Effective Leadership in the Church

A training tool to help congregations, pastors, and other church leaders effectively work together to accomplish God's mission.

Case Study 1: Who's Planning Worship?

Pastor Pete was disturbed—disturbed with himself. The end of the worship planning meeting was near. He felt anxious; he guessed the other members did too. In the awkward silence, he wondered what to say.

Before he became pastor, First Church had a history of letting the pastor make almost all the decisions in the church, especially about planning and leading worship. The council had generally communicated the boundaries, but the pastor had led the way in everything.

Then Pastor Pete came and encouraged members of the congregation to help plan and lead in worship. He asked a dozen people to join him, some from the council and some not. He called them the "worship committee" and held regular meetings to tell them his plans for sermons and to ask them their ideas for music, Bible readings, and prayer. Slowly the committee began offering ideas.

In the third session for planning one particular worship service, the group was getting a bit edgy. They had planned a somewhat humorous sketch about the Ten Commandments. In a previous session, they had chosen songs. Pastor Pete now encouraged them: "This is good work. You are the owners of this plan." But he could see frowns on some faces. One older member was plainly anxious: "I'm not quite sure about our roles here. Do we make the final decisions or do you?" Another member added, "Some of us feel we don't have the training to make these kinds of decisions."

Before Pastor Pete could answer, one member suggested a more familiar hymn for the concluding song rather than the new praise song he had previously suggested. The whole group brightened to the idea and wanted the change. Pastor Pete felt anxious, like something was slipping away, but nodded agreement.

Was it loss of control that bothered him? Hadn't he said he wanted them to participate? Should he confess his anxiety? Who *did* have the final say, anyway? Was it the pastor or the committee? One thing he knew—silence wasn't the answer.

Chapter 1

Biblical and Theological Themes Regarding Leadership in the Church

What follows are seven important biblical and theological themes that must guide any discussion of Christian leadership.

1. What is the mission of the church?

Defining leadership in any organization immediately raises questions about that organization's mission, its reason for being. In the case of the church, the Bible raises and answers two very important questions.

First, whose mission is it? God's, not ours. The church doesn't come up with its own mission. The Bible sets forth God's mission for the church.

Second, what is the church's mission? The Bible states the church's mission in many different contexts. Consider Colossians 1:15-20, Matthew 28:18-20, John 17:20-23, 1 Peter 2:9-11, Ephesians 4:11-13. It's helpful to see these various statements of the church's mission as different facets of a single diamond, each enriching the other.

Perhaps God's mission in the world can be summarized this way: God's purpose in Christ is to reconcile all things to himself. The church is the body of Christ in the world—the means by which the world will know that Jesus Christ is Lord and through which all believers will reach maturity in Christ and unity in the faith and knowledge of Christ. To fulfill the mission of God to reconcile all things to himself, God sends the church into the world to spread the gospel, to evangelize, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, and to embody in its corporate life the message of reconciliation.

(*Note:* "Mission" usually refers to one's deepest purpose or belief, while "vision" usually refers to how one will live out that mission in the future. The discussion about which comes first—mission or vision—is ongoing. By these definitions of "mission" and "vision," the passages above no doubt reflect both the church's mission and its vision.)

"Mission" implies passion— a single-minded purpose of "getting there," perhaps even risking reputation and standing among others. Does your church have a clear sense of its mission? How would you summarize it in a single sentence?

What is the relationship between the Bible's "mission statement" for the church and a church's own mission statement?

2. What does the Bible mean when it calls the church "the body of Christ"?

To understand leadership in the church it's important to understand a peculiar and mysterious fact about the church: the church is the body of Christ. The Bible does not say the church *resembles* or *is like* a body. The church *is* the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27)—the way Christ is present in the world. When we think about leadership, we must understand four features of the church as the body of Christ.

Christ is the head of the body.

The New Testament is clear that Christ is the head of the church. Christ's headship is a reference not to power and the right to control, but to the source of the church's life. Christ sustains the whole body and supplies what the body needs for life (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Col. 1:18).

The church is a living organism.

Christians are members of a living body, not an inanimate institution (Eph. 4:12-16). The source of the church's life is Christ himself. This implies two things: First, the church as a living organism is constantly growing, changing, and adapting to changing realities around it. This is what it means to be alive. The term for an organism that has quit growing and changing is "dead." Second, the church is not a self-sufficient closed system, answerable only to itself. It is contingent, dependent. Like the vine to the branch, the church is organically connected to and dependent upon Christ for its very life. As a living organism, the church's concern is not "What do *we* want to do?" but rather "What is Christ doing in and through us? How is the life of Christ being tangibly expressed in our life together as a church?"

The body of Christ is one, with many parts that organically work together (1 Cor. 12:12-31).

First Corinthians 12 makes clear that each part of the body is indispensable to the healthy functioning of the whole body. Such mutual interdependence implies a mutual accountability that all members of the body of Christ, including leaders, have to Christ and to one another.

God gives to the church the gifts of his Spirit (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:7-11; Eph. 4:11-13).

These "gift passages" make clear that God gives spiritual gifts to all the members of the body, not just a few select leaders. Moreover, God gives particular gifts to particular believers. Yet emphasis upon particular gifts given to particular individuals in the body must be balanced with emphasis upon the *giftedness* that the body as a whole possesses by virtue of Christ's indwelling Spirit. Paul says that spiritual gifts are given for the common good. Indeed, as various members of the body of Christ realize

What would be a good answer to give to the nine-year-old who asks her parents, "Who runs the church?" If "Christ" wasn't a good enough answer for that nine-year-old, how would you go on to describe the way Christ rules the church through the members of the body?

How does this reality of the church as a living organism shape the way we think about leadership in the church?

What signs tell you that your church is a living body, with the parts of the body organically working together?

that they are able to serve one another and others beyond the church, gifts emerge and are affirmed by and strengthened in the body. The balance between individual gifts and the giftedness of the body is an important one.

3. What does the Bible teach about "servant leadership"?

The Bible teaches us many things about the nature and quality of Christian leadership. Perhaps the most profound insight comes from the life of Christ himself and Christ's clear teaching regarding servant leadership.

Christ is the model of servant leadership.

In his incarnation, Christ embodies the message of servant love. The cross is the ultimate message of self-giving love (Phil. 2:1-11; John 13:12-17).

Authority in the New Testament entails both power *and* servanthood.

Jesus Christ himself exemplifies both: he rules with power "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:21), but he also stoops down to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13). We can see this same example of power combined with servanthood in the role of parenting. In their relationship with children, parents have authority that includes right and power; good parents also love their children with a servant love, and use their authority through this love. Authority, power, and servant love, all properly understood, are not set over against each other in the New Testament—and thus should not be set over against each other in discussions of leadership (Matt. 20:25-28).

The New Testament emphasis upon servant leadership reminds leaders to be careful in their exercise of power and authority. Leaders must realize the ways that positions of leadership can inherently create an imbalance of power, and must take seriously their responsibility to exercise power as servants of the one who has all power and authority.

The practice of servant leadership is one of the ways Christians "put on" Jesus Christ.

In John 13:14 Jesus makes it clear that those who follow Jesus must practice his servant love: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." In Ephesians 5:1-2, Paul calls believers to imitate God in his self-giving actions: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Leadership in Christ's church must be different from the Gentiles' "lording it over" approach to leadership. The goal of servant leaders is to love and serve those they lead by helping them find and productively use their gifts in the ministry of the body. Leadership in the

What are two or three of the spiritual gifts God has given your congregation as a whole?

Give some examples of authority, power, and servanthood *all* being expressed appropriately.

How can you tell if the church's leaders are following the biblical principle of servanthood?

church is essentially and radically a matter of servanthood, love, forgiveness, redemption, sacrifice, justice, and obedience.

(*Note:* For a more extended discussion of these and other biblical themes related to church leadership, see *A Theology of Church Leadership* by Lawrence Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke [Zondervan, 1980].)

4. What is the relationship between reconciliation and effective leadership?

God's mission has been summarized above in terms of *reconciliation*: God's purpose in Christ is to reconcile all things to himself. Thus, the church is called to embody in its corporate life the message of reconciliation. A church that is achieving God's purposes in the world will be breaking down barriers between individuals and groups.

More and more churches today live in close proximity to diverse racial and ethnic groups. How can your church cross ethnic/racial boundaries and manifest more deeply the reconciliation we have in Christ?

One of the greatest needs today—in North America and throughout the world—is the need for *racial* reconciliation. One of the great tests of authentic Christian community is whether that community can transcend the barriers that divide people along racial and ethnic lines. Deep racial reconciliation is one of the greatest testimonies to the power of the gospel that the church can give. Effective Christian leadership involves the intentional pursuit of such reconciliation, yearning for the vision of Revelation to become a reality—when people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" will be gathered around the throne (Rev. 5:9).

Racial reconciliation is only one test of authentic Christian community. Breakdown of marriage and family, social and economic differences, political and ideological divisions, and antagonism and hostility between parts of the body of Christ are all examples of alienation within community. One of the deepest impulses and values of Christian leadership is the pursuit of reconciliation at every level of community.

5. What does the Bible teach about suffering and leadership?

The New Testament is clear in its teaching that Christians suffer not just because they live in a broken world, but also because obedience to Christ and the gospel generates resistance and hostility, and engages the power of darkness (1 Pet. 3:8-22; 4:12-19; Rom. 5:1-5; 2 Tim. 1:8-12).

If suffering is a part of leadership, what does this suggest about the marks of Christian character that congregations should consider as they seek out leaders?

Christian leaders should expect to suffer. In fact, a person who aspires to church or kingdom leadership but has a strong aversion to suffering should look elsewhere for work. It's interesting to note that biblical characters whom we often associate with strong leadership (Moses, Joshua, David, Esther, Deborah, and other "heroes of faith" [Heb. 11]) often suffered. Sometimes their suffering was self-imposed. Indeed, all leaders struggle with temptations, and many leaders commit colossal sins that throw

themselves and the community around them into deep pain and suffering. But suffering is often the result of doing good—the natural or supernatural resistance and hostility to the gospel that creates pain and injury.

The good news is that virtually every passage in the New Testament that speaks of Christian suffering is laced with hope—hope because of the positive, character-building, community-building impact of suffering when it is embraced with faith; and hope because of the forward-looking "not-yet" perspective that is brought into clearer focus in suffering. Christian leaders know that Christ will prevail and his mission will be accomplished.

One important implication of the reality of suffering for the Christian leader and community is that "success" and "failure" are never as clear-cut as one might be tempted to believe. Sometimes the chapter of a church's history that involves the most suffering becomes the chapter that was most used by God to form, shape, and lead that church into its most vital and vibrant chapter of ministry. To use Jesus' and Paul's language, churches are continually dying and rising again. Churches and leaders must be willing to endure pain and suffering—to be the seed that is put into the ground and dies—if they are to rise again and produce many more seeds. Every Christian leader (and congregation) must continually take to heart Jesus' words when he faced his own suffering and death:

> Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. (John 12:24-26)

Death and resurrection are an ongoing process of sanctification for the believer. Congregations also go through death and resurrection. Are there things that your congregation is dying to, or things that it must die to? Are there signs of things that it is coming alive to?

6. How does the CRC translate these biblical teachings into a coherent theological understanding of the church?

The church seeks to reflect the biblical teaching above in its *polity*—its form of government. The most concise statement of the CRC's polity is the Church Order. The most concise summary of the CRC's official positions on the nature of the church's ministry in general, and office and ordination in particular, can be found in the conclusions of the synodical report of 1973 on ecclesiastical office and ordination, and the guidelines of the synodical report of 2001 on ordination and "official acts of ministry."

To briefly summarize, these official church positions affirm the following:

- the church's role in the mission of the Lord, namely, to be the body of Christ manifesting his presence, proclaiming the gospel, evangelizing and seeking the lost

- a definition of leadership in the church that entails a relationship of trust and responsibility in which certain people are entrusted by Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, to take pastoral responsibility for a part of his flock
- the purpose of ordination to set apart certain individuals for special ministries or services
- the comprehensive ministry of the church shared by all believers
- the distinction between those who serve in official offices and those who serve more generally as one of function, not essence
- the authority of office as defined primarily by service, which includes the responsible stewardship of God-given natural and spiritual gifts, rather than by status, dominance, or privilege

7. Is there a difference between leadership in the church and leadership in other spheres of society?

Is there a difference between leadership in the church and leadership in any other organization? We think there are differences as well as similarities.

There is similarity in terms of laws of human behavior, social laws, psychological laws, and organizational laws that are rooted in creation and apply to all organizations, including the church. The best of Christian wisdom discerns these deep and universal patterns to human life and community. God's common grace makes it possible for a person who may not be a Christian to be an effective leader in an organization. Reformed Christians are always aware that God has created and still works in the whole world, not just the church.

But there is also a difference. The church is a unique *organism* in which Christ and the Spirit dwell. The church has a unique source of life, is directed toward particular ends and goals, and is governed by particular commitments and practices—such as prayer, worship, study, witness, and service—that give peculiar shape to the church's life and ministry. The church cannot be explained in organizational terms alone and must guard against approaches to leadership that merely accommodate to the broader culture (see *Pastor: A Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* by William Willimon [Abingdon, 2002], p. 70).

(*Note:* A fuller exposition of many of these themes can be found in a synodical study committee report entitled "Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" [*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 635-716], and in synodical guidelines for understanding leadership, office, and ordination [*Acts of Synod 2001*, pp. 503-504].)

Some churches overemphasize the differences between the church and other organizations and miss out on valuable things they could learn from the way other organizations are led. Other churches underemphasize the uniqueness of the church. Where does your church fall in this spectrum?

Case Study 2: Hands Off, Hands On

Susan Bridge, the chair of the council, had to decide. The new pastor was strong, having implemented new programs with fire and devotion. But some people felt run over. Should the council put the brakes on—hold him back or at least slow him down?

Center Church was a big congregation with a suitably big staff. The former senior pastor was a superb minister of the Word; he had spent much time each week in his study, and it showed on Sunday. The congregation learned from his thorough study of God's Word and his apt illustrations.

However, he didn't like the administrative side of ministry. The staff carried out separate ministries as they saw fit. While they benefited from the pastor's sermons, the people thought the pastor aloof or shy because he showed little interest in them. Because he was near retirement, the council heard the criticism but believed things would change in the church when he retired.

As churches sometimes do, Center found a dynamic younger pastor to lead their congregation, the opposite of their former pastor. He took charge of the staff and gave good direction to them and the council, but was forced to quit the ministry when he suffered a heart attack and nearly died.

The church felt the loss keenly. They hired a retired pastor to help them for two years. The pastor had a solid reputation in the denomination for his good preaching, friendliness, and ability to administer a staff and start new programs. The church thought they were set, with the council and congregation happy with the choice.

Now, nine months later, clouds of trouble covered the sunny start. Some staff and council members were frustrated at the new pastor's "bulling" his way ahead with new programs. They did like his enthusiasm, his energy. The congregation loved his welcoming manner. He connected with all ages. But he virtually ignored the council, getting approval for his ideas "out and about." Although Center had committees, the pastor decided what he wanted done and told them about it.

Susan Bridge saw it herself. Others saw it too. And now the issue was before council. What to do—should it be "hands off," holding the course without change? Or should it be "hands on," intervening somehow to change the way the pastor operated?

Case Study 3: Mission, Mission, Who's Got the Mission?

Faith Church was in the middle of a muddle. Rev. Sharon Wilson was plowing straight ahead with the church's mission, but the congregation was lagging, even balking. And the council was in between, watching the spinning wheels and not knowing what to do.

Faith had been a vibrant church in earlier days but had lost some members who moved to churches nearer their new residences. Some new families in the neighborhood had joined Faith; some unchurched people were also attending. When Rev. Wilson came, she noticed that the search team had exaggerated the buy-in of the congregation for new directions that a study committee had approved.

But Rev. Wilson believed the congregation would follow if she quickly implemented the changes. Some council members had gently cautioned her, but she plowed forward with enthusiasm and full effort. Soon some members of Faith headed out the door. The council started a new round of direction setting, using a consultant, and changed its direction somewhat. Rev. Wilson survived the change and pushed ahead to carry out the new plan.

Part of the plan was to reach out to the surrounding community. God blessed that effort with more people coming to the church. But the congregation tired out, retreating in their effort, with some ministries actually throwing in the towel. This time Rev. Wilson drew together a small group of leaders to do a third round of "vision setting."

It seemed like a good plan and Rev. Wilson was pleased. She preached it and pushed; the congregation balked, criticizing her for constantly intimating that they weren't committed. Their energy ebbed; Rev. Wilson's fire was diminishing into embers. The council saw both declines and wondered: three attempts to change with no seeming good. Was it time for a fourth? Or, as some members urged, was it time to forget planning for a while and just "be the church"? One thing was sure—something had to be done. But what?

Chapter 2

The Shape of Effective Leadership in the Church

What does effective leadership look like? How does it work? How do people know whether their congregation is being effectively led? The concept of *reciprocal leadership* helps us to focus on the relationship between follower and leader rather than on certain traits a leader might possess. We can also identify "four Cs"— four factors present in situations where effective leadership is taking place.

1. What is Christian leadership?

First, a definition:

> Effective Christian leadership is the process of helping a group embody in its corporate life the practices that shape vital Christian life, community, and witness in ways that are faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel and appropriate to the particular group's setting, resources, and purpose.

The next definition is more specific to leadership in a congregational setting:

> Effective Christian leadership is the process of helping a congregation embody in its corporate life the practices that shape vital Christian life, community, and witness in ways that are faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel and appropriate to the particular congregation's setting, resources, and purpose.

The church has many leaders

It's important to clarify that the above definitions do not limit the function of leadership to particular individuals or offices. The New Testament teaches and the church affirms that "the task of ministry is shared by all and is not limited to a special, professional class. . . . The ministry of the church is Christ's ministry, shared by all who are in Christ" (from conclusions 1 and 2, "Report on Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination," *Acts of Synod*

1973, p. 714). This point bears repeating, given our strong, histori-cally conditioned tendency to associate leadership with the activi-ty of pastors and other officially designated individuals.

The *essence* of leadership vs. the *style* of leadership
It's also important to clarify that the definitions above address the *essence* of leadership, not the various *styles* in which leadership is expressed. In *essence,* Christian leadership is the same in all times and places. It embodies unchanging principles and values, such as servanthood, morality, respect for all people as divine image-bearers, and so on. But the *style* of leadership varies greatly depending upon the individual leader and the situation in which leadership is exercised. A well-developed and mature leader has the capacity to exercise different styles in different situations. A crisis situation may call for an authoritarian style, a decision-making process among peers may call for a consensus-building style, and a learning situation may call for a prophetic style. Leadership styles are neither linear nor hierarchical; they are best understood as options in a repertoire circle where the situation determines which style will best serve.

> **How is leadership shared in your congregation? Can you think of examples of when your leaders exercised differ-ent leadership styles, depend-ing on the need or context?**

The biblical concept of "help"
Finally, it's important to clarify the meaning of the word "help" in the definition. If we don't understand the word "help," we may see this definition as an overly weak concept of leadership. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word most frequently trans-lated "help" usually refers to God. "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2). When leaders "help" people live the Christian life, they are far from weak. They are agents, albeit humble servants, of the triune God; indeed, they are acting like God.

2. What is "contextualization" and why is it so important when it comes to leadership?
Effective leadership takes into account the critical role of the *min-istry context* in which leadership is exercised. Every ministry con-text is unique. It has its own particular history, setting, relationships, and culture.

Leadership takes culture seriously
"Culture" here refers to the common ideas, feelings, and values that guide community and personal behavior, that organize and regulate what a particular group thinks, feels, and does about God, the world, and humanity. Culture is that invisible vault where worldviews, presuppositions, and values are generated and stored.

   Effective leaders understand that culture operates most power-fully when it is least visible. Consider these two images: First, cul-ture is like the ocean. The power of the ocean is not in the six-foot

waves on top of the water; it's in the massive movement of water underneath the wave, a movement that cannot be seen. Second, as one wag has put it, "Culture is like bad breath: you smell it on everyone else before you smell it on yourself." That is, just like people don't smell their own breath, they often don't see their own cultural values at work. Culture operates most powerfully when it is least visible.

For example, it's easy for Dutch people to assume that thriftiness or cleanliness or deferral of gratification or emotional reserve—cultural characteristics often associated with Dutch—are not merely cultural characteristics of one particular cultural group, but are universal traits. It's even more dangerous when people assume that their own cultural characteristics *should be* true of everyone.

The point here is that effective leaders understand that culture, visible or invisible, functions in powerful ways in any group and must be taken into account as leadership decisions are made.

All ministry is cross-cultural

Effective leaders also understand that virtually all ministry is *cross-cultural.* The cross-cultural nature of ministry and the corresponding need for cultural sensitivity in leadership is most obvious when it involves the meeting of meanings between different races, ethnic groups, nations, regions, and socioeconomic classes. But ministry in a highly secular, post-Christian culture makes virtually all North American ministry cross-cultural and *counter-cultural*—that is, engaged in the meeting of meanings between cultures that have fundamentally different and opposing world-views, assumptions, and values. For example, exercising leadership in the church in a racially broken society and racially diverse community will require a keen understanding of racial dynamics (cross-cultural), and a radical commitment to the unity and diversity of the body of Jesus (counter-cultural).

Every congregation is unique

Effective leaders understand how leadership must be contextualized, or shaped in its expression, in each ministry setting. Leadership must look different in one or another ethnic community; it must be exercised differently in one social structure or another; and it must adapt to the various stages in the development of a church. Knowing the times and the culture of a congregation and knowing how to respond appropriately might be called "cultural intelligence" or "contextual intelligence" and is an important mark of an effective leader.

3. What are the personality traits of an effective leader?

This is a fairly common question, but the wrong one to ask. One of the most interesting shifts in leadership theory in recent years has been away from the notion of a "leadership personality."

It used to be that CRC congregations looked very similar to each other. Today each congregation increasingly has its own particular character. Often this is because a congregation has taken seriously this challenge to contextualize its ministry. In what ways does the context of your congregation as defined in these paragraphs shape your congregation? In what ways should it shape your congregation more (or less)?

What cultural differences do you observe within your own congregation? (For example, differences between young and old, between more educated and less educated, between affluent and poor.) What cultural differences make ministry challenging in your congregation?

Peter Drucker, a leading authority on leadership, has pointed out that a single universal "leadership personality" or set of "leadership traits" simply does not exist. Name a leadership trait that seems "absolutely essential" to being an effective leader, and someone else can name ten situations of effective leadership where the leaders don't have those personality traits.

Effective leadership is best understood not by focusing upon personality traits in the leader, but upon *the relationship between the leader and those being led.* Focusing upon the *situation* and the *relationships* shifts the question from "What are the traits of good leaders?" to "What factors are present in situations where effective leadership is taking place?" and "What do relationships look like in situations where effective leadership is taking place?"

4. What are the positive things we can expect to see in situations where there is effective, reciprocal leadership?

Four factors (the four "Cs") seem ever-present in situations of effective leadership:

1. **Character** in the leader (which generates **trust** on the part of followers).
2. **Conviction** in the leader (which helps the congregation discern its **purpose and vision**).
3. **Competencies** in the leader (which help a congregation function as a **healthy system**—i.e., deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways).
4. **Confluence** of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry opportunity, and resources that is **a gift of God's Spirit** and that enables a leader and congregation to work joyfully together in realizing God's purposes.

Three important clarifications must be made before expanding upon each of these factors.

First, notice how all four of these factors involve *both leader and congregation, the relationship between them, and the impact they have on one another.* For example, character in a congregation's leaders helps the congregation trust those leaders, which in turn strengthens the character of the congregation, which in turn helps the leaders trust the congregation. Praise God for such an upward spiral of character and trust!

Second, it's important to distinguish between *personality traits* and *character traits.* The focus in these four factors is not on personality—introvert, extrovert, charismatic, quiet—but on the character of the leaders and those being led. Put another way, a church can be healthy with a leader who's an introvert, but not with a leader who is untrustworthy, arrogant, or sexually promiscuous.

Third, these four factors can be applied to diverse cultural situations. Each cultural situation will define these factors according to norms appropriate to that culture. But these four factors reflect certain realities of human behavior and community that are present and must be reckoned with across all cultural differences.

Effective leaders are people of sound **character** who generate **trust** in their followers.

For Christian leaders and for all Christians, *the foundation of Christian character* is the believer's union with Jesus Christ. In their death with Christ believers die to the old self, are raised to a new life with Christ (Col. 3:1-17), and are clothed with the character of Christ. As the branch receives its life from the vine, so Christians receive their spiritual life from Christ (John 15:1-17). Christ, by his Holy Spirit, produces in the believer the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The foundation of character for all Christians is their new life in Jesus Christ, and Christ's life in them.

The character of Christ in the Christian leader should clearly produce certain moral excellencies that are crucial to the leader's effectiveness—honesty, integrity, fairness, compassion, service to others, a life of prayer, and total dependence upon God for strength and guidance. One of the key evidences of such character in leaders is that people *trust* such leaders, and such leaders trust the people they lead.

Another dimension of character is the life experiences that form a leader. *Who a person is* determines *how that person will lead.* A person's character is determined, in part, by the life experiences that form him or her. Growing up during the Depression, losing a parent as a teenager, experiencing the horror of war, having parents who model generosity and service, growing up in two or three very different cultures—all these life experiences are formative of who we are at the deepest levels.

Another dimension of character is an *emotional intelligence* that is consistent with effective leadership. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's own emotions, motivate oneself, reach out for emotional support in healthy and appropriate ways, recognize emotions in others and respond appropriately, handle relationships, control impulses, demonstrate empathy, listen actively, deal constructively and creatively with conflict, assess one's world in optimistic and hopeful terms, take appropriate risks, patiently persist in the face of anxiety and conflict, and respect differences among people. A key element of emotional intelligence as practiced by leaders is the ability to seek input from people at all levels on how they are performing as a leader, to be non-defensive in response to such input, and to appropriately adapt in light of such input. (See an inspiring and illuminating paper by Craig Dykstra entitled "The Significance of Pastoral Ministry and the Idea of the Pastoral Imagination" in which he develops the concept of "pastoral intelligence" and "pastoral

Isn't it interesting that God often uses our most difficult and painful experiences to equip us for service? Can you think of experiences that had a positive, formative impact on you?

It is hard to over-estimate the importance of "pastoral intelligence." When asked what single factor is the best predictor of whether a pastor will flourish in ministry, Duane Visser, director of Pastor-Church Relations, has a clear and simple answer: knowing how to get along with people. Clearly, both pastor and congregation must have emotional intelligence as described in this paragraph. We all can grow in this area. What are some areas where you as pastor and as congregation know you need to grow?

imagination." This paper is unpublished but is available upon request to leadership@calvinseminary.edu.)

Effective leaders operate out of strong conviction, which helps a congregation discern its purpose and vision.

Effective leaders believe certain things deeply and commit themselves selflessly to realizing certain ends. Some call this one's "vision" or a "preferred future." For Christian leaders, these convictions must be shaped by the biblical vision of the kingdom of God. Effective Christian leaders must be invigorated by a vision of the kingdom God is establishing in the world. These convictions arise out of the leader's relationship with God in Christ and the Holy Spirit, and God's call to follow God in faith and obedience.

For Christian leaders, such conviction has the greatest potential for long-term good when it arises out of a strong vision of the church's mission and a thorough grasp of the biblical, pastoral, and theological contours of the Christian faith and church. This must be combined with an ability to communicate these contours in meaningful and relevant ways through sound preaching and teaching and imaginative pastoral leadership.

The capacity for *reflexive leadership* (Carroll and Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds,* Jossey-Bass, 2002) is an important dimension of leading with conviction. Reflexive leadership involves, for example, holding in creative tension the positive value of the tradition and the challenges of the present situation. Effective leaders are capable of informing and guiding an ongoing "argument" between competing convictions. At such points conviction requires a deep grounding in and understanding of the faith tradition, as well as a lively imagination and capacity for thinking creatively. Effective Christian leaders think deeply, theologically, integratively, and creatively.

A note about "conviction" and "vision"
Because the word "vision" is easily misunderstood, we use the word "conviction" in the previous paragraphs. For many, "the leader's vision" conjures up images of fumbled, lone-ranger attempts to introduce major changes in a congregation, painful polarization, and destructive conflict often ending in separation from the pastor and mass exodus of members.

Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline,* pp. 205-232) prefers the term "visioning" to avoid some of these pitfalls. "Vision," a noun, connotes an answer, a solution to the problem. Congregations usually want, yet resist, pastors who gladly offer their vision for the church. By contrast, "visioning" refers to "a structured conversation of God's people about what they believe God has called them to be and to do." Effective leaders don't impose their vision but enable a process whereby the congregation develops its vision.

On the other hand, leaders who have no strong convictions and corresponding vision are weak and ineffective leaders in congregations that desperately need leadership. It is difficult to overstate

this concern. Many CRC congregations are struggling for direction and desperately need wise, strong leadership. Thus it is important to see the overlap of conviction and vision when both are properly understood.

Effective Christian leaders have strong, biblically shaped convictions that issue forth in a biblically shaped vision. They believe certain things deeply. They have dreams and are passionate about what God's church and kingdom ought to look like. They are bold and courageous. