following my acceptance of the call. I sat at the conference table with the rest of the council and was ready to begin my life as the pastor of Zion. The president began the meeting and I was asked to offer the opening prayer. Those were my last words until much later in the meeting. I was literally raising my hand to try and get into the discussion. For all their talk about wanting a leader, I couldn't even get on the floor. Rather than get angry or upset, I began to chuckle. It was actually pretty funny, and I shared the joke with the rest of the council once I was recognized. The whole council laughed. Everyone enjoyed the irony and they were more than willing to listen to the points I wanted to make.

That council meeting has become a metaphor for me about leadership in the parish. The congregation and council both said they wanted a leader, but resistance would be a fact of life. I was not going to simply walk in and take over either the council or the church and have everyone blindly follow me. In truth, I would not want that kind of authority. I could not and would not demand that they pay attention to me. In this situation, there was nothing personal about my exclusion from the conversation. They were functioning as they had always functioned and my being there didn't automatically change that dynamic. I could have become upset, but if

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<sup>54</sup> Friedman, Generation to Generation, 209.

I made it a personal issue or affront, I would have missed the point. It was simply funny, and humor, the use of paradox, became a much better way of talking about what was happening that night. In fact, humor allowed us to become at first less serious and then really serious. It also helped to establish my approach to leadership. The story of my first night at council and my trying to get into the discussion has become a favorite at Zion and has been repeated again and again. In fact, the story has become a part of my opening speech for every new council.

What then are the qualities of a self-differentiated or systems leadership? Here I will borrow from Dr. Peter Steinke as he summarizes the range between undifferentiation and differentiation.

### **Undifferentiation**

**Opts for Certainty:** Uses black/white thinking (psychologist Alfred Adler refers to either/or thinking as a form of arrested development, the way children think); wants quick fix; pushes for resolution to ease own discomfort with emotional pain, ambiguity, or cognitive dissonance.

**Avoids Self:** Resists insight; lacks awareness of self; behaves more reactively and mindlessly; has fewer responses available to handle life.

**Looks Outside Self:** Takes little responsibility for self and blames others; sees only what is exterior (anxiety forces one to observe threat, condition, what is outside of self); has little sense of connectedness and the mutual influence of behavior.

**Force Others to Adapt:** Functions willfully (one way or no way); pushes and pulls on almost anything; wants others to change; coerces or manipulates.

### **Differentiation**

**Takes a Stand:** Works on self-definition; functions on basis of values, principles, and beliefs; knows what one believes, stays the course, and commits to the process.

**Focuses on Self:** Increases self-awareness; looks at own “stuckness”; modifies own exaggeration of instinctual forces (anxiety); attends to own behavior; makes changes in self.

**Stays Connected to Others:** Sees life organically (“members of one another”); tolerates differences; encourages dialogue.

**Sets Clear Goals:** Defines self from within, not over against others; knows where one is going; maintains larger view; lives with a purpose in mind; seeks clarity.

**Accepts Challenge:** Moves forward; stretches; knows that “pain” arises when one leads; stays focused on conviction and direction.<sup>55</sup>

Here we see the keys to systems leadership. My most effective ministry has taken place when I have been willing to take a stand, to tend to my own emotional life, to stay connected with the congregation, to set clear goals and to be willing to take risks and accept challenges. This was true in my first parish as we moved from survival to growth, and in my present parish as we have move from a pastoral to program congregation. The keys remain the same.

With those keys in mind, I want to shift gears and turn to a style of leadership that is found in the biblical witness. In particular, I want to turn to the understanding of leadership that is found in Luke 22. Here, on the lips of Jesus as reported by Luke, we discover Jesus' view of leadership. We discover a servant leader. In the next chapter, I set forth the necessary background material to understand this type of leadership.

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<sup>55</sup> Peter L. Steinke, Healthy Congregations: A System Approach (New York: Alban Institute, Inc., 1996), 98.

## CHAPTER 4

### JESUS: SERVANT LEADERSHIP

There are few places in the New Testament where Jesus talks about leadership. The best example, and the one that will be the center of our attention, is the twenty-second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 24-30.

A dispute also rose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he (Jesus) said to them. “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”<sup>56</sup>

In this passage, Luke places on the lips of Jesus not only a critic of authority, but also a description of what it means to be a leader. He points to the idea of servant leadership as a model for all leaders within the life of the church, including the pastor. Jesus’ teaching is a guide on how to understand and exercise authority (leadership) in the church.<sup>57</sup>

To understand fully this passage, it is important to understand the world in which it was written. Luke and his readers, despite their extensive exposure to Judaism, lived and breathed in a world keenly aware of the powerful and pervasive influence of Rome.<sup>58</sup> It is against this background that Luke 22:24-30 needs to be examined. I will borrow from the work of Peter Nelson in his dissertation Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 to describe the Greco-Roman world.

