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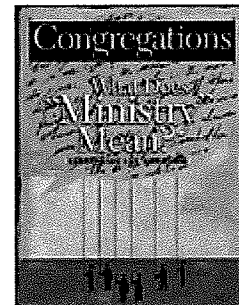
CONGREGATIONS

Fall 2004

Living from the Inside Out

LAY VOCATION IN PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

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I enjoy nothing more than conducting retreats for church leadership teams, usually on a Friday evening and all day Saturday. Leaders who call to schedule such events typically want to renew and revitalize their congregations. They're ready, they insist, to focus on a clear vision, to set compelling goals, and to make bold plans. I warn them that my approach demands a willingness to risk the unfamiliar, an openness to fresh ways of thinking, and nothing short of relentless courage. I tell them this retreat may stand them on their heads, and that clergy and laity alike may find themselves radically challenged. "Okay," they say. Frankly, they have no idea of what is in store! It will take the whole weekend to get it—if we're lucky.

At the heart of my work is a vigorous commitment to the role of laity. The apostolic church had no professionalized ministry until early in the second century, and no entrenched hierarchy until Constantine. The church of Acts and of Paul's letters is built on the foundation of lay vocation. Among the first books I read in seminary nearly 40 years ago was *Theology of the Laity* by Heinrich Kramer, still a classic. One could have reasonably predicted that, four decades later, laypeople would have claimed their rightful place of leadership, authority, and influence. Sad to say, they have not.

Full Plates, New Callings

Early on, usually in the first hour of a retreat, I post a banner reading Discernment before Decision-making. "In the interest of full disclosure," I caution, "I ought to post a warning label: 'This event could be dangerous to organizational convenience.'" Participants' curiosity edges toward confusion when I try to clarify my meaning by saying, "Expect some 'good news' resignations."

I proceed to a definition of leaders: "the people with the fullest plates." Nods and smiles suggest that I am onto something. When I ask how all that stuff got onto people's plates, I get predictable answers: "I was appointed/assigned." Or, "In a weak moment, I was recruited." Some admit—without real enthusiasm, supposing someone had to do it, and seeing no raised hands—"I volunteered." For too many church leaders, what began as joyful service has morphed into duty and obligation. The nods have lost their smiles. "So few of us do all the work," they moan—a familiar story.

Then I invite leaders to "set aside" that full plate (not dump it, just put it aside) and ponder that to which they sense God may be calling them. I suggest that they assess the gifts for serving and loving God has given them, or that life and experience have honed. They need to seek clarity as to what focused purpose the Spirit may be stirring in them. What yields a sense of passion, delight, and joy? What, if their plate were not so full, would they love to be doing to serve the church? This exploration, halting and awkward at first, soon becomes animated and illuminating. I invite each leader to begin drafting a personal mission statement. Then I suggest that participants revisit the plates they set aside—with permission, even encouragement, to remove whatever does not align with their emerging sense of call, gift, purpose, and passion. Then, in no rush, they may prayerfully add to the plate only those tasks so aligned.

The total group reflection that follows radiates vitality. Someone wonders, "What if we asked everyone to think about these things? Wouldn't serving be more rewarding, indeed more faithful?" I challenge them, as leaders, consciously to lead this shift from one paradigm to a new one of discerning and serving in the church. A first taste of transformational change!

Now the warning label makes sense. "Some 'good news' resignations may be in order," I repeat, evoking fresh smiles from most leaders, and perhaps glances of chagrin from pastors and board chairs. The majority of leaders with whom I have worked confess that no one ever asked them to wonder what their calling and gifts were, or what passion they were ready to release. Ah, "lay vocation"—not merely generically motivating or more effectively recruiting laity, but inviting people to discernment as the basis for serving.

Sometimes I can see in leaders' faces, hear in their tone of voice, sense in their heightened attentiveness a new dignity, a deepening confidence, a true lay vocation— internalized, experienced, and celebrated. I am convinced that at the heart of congregational faithfulness, church renewal, revitalization, or reinvention must be people who are invited, challenged, and equipped to know themselves as called and gifted. Sadly, in perhaps the vast majority of churches, this outcome would represent a monumental shift. But I believe it is only the starting point.

Changing the Metaphor

A certain Presbyterian congregation, having increased its mission allocation in the annual budget, decided to inspire its members to more hands-on, personal involvement in mission outreach—the theme of its Friday evening and Saturday retreat.¹ Discernment of call and gift had already become a cornerstone principle and practice in the parish. Increasingly, congregational leaders and those on their ministry teams served out of a conscious desire to hear their call and claim their gifts, with discernment of vocation as the basis for serving and leading. That was the approach of this mission outreach committee.

The leaders carefully chose three mission options and promoted them vigorously. Year one yielded disappointing results. The second year, undaunted, they prayerfully chose different projects, promoting them even more creatively. Again, disappointment ensued. A newer committee member offered this critique:

We're trying to be an airline. What if we became an airport instead? We're trying to get people to fly our airline to our destinations—limited planes, limited routes—as if they were customers. What if we changed the metaphor? An airport instead of an airline. We'd provide a safe place for optimum numbers of takeoffs and landings, large planes and small, to endless destinations. Instead of pilots, we'd become air traffic controllers.

This man was thinking out of the box. He had taken another taste, maybe a hefty bite, of transformational, paradigm-shifting change.

In year three, leaders still offered an option or two, but they focused on inviting members to pray for discernment, to hear how God was calling them to "make love concrete in the world," to live out their own mission calling. As individuals began to sense a calling, even partially formed, they were encouraged to submit a mini-profile to the church newsletter, to write it on a Post-it note to be placed on the "mission wall" in the community room, even to offer a brief invitation during worship service announcements. The mission outreach committee resisted the temptation to create mission projects themselves as ideas came forward, but rather "got beside" circles of folk with common callings, encouraging them to carry their own projects forward.

A first mission group formed around a ministry to AIDS patients. Then a second team organized to collect and distribute blankets, together with meals cooked in Crock-Pots, to Philadelphia's homeless from the back of an old van. A third new group carpooled each Thursday morning to Chester, a small, depressed, predominantly African-American city a half-hour away, for community Bible study and an urban gardening project. A fourth, more ambitious

project would coordinate the construction of low-cost homes in Ludlow, Philadelphia's most depressed neighborhood. Five years later that congregation of just under 300 members had 15 thriving mission groups, circles of three to a dozen volunteers sponsoring mission work in and around Philadelphia and in three foreign countries.

People began not only to call mission groups to life, but to affirm lay ministries discerned and lived out beyond the church. Bill coached in a Saturday morning soccer league, and Sarah tutored after school at a community center. Ben slept two nights a week at a center-city homeless shelter, and Mary served as a hospice volunteer. Mission ministry enlarged its embrace to celebrate all acts of loving service.

Lay-initiated Education

This "new metaphor" was contagious, infecting the adult education committee. That group's strategy of using questionnaires to determine adult program offerings, as logical as it seemed, had yielded only minimal success:

- "They said they wanted a couples group, but only two couples showed up."
- "We thought they'd love a progressive dinner, but we only had a handful."
- "We paid good money to bring in a popular speaker, but we filled only half the seats."

These plaintive reports were part of an old story. The next year lay leaders tried the new approach. They offered some staples—a Sunday morning forum, a morning and an evening Bible study, an occasional seminar. But they focused their efforts on inviting people to reflect prayerfully and deeply on what programs, small groups, issue- or theme-oriented seminars they wanted—and were willing to help convene.

Serendipitously, some church members who lived on the same street converged just after dark one evening under a streetlight—one person jogging, a couple out for a stroll, another couple walking their dog. One man, thinking out loud, wondered whether people were interested in gathering in one another's homes for Bible study and prayer. A house church formed, word got out, and within a month two more groups formed in other neighborhoods.

Charlie, a new member, noticed that other church members boarded his commuter train each morning. "I was wondering if I might not invite them on, say, a Thursday morning, to come an hour early for Bible study and sharing over breakfast at the Villanova Diner," he said to the adult education chair. Her empowering reply was "How can I help you do that?" Within a week the commuters had pushed together two tables in the back room of the diner, and were eating bagels and poring over a parable from Matthew.

A Small-Group Strategy

Virtually all church-growth and renewal literature affirms the importance of small groups. A languishing, barely-holding-its-own church in an established neighborhood came to the reluctant but timely conclusion that rapid numerical growth was unlikely. At least the growth strategies it had pursued to date had borne little fruit. Members decided that an emphasis on the quality of church life might be more promising, and that developing small groups was a place to start. At that point they had no small groups. But they had managed to convene a three-person small-groups task force.

I proposed a modest first step, which the participants assured me would not work; but since they presented no alternatives, we pressed on. "Put a little questionnaire in the church bulletin for a Sunday or two, and include it as a tear-out with a return address in the newsletter," I suggested. One comment captured the group consensus: "We won't get more than a handful of responses." Task force members listed five possibilities, generically defined, and left space for suggestions. To their surprise and mine, they collected eight or 10 names for five of their six suggestions. "Good news," one member observed, almost reluctantly. "Guess we need to get to work to plan and promote those groups."

"Bad idea," I said firmly. They looked bewildered. I put forth an option: "Call a 'convening caucus' for each of the groups. Maybe before and after church, each in turn, over the next three Sundays." Not fully persuaded, they

concluded. Again, to their surprise and mine, more people than expected, more than had signed up by questionnaire, turned up at each of those five gatherings. As chairs were added to the circle at the first of the five, the task force member poised to convene the group leaned over and whispered, "I guess now we need to get to work to plan and promote some groups."

"Bad idea," I repeated, evoking renewed bewilderment. I encouraged him to keep to the plan we had conceived, to follow the agenda and ask the questions we had framed. He invited the group, first in circles of three, to discuss:

- What are you looking for that brought you to this meeting?
- What kind of group did you have in mind?
- What format do you think might work?
- How often and where did you think we might meet?
- What topics or themes might be addressed?

The conversations among the threesomes were lively. It was hard to reconvene the full circle. The leader artfully encouraged the groups to share their thoughts, which he jotted on newsprint. The clarity and energy seemed promising. Still another task force member leaned over and whispered, "Certainly now it is time to plan and promote the groups." His wary look anticipated my now familiar answer.

"Bad idea," I responded. The head of our team dutifully asked the last, most pivotal question: "Who among you, maybe a team of two or three, would be willing to convene this group?" An awkward, seemingly endless silence followed. But anxious task force members resisted the temptation to take on that role themselves. Finally, a woman said she'd love to, and another quickly joined her. Now I nodded to the relieved and smiling faces of the team: this group is ready to go.

The other four gatherings followed a delightfully similar course. A critical mass of folk assembled, easy consensus emerged on hopes and expectations for the group, and a convener team materialized. That church went from zero small groups to five in less than a month. Six years later, four of the five groups are going strong. The small-group task force did not decide on a selection of small groups to offer. They did not merely collect the names of those expressing interest, and then offer the groups. They resisted taking over the process when they had more specific and concrete data on what people wanted. They inspired response; they encouraged, offered resources, and empowered the formation of groups. Each group "belonged" to its members.

One that convened was a couples group, with Jim and Ann among the participants. Inevitably, some Friday evening when the group is to meet, Jim will come home weary from work, only to find Ann exhausted as well. Jim's first words, had the task force planned and promoted the couples group, might have been, "Ann, I'm tired; let's skip that couples group tonight," and Ann would have nodded agreement. But tired as they are, Jim and Ann wouldn't think of missing their couples group.

The Pastor's Role

A singularly embarrassing vignette from a weekend retreat where I—as pastor of the church—was a participant may offer insight into the pastor's proper role.² Our congregational leaders, led by an invited consultant, were working in subgroups at the Saturday morning session. I had left the room to make a phone call and was returning to join my threesome.

As I started to open the door, I heard a younger lay leader say, "I don't know why we are doing this, because Howard's gonna do what he damn well pleases anyway!" Embarrassed and hurt, I pushed the door shut and took a deep breath, uncertain what to do next. I took another deep breath, opened the door, and leaned over to whisper into the young leader's ear, "When the small groups report back, I want you to share that comment." He resisted, no doubt embarrassed as well. But he shared his reflection, which was met by nods of clear, if awkward and self-conscious, agreement.

The consultant responded artfully. We had identified, he suggested, a critical issue in a commitment to lay vocation in the church—that of authority. We were at the cusp of transition between being a pastor-centered church and becoming a program-centered church. The whole process of making decisions, clarifying roles and role interfaces, taking responsibility, and accepting accountability needed radical redefinition. Through the next year—and it was often difficult, if not downright painful for us all—we worked together to craft a covenant of partnership in ministry.

George Barna, speaking at Eastern Baptist Seminary, offered this telling commentary on clergy and leadership. Clergy were asked to rank 10 areas of responsibility and competence in the role of being a parish pastor in three ways—first, assessing the importance of that role; second, assessing their present level of competence; and third, indicating where they place their continuing education emphasis. Leadership ranked eighth of 10 in each category.

The legacy of pastor as benevolent dictator, as hub of the wheel—primary source of vision and mission, principal architect of structure and procedure, atop the power pyramid—may still be the norm. Embodying authority and being authoritarian are radically different roles. Many pastors blur that distinction. On the other hand, younger pastors, announcing their readiness to relinquish such prerogatives, become passive, distant, and uninvolved. If clergy domination engenders resentment, clergy passivity spawns chaos. If pastors no longer want to name the vision or set the goals or announce the plans—but rather empower the laity as partners in this foundational work—they must become process leaders who enable the laity to see a vision, set goals, and plan ministries. Walking neither ahead nor behind, they are challenged to walk beside.

Living Out Lay Vocation

I write not to offer a foolproof, step-by-step program for congregational renewal. It is an invitation to an adventure, an approach, an exploration. It is not a series of tactics, but a set of principles and values to be named and cultivated. Lay vocation must be claimed and celebrated as biblical mandate before it becomes a strategic plan. As jazz virtuoso Charlie Parker put it, "If it's not in your heart, then it's not in your horn." Lay vocation is lived from the inside out. Be it, and then live it out. It is more journey than destination.

NOTES

1. For more details, see *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the Inside Out* (Judson Press, 1998), 87-93.
2. See *Recovering the Sacred Center*, 116.

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[Back to Top](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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