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<sup>56</sup> Lk 22: 24-30 NRSV

Peter Nelson makes a number of significant points. First, Luke wrote in the time of the Roman Empire, which was strictly ordered, structured and hierarchical. Overseeing the empire was the emperor. Unlike modern day royalty, the Roman emperor was no figurehead king. He exercised tremendous power and was truly answerable to no one. Some emperors tolerated the practice of being called God; others actually promoted the idea. This only served to extend the power of the emperor.<sup>59</sup> Underneath the emperor, there were provincial governors who were relatively independent figures with extensive power.<sup>60</sup> The imperium, which included the emperor and provincial governors, exercised virtually absolute rule in the time of Luke.<sup>61</sup> The long arm of Rome was felt everywhere. Its reach into the provinces was both firm and effective.<sup>62</sup> For the average citizen, Roman rule was real and not some distant or intangible reality.<sup>63</sup>

Second, if the emperor, governors, and local officials represented the official pattern of authority and subordination, it established the “unofficial” pattern that was found throughout the empire and dominated the social interaction. This pattern was one of patronage and clientism. An unwritten social “law” for virtually all relationships prescribed patronage and clientism, whether one was a senator or slave, landlord or peasant. Relations with non-family members were heavily influenced by each party’s relative status as patron or client.<sup>64</sup> This pattern

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<sup>57</sup> Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 46.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Nelson, 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians (London: SPCK, 1986), 34 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 29.

becomes critically important in understanding Jesus' words on leadership in the passage from Luke.

John Elliott describes the patron-client relationship in this way. "It is a personal relation of some duration entered into voluntarily by two or more persons of unequal status based on differences in social roles and access to power, and involves the reciprocal exchange of different kinds of 'goods and services' of value to each partner."<sup>65</sup> A patron-client relationship was characterized by personal honor and obligation: the patron was obliged to protect or provide for his dependent client, and the client was obliged to offer service to and enhance the reputation of the patron.<sup>66</sup> Although the system was built on the presupposition of human inequality, within that framework all parties generally benefited in some sense.<sup>67</sup> In the political arena, there are clear examples of this pattern. In the Roman Empire, there were puppet kings who served as clients to the Roman "Patron-empire". The Herodian kings as clients were permitted to retain substantial powers in exchange for repeated expressions of loyalty to and support of Rome, their patron.<sup>68</sup>

Third, as mentioned earlier, this pattern of patronage and clientism extended beyond the political arena. It impacted every social relationship including the family. In many ways, the ancient household did not resemble the modern Western nuclear family.<sup>69</sup> The household was larger by nature and typically included husband and wife, unmarried children, slaves, freedmen

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<sup>65</sup> John H. Elliott, Patronage and Clientism in Early Christian Society: A Short Reading Guide (Forum 3, 1987), 42 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Veyne, Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism, trans. Brian Pearce (London: Penguin, 1990), 5 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar Press, 1994), 31.

and foster children.<sup>70</sup> The oldest living male was recognized formally as head of the household and called the paterfamilias.<sup>71</sup> He functioned as the emperor of the family with a power that was almost unlimited.<sup>72</sup> This was true in many Christian homes. As the ruler of the house, the Christian paterfamilias served many roles. He was the family teacher, the manager of the household, the representative of the family in the village assembly of elders and, in the Israelite setting, the family priest.<sup>73</sup> The father clearly was the dominant figure who sat on top of the household's hierarchical structure.<sup>74</sup> The transfer of authority came only when death was imminent and served only to continue the pattern.<sup>75</sup> Authority would pass again to the oldest male.

Fourth, in looking at this patten of patronage and clientism, it is important to look at the role of children in the family, particularly since the term “youngest” is found in the Lukan passage, verse 26. In the ancient Near East, children did not hold the position they have in contemporary families. Children were usually held in low regard and provided free labor, care in old age, and the continuation of the family.<sup>76</sup> It was the oldest members of the family who

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<sup>68</sup> Nelson, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>71</sup> Victor H. Matthews, Manners and Customs in the Bible (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 67-68 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>72</sup> Matthews, 68-69.

<sup>73</sup> Nelson, 37.

<sup>74</sup> Matthews, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>76</sup> Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 41 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 37.

were shown the greatest respect.<sup>77</sup> Not only were children of less value, but in a real sense, they were thought of as less than truly human.<sup>78</sup> The status of children as weak, small and dependent creatures was important in the radical shift in social position that takes place in the passage from Luke.<sup>79</sup> This will be explored in more detail shortly.

Finally, we need to consider the role of servant and slave. In Luke, the terms seem interchangeable,<sup>80</sup> but in Jewish law and practice, a slave was considered property<sup>81</sup> while a servant was someone who was employed. A master's authority over a slave would be greater than an employer's authority over a servant.<sup>82</sup> However, it would not be appropriate in Luke to make a sharp distinction and in Luke 22:24-30, it is the role of the slave that is the most informative.<sup>83</sup> Slaves were viewed in a similar manner to children. They were perceived as being inferior to free adults, and therefore outside the fully human community of citizens.<sup>84</sup> The view of slaves accentuates the gulf between the positions contrasted in Luke 22:25-27, and highlights the radical nature of the call to "become like a servant".<sup>85</sup> Becoming like a servant or slave was a common occurrence in the time of Jesus. Defaulting on a debt was one of the ways people became enslaved.<sup>86</sup> Poverty also drove people into slavery. Being a slave could provide a person with food and shelter, even if the cost was the bondage of children who were

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<sup>77</sup> W. L. Liefeld, Luke (Expositor's Bible Commentary) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 1028 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 38.

<sup>78</sup> Nelson, 39.

<sup>79</sup> Nelson., 39.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Wiedemann, Slavery (Greek and Rome: New Surveys in the Classics 19) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 25 quoted in Peter K. Nelson, Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24-30 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 43.

born into slavery and the loss of their rights.<sup>87</sup> Captives of war were routinely forced into slavery.<sup>88</sup> Thus the command in Luke 22:26 to “become like a servant” was not an abstract idea to the readers of Luke. It was very real to many unfortunate people.<sup>89</sup>

The nature of authority in the time of Luke becomes critical to understanding Jesus’ proposed view of leadership. The world of Luke did not operate with the modern notion of human equality. Society did not view all people as having inherent worth and the right to personal liberties. On the contrary, the world of Luke had pervasive networks of power, both official and unofficial, that kept everyone, man, woman and child, in his or her place.<sup>90</sup> Life was ordered and hierarchical. Those in positions of authority and leadership provided for those below. They were the benefactors who took care of the needs of those under their rule. Those below would offer obedience and loyalty in order to receive rewards from those in positions of authority. Jesus’ words radically changed that ordered world and envisioned a new understanding of authority and leadership. Jesus turned the world upside down. The first would be last and the last would be first. Authority would be a function of serving rather than of power and control. This reversal is a key element in Jesus’ proclamation and is a major motif to be found throughout the Gospel of Luke.

The patronage system with its relationships of debt and mutual obligation is contrasted with the reversal of values that mark Luke’s Gospel. Jesus’ own serving of the meal is an

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<sup>85</sup> Nelson, 43.

<sup>86</sup> De Vaux, 83.

<sup>87</sup> Weidemann, 26.

<sup>88</sup> De Vaux, 80-1.

<sup>89</sup> Nelson, 43.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

example of servant leadership in the community.<sup>91</sup> The disciples want to be great, and Jesus tells them they must serve. The passage also introduces a double reversal when Jesus assures the disciples that if they continue in his trials, they will be exalted.<sup>92</sup> What is involved is a radical transformation of the traditional way of thinking. Greatness and servanthood are seen in a new light. It is in no way the high and mighty that lead, but the lowly and powerless.<sup>93</sup> This kind of reversal is found elsewhere in Luke. In Luke 9:46-48, Jesus' disciples argue about which of them is the greatest, but Jesus associates himself with a child and commends the reception of such a lowly one, for it is "the least of them" who is truly great.<sup>94</sup> In Luke 12:33, Jesus tells his disciples to sell their possessions and give alms. By doing so, they will gain treasure in heaven that does not fail or waste away.<sup>95</sup> In Luke 12:35-37, there are servants who quickly welcome their master home and then are served by the master. Luke 14:7-14, speaks about a banquet where a person is encouraged to take the "lowest" place so that the host may invite him or her to a higher place of honor.<sup>96</sup> "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Verse 11). In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus admonishes the host to show hospitality to the destitute, even though a poor person would not be able to repay any kindness given.<sup>97</sup> The Lukan parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) also lifts up this reversal. It is the confession and honesty of the tax collector that is exalted by

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<sup>91</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, Luke (Westminster Bible Companion) (Louisville, KY: John Know Press, 1995), 263.

<sup>92</sup> Nelson, 75.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 90.

God.<sup>98</sup> There are many others examples in Luke including the Magnificat (Luke 1:52-53), the Beatitudes and Woes (Luke 6:20-26), and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) which all voice this reversal. Recognizing these patterns of reversal in Luke helps us to appreciate the pattern in Luke 22:24-30 and to sense its importance.

Jesus described his life as one of service, and he aligned himself with children and servants, yet he remained the leader of the apostles. Just as Jesus was a servant who led, he called the apostles, who were “great” and “leaders”, to lead as servants.<sup>99</sup> Servant leadership involves adopting an extraordinary, counter-cultural form that should not be confused with the ambitions of any political revolution.<sup>100</sup> When Jesus challenged the political authorities of his time, he did not challenge their right to rule. Jesus held them up as a negative example of exercising authority. In the community of his followers, it would not be so.<sup>101</sup> Jesus urged the apostles to follow his example and lead “from below” as servants committed to the welfare of those they led.

Using the insights of Peter Nelson, I want to push the model of servant leadership farther. As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, this extended model is a reflection of my own thinking. It is a model that has, in many ways, shaped my understanding of parish ministry. In the next chapter, I will outline this model of servant leadership and apply it to the parish.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>99</sup> Nelson, 256.

## Chapter 5

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP

So what is servant leadership? What is this paradoxical approach to authority that Jesus proclaimed? How does one lead “from below”? Reflecting on the direction found in Luke, I would like to explore seven aspects of what I see as servant leadership. To be clear, these are my observations and descriptions. I believe the first four are tied closely to the text and represent a traditional interpretation of the material. I have defined the first four as benefits, authority, vision, and paradox

#### Benefits

A servant leader does not seek personal benefits, for the very nature of a servant is directed to others. A servant leader has no personal agenda and can stay on task, and not be undone when the going becomes difficult and the rewards are few. This is counter to our usual tendency, because we tend to back away or to insist on some kind of appreciation when the going gets tough. A servant leader is not bound to a benefit package in order to lead.

As pastors, we may think that not seeking personal benefits should come easy. After all, we do not go into the ministry for money or power. However, this kind of thinking misses a crucial point. Payoffs come in all kinds of forms, and for most pastors, the payoff is the emotional response from the congregation. It is the accolades from the crowd, the sense that we are appreciated or even loved that is the reward we seek or want. I myself relished the positive emotional feedback that I received after preaching, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 256.

visits. I was attentive to how parishioners were reacting to the direction I was giving. I found it difficult to go where the congregation did not want to go, to deal with the resistance and sabotage.

As a young pastor, I remember leading the charge to build a basketball court in the parking lot next to the church. I did not realize the resistance this project would encounter. The parishioners were concerned that we would attract the “wrong” kind of young people. And who would provide the supervision, and who would pay for the property damage the first time the basketball went through a window? This episode was the first negative reaction to my leadership, and I was taken aback. Here I thought the basketball court would be a welcomed step to increase the visibility of the church and make a positive impact in the community. Instead, I found it difficult to proceed when people weren’t applauding me for my efforts. I am happy to report that in the end, the basketball court was built and the concerns raised about it were addressed, but the whole encounter was an important first lesson in being a servant leader.

### **Authority**

A servant leader does not “lord it over others”. Authority is not a matter of power and control. This change in the style of leadership means that people do not follow because they have to follow but because they want to follow. To “lord it over others” leads to oppression, and oppression creates the illusion of control where the leader is not really leading but is pushing from behind. People who are pushed come to resent the pushing, and then fear becomes the last remaining tool to try to keep people in line. This dynamic has been seen again and again on the world stage. Dictators lead only by power and control, and fear is the instrument that keeps them in power until a revolution takes place. In distinction, a servant leader does not force but

asks. A servant leader does not push another to act but invites. A servant leader does not seek control but simply leads.

Pastors should not play power games, but we are not immune. A pastor of my acquaintance would invoke prayer every time a decision was not going his way at a council meeting. In the midst of the discussion, he would declare, "Let us take time to pray". During the prayer, he would outline his argument, sight the weakness of the other position, and ask for God's direction and blessing. The vote would often go his direction after this power play, but he would lose in the long run. Those on the council who had been outvoted resented what they saw as a heavy-handed tactic by the pastor. Their angry resistance came later in the form of sabotage. They would not support or aid the program that had been voted into place. The pastor's experience shows that leadership is more than forcing the vote. Servant leadership proposes a different sense of authority. No one is forced to follow or obey. A servant leader sets out with a clear vision and extends an invitation.

### **Vision: Serving**

A servant leader has a particular vision, and that vision is to serve. Political leaders are judged by whether they have a clear vision. Comedians make fun of politicians who have difficulty with the "vision thing". For the servant leader, the vision is clear and has to do with serving others as outlined in the Gospel. This clarity of purpose acts as both a guide and support. Servant leaders, with a clear vision of serving, are more likely to stay on task. They know where they are going and will not be sabotaged by setbacks or the resistance of others. Their ability to stay on course becomes self-supporting, encouraging both the leader and those who follow.

At Zion, we had the opportunity to become a partner in the Interfaith Hospitality Network. This program is designed to help families and individuals who find themselves homeless and who are in need of assistance. A network of congregations provides temporary housing, food, and other support. A central day facility makes arrangements for the children to go to school and adults to work with social workers. The network serves as a bridge.

I brought the idea of participating in the Interfaith Hospitality Network to the Social Ministry Committee. It seemed to me that this was a concrete way by which we could serve the community and give expression to the gospel. I asked the committee to become a part of the network, opening both our doors and hearts. It was a way of serving. The Social Ministry Committee shared the vision and championed the cause before the council first and then the congregation. With great excitement, the congregation said yes and has been involved in this ministry as a host congregation for the past ten years. When we built our new Christian Education Center, we built it with Interfaith Hospitality in mind. We included a hospitality room, showers, and a washer and dryer. Zion's clear vision of serving others helped the congregation to become involved in the community with very little resistance at all.

### **Paradox**

Finally, servant leaders live a life of paradox. This ongoing theme of Luke is implicit in servant leadership. They lead by serving and invite others into this paradoxical world. They challenge the world's perception of what is great, what is important, and what is authority. The Roman world is not the only one that finds a servant leader a radical way of thinking. Our own world is challenged by this kind of leadership, e.g., in our present political realm where

leadership is built on power, position, and control. The world looks very different through the lens of servant leadership.

Every congregation experiences the paradox of servant leadership. Who are the true leaders in the life of the church? So often, they are not the people with titles and authority. Every congregation can name people whose lives of service make them the true leaders within the life of the congregation. They are the people who often shun the spotlight and accolades. They are simply people involved in the business of serving, and they often have a strong sense of being called to do so. A couple in my present congregation serves as a clear example. They would not want to be mentioned by name. They would not want attention focused on them. But they live lives of service, whether it is with the homeless in the community or with the people of Oasis Village in Mpongwe, Zambia or with those in our own congregation who need help. Whenever there is work to be done, they are there. They give of their time, talent and treasure. And when they ask for help, the common refrain is, “How can you say no to them. They do so much for others.” By their example, they draw people into serving others. They are recognized as the true leaders in our congregation though they carry no title and ask for no favor. They are examples of this paradoxical servant leadership.

### **Three Non-Traditional Aspects**

The final three aspects of servant leadership push the texts beyond traditional interpretation, but I believe they are appropriate. In my understanding, a key to the text is the person speaking. Jesus is addressing his disciples. The principles outlined on leadership are more than suggestions. There is an implicit sense of call. Jesus’ disciples were called to be servant leaders. I would also argue that with the sense of call, there is a sense of accountability

to the one who is calling. Both of these elements – call and accountability – are involved in servant leadership. Finally, I would argue that servant leaders lead by example. Jesus, who calls his disciples to servant leadership, is also the one who serves. Jesus enfleshes the principles he lifts up.

### Called

According to scripture, a servant leader is one who is called by God. Jesus' disciples were called to serve and it gave them a sense of purpose and direction. Servant leaders have a clear understanding of themselves and what they are to do. Their understanding is not defined by others but by God. A servant leader in Luke is set apart for a reason.

I gained a clear appreciation of that fact when I was ordained in my home congregation, Hope Lutheran Church, College Park, Maryland. This was the congregation where my grandparents worshipped and where I grew up as a boy. I had served as an acolyte in the congregation, I sang in the children's choir, and I had led the youth group. I remember the entire service and can still recall the sermon. However, the most meaningful moment is when I knelt and those gathered placed their hands on my head. I had a profound sense of being called by God, a sense that I was set apart for a purpose. The clarity of that moment has stayed with me throughout my ministry, and I realize how often I return to that moment in my day-to-day struggles and challenges. My sense of being called helps to anchor my role as pastor, and I find that I am more effective as a leader when I am guided by a sense of purpose. As a servant leader, I am both encouraged and humbled by the sense of call.

### Accountability

In the Gospels, a servant leader answers to God. This is implicit in Jesus' discussion about leadership both for himself and for his disciples. A servant leader is accountable, driven not by his or her desires or by the demands of the crowd but by a larger purpose or higher power.

At the present time, Zion is in the midst of establishing a vision for the next five years. The central question has been "What would God have us do?" The sense of accountability comes out of the fact that Zion is nearly 300 years old and that its history is an unfolding of God's work in the congregation. As the pastor, I take seriously this idea of accountability. As a servant leader, I continue to share that sense of accountability with the rest of the leaders on council and with the congregation in general. During these past months, as we attempt to discern God's purpose for us as a congregation, it has been gratifying to hear people talk about being accountable to God in a way that is both affirming and empowering.

When Zion began serving as a host congregation in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, there were strong objections within the larger community. Neighbors were concerned that we would be housing homeless people. They were concerned about the risks involved and about the safety of others in the neighborhood. The congregation did not sway, but remained steadfast in its support of the network and the idea of ministry. In the end, the congregation felt accountable to God and not to the fears of the community. At that point, Zion was living out servant leadership.

Lead by Example

A servant leader leads by example. I would argue that this is clear in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus calls his disciples to be servant leaders as he serves the meal. A servant leader does not exercise authority from a distance. Instead he or she leads by working along side those who follow. A servant leader does not see himself or herself as above the action or apart from it.

In my first parish, I soon discovered the importance of leading by example. When I arrived, one of the major issues in the church was whether I would mow my own lawn at the parsonage. My predecessor had argued that his time was better spent in ministry than in mowing the lawn. He had a point, but in a rural/blue collar congregation, his position didn't play well. The members had the distinct impression that he thought that he was too good to do manual work like they did. The congregation felt a disconnection, and it impacted his ministry in a significant way. I had no great political insight or understanding, but I was willing to mow the lawn. I surprised them even more when I joined the work crew in helping to fix the stones in the cemetery at Mt. Moriah. For many, it was the first time they saw a pastor in shorts and T-shirt, working with a shovel and wheelbarrow. I led by example. Years later, people still talked about that experience in the cemetery. I was one of them and they were much more willing to follow if I was willing to work with them. Leading by example has become a very important part of my understanding of ministry and is significant to being a servant leader.

As I see it, these seven qualities are the major elements of servant leadership. They have shaped my ministry. I have not always put them into practice, but when and where I do they have made a real difference. And in each congregation, there are lay examples of servant leadership who speak to both clergy and laity.



## CHAPTER 6

### SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Having explored both system leadership and servant leadership, I return to my original premise. I believe there are many places where the two converge. They may use different language, but often they are saying the same thing. Or at least there are notable parallels between the two models and the parallels speak profoundly to the issue of leadership and parish ministry.

Where are the connections? I will address this question by reviewing the key elements of servant leadership, and then adding a similar point from system leadership. I anticipate that a parallel pattern will overlap. I know differences exist between the two models, but I want to find the places where they merge. After combining the two, I will use a final extended illustration to highlight both models and to clarify the interplay between the two.

First, servant leadership does not seek rewards or benefits. Consequently, a servant leader is not bound by the response of the group and looks for no payoff from the group. I would argue that there is a strong connection with system leadership. In system leadership, the trap is emotional payoff. If a leader accepts the emotional rewards of the group, the leader is more bound to the response of the group and less likely to act. For a system leader to be effective, he or she does not seek emotional rewards and therefore is not bound to the emotional process of the group. The emotional response (payoff) does not dictate his or her actions. This is an insight shared by both models.

Second, servant leadership does not “lord it over others.” A servant leader does not act out of power and control but out of a desire to serve others. Again, I would argue that a

strong connection exists with system leadership. Similar language can be found. System leadership says that one cannot “will” another, which means that leadership is not a function of power. In actuality, no one has that kind of control, for if people are pushed, they will resist. One is simply to lead, knowing that not everyone will follow. Again, there seems to be a strong parallel between the two models of leadership.

Third, servant leadership is guided by a vision. The vision or purpose of a servant leader is to “serve.” In this element, I find the connection with system leadership weak. The purpose of a system leader is his or her functioning. This purpose becomes a focusing point and anchor when there is resistance and sabotage. A clear purpose allows the leader to self-differentiate, which is a key to systems leadership. It could be argued that the clear purpose of servant leadership serves as a similar focusing point and anchor but the connection is tangential at best.

Fourth, servant leadership is one of paradox. As understood by Luke, a servant leader represents a reversal in the world of groups, because he or she leads from below rather than from the top of a hierarchy of power. System leadership also deals with a sense of paradox but in a different way. It moves counter to the world when it recommends that one should lead by focusing on one’s own functioning. This seeming paradox is radical in nature, but in systems theory it becomes the only real way change happens. Paradox is found in both models, but the connection is strong only when the two models speak of not seeking benefits and not using power.

Fifth, servant leadership has a strong sense of call. Jesus calls the disciples to a different kind of leadership in the world by inviting them to become servants. This sense of call becomes

a defining moment for the disciples. The disciples get a clear understanding of whose they are and who they were to be. A systems leader does not use this language. He or she operates with a sense of clarity, but this clarity is called self-differentiation, a focus on his or her functioning. It could be argued that a Christian leader has a unique but clear understanding of who he or she is, which would aid in systems leadership, but the connection is not direct.

Sixth, servant leadership is accountable to God. If the group dictates the agenda, then the group serves as the leader. By the same token, a systems leader does not answer to the group but is accountable to self, not God. He or she stays in touch with the group without becoming fused with, or bound by, the group. The system leader never forgets who he or she is. In the language of the church, servant leaders never forget whose they are in connection with God. Being God's person is the way they understand themselves. Accountability becomes another place where servant and system leadership are similar in a leader not be accountable to the group but are at variance as to whom the leader is accountable.

Finally, servant leadership leads by example. From a practical point of view, one cannot truly lead from above or from a distance. A systems leader takes a similar course. He or she stays both out front and connected. Leading by example is a way that allows for both.

As I state at the beginning of this paper, systems leadership and servant leadership come from different points of view, but there is common ground. I have attempted to draw the connections. To illustrate this harmony between system and servant leadership, I would like to use one final illustration. The example I chose comes from one of the most exciting times I have known in ministry. Looking back, I am still amazed at the change that took place within the congregation and the willingness of the congregation to embrace that change. The story has

become a legend in the life of Zion. It is told to every class of new members. I checked my remembrance of the event in the council and congregational minutes to make sure I got the details right and did not embellish what took place. The story is about the working of the Holy Spirit, but it is also about leadership. After I tell the story, I will revisit the event and look at the key elements of leadership in both servant and systems language and thought.

In March of 1993, the Church Council of Zion held its monthly meeting. The Property Committee once again brought a proposal for the renovation of the old Christian Education Building. The committee recommended a new heating system. The cost would be around \$25,000.

The renovation of the Christian Education Building had been a sore subject for many years. In the 1970's, the members of the congregation had built the building as a temporary solution to their Sunday School needs. The building had served well, but now it desperately needed work. In addition, the church had outgrown the facility. Zion needed more classrooms, a larger assembly area, better parking, and a more uplifting entrance. Every year a new solution was presented and every year the solution was thought to be too expensive. Consequently, each time the motion was tabled until the next year. Two reasons were given. First, Zion was debt free and did not want to consider any action that might incur debt. Second, Zion had five acres of land on the south side of Oldwick. This property served as a nest egg and was viewed by many as the future home of Zion. Unfortunately, it was a future no one could envision. Every attempt at a long-range plan was met with resistance, and the recommendation never got anywhere. In a very real sense, we were stuck.

In March 1993, something dramatic took place. I decided to change the question. Instead of asking what we thought we could do, I urged us to ask what we thought God wanted us to do. That shift in the question changed everything. A plan was put into place to begin to answer the new question with the whole congregation participating. Prayers were offered. Dreams were shared. We set no limits or boundaries. We began to work with an architect to give the vision shape and design. Plans for a new Christian Education Building were drawn up. The council was set to approach the congregation.

In January 1995 at the Congregational Meeting, a motion was made to undertake the project as a response to what God might want us to do. It was a surprising and exciting moment in the life of the congregation. Earlier, the council had balked at a \$25,000 plan for a new heating system. Now, it was presenting a proposal for a complete renovation of the Christian Education Building with a large new addition and parking lot. The total cost was estimated at \$1,000,000 or more. To go with this proposal represented a huge move in direction and focus for the congregation.

The oldest member of our congregation, one of the true matriarchs in the church, introduced the motion to proceed at a congregational meeting. We captured her comments on videotape and shared them with the congregation. She lent wholehearted support to the effort and firmly believed that Zion could and would rise to the challenge. She quoted scripture by saying “faith without works is dead” and contended that Zion was ready to put faith to work. I followed her presentation and shared with the congregation the belief that this building program reflected our commitment to ministry, growth, and the historical site. I concluded by saying, “I believe we are ready, I believe we are willing, and I know God will make us able.”

At the meeting, there was some resistance within the congregation, but the leaders remained strong and positive. The suggestion was made that we reduce the scope of the project and just renovate the old Christian Education Building. Someone noted that the fund raising appeal might not reach the necessary goal. Someone else brought up the five acres and wondered what would happen to the property. The response of the leadership to each question was clear, direct, and non-defensive. To the first, our commitment to ministry and growth had ruled out a simply renovation. To the second, our commitment to the vision would drive our financial campaign and we had every intention of meeting and exceeding the goal we had established. To the third, our dream of the five acres had always been to see that land used in a way to best serve the ministry of the church. This new Christian Education Building was the fulfillment of that dream. As the conversation continued, there was a growing excitement in the air. When the vote was finally taken, the motion was passed unanimously.

In light of our commitment to ministry and our continued growth, the congregation authorizes the church council to proceed with plans to upgrade and expand the Christian Education Building. Further, the congregation authorizes the church council to engage Lutheran Laity Movement to conduct a fund raising appeal at a cost not to exceed \$15,000. When the appeal has been completed, the church council will report back to the congregation with recommendations for a final plan.

In the spring of 1995 the financial campaign was held. As a campaign it exceeded the projections of LLM and our own optimistic goals. Nearly \$400,000 was pledged including \$60,000 from the community.

In June 1995, a congregational meeting was held. The final plans were presented and the congregation unanimously approved the proposal to build the new Christian Education Building. At the same time, permission was given to sell the five acres and put the money in the

building fund. A project manager was appointed and the work proceeded. On May 26, 1996, Pentecost Sunday, ground was broken for the new building and on September 28, 1997 the Christian Education Building was dedicated. The new facility enfolded the ministry vision of the congregation. More and larger classroom allowed us to expand Christian Education. A larger assembly area allowed us to meet as a congregation and open our doors to the community. A welcoming foyer and adequate parking allowed us to provide greater hospitality. The addition of a shower, washer and dryer, and hospitality room allowed us to better serve in the Interfaith Hospitality Network. The whole process opened us to new possibilities. The visioning and building of the Christian Education Building changed the thinking and direction of Zion and continues to impact the congregation to this day.

The role of leadership was key to this shift in thinking and acting by the congregation. I would like to go back over the events that lead to the building of the Christian Education Building from the perspective of a combined model of system and servant leadership. As mentioned, the resistance to addressing the concerns of the old Christian Education Building surfaced every time the question was raised. It was strong enough that no action was taken. For many years, every attempt to force the issue by any pastor, individual, or committee was defeated, though everyone admitted there was a problem. We were unable to overcome the financial barrier and the chance of building on the five areas. What changed?

The change was in the leadership of the congregation. Instead of asking how we could fix the Christian Education Building, we started to ask, "How do we serve God and others?" The issue became one of call rather than one of crisis. I had a clear sense of vision of what needed to be done, and I grounded that vision in a sense of call by God and a desire to serve.

The lay leadership on council came to share equally in that vision. We never used the language of building program or project, but the heading was always Growing in Ministry with the scriptural addendum, “What would you have me do, Lord?” This clarity of vision made both the church council and me take a more effective stand as leaders. When the resistance arose, and it did at that first congregational meeting, it did not sabotage our efforts. We were able to hold our position with real excitement and joy, and did not become reactive. We invited people to join us in this adventure and trusted that God would lead the way. Our personal investment in the building of the new Christian Education Building was outweighed by this opportunity to extend our ministry by serving. There was no overt politicking, no power plays, no voting blocks. The decision of the leadership, including myself, was to share the vision and let it propel the decisions of the congregation. Certainly the momentum carried weight, but the decision not to use power tactics was significant. Such an approach is critical to both system and servant leadership.

We used the same model in presenting the project to the community at large. We did not line up the votes on the township committee to secure the necessary approval. Again, we went to the local authorities as a whole and shared the vision. To our surprise and delight not only did the township approve our plans but wholeheartedly endorsed our efforts. Our approach was indeed paradoxical. We had the political power in the community to get whatever we wanted. After all, the town of Oldwick grew up around the church. We chose, however, not to use our political power. We presented the vision and felt that it would lead the way. This sense of paradox is important to both system and servant leadership.

The leadership of the church also led by example. Before going to the congregation to ask people for financial support, the leadership made their own commitments, the congregation where financial giving was usually kept secret, but we shared the information with the congregation and it had a significant impact on the rest of the congregation. This leading by example is reflected in both system and servant leadership.

Throughout the process, we kept the vision before us. Our clarity and excitement helped to make the leadership non-anxious and also help to take the anxiety out of the whole congregation, the whole system. We were not worried about the challenges and struggles that might take place. As leaders of the church, we were convinced that this growth in ministry, this new Christian Education Building, is what God wanted us to do. We were convinced that God would make it happen. The congregation fed off of the calmness of the leadership. Where \$25,000 was too much to consider, \$1,000,000 or more was doable. The congregation stepped out into new territory beyond the concern about debt, beyond the concern about the five acres. A shift took place in the system, and we are still experiencing the shift. The decision to grow in ministry by building the Christian Education Building has led to other undertakings – to Oasis Village, the community we are building to care for the widows and orphans of the Aids epidemic in Mpongwe, Zambia. We have also launched Containers for Christ to send yearly assistance around the world and the nation. We have become a mission partner with Faith Kitchen based in Trinity Lutheran Church in Dover, NJ. And we work with the Eastern Conservatory of Music to provide daily instructions in music for our young people and community. The list goes on, but the point is made. The congregation changed. The system

moved. And the reason was leadership. It was a leadership that was both system and servant. The two worked together and complimented each other.

At the beginning of this paper, it was my intention to build a bridge between system and servant leadership. I believe that many of the qualities of a system leader are captured in the words of Jesus about a servant leader. My hope is that this paper has served to clarify the connection. For me, that connection is compelling and continues to be a source out of which my ministry flows.

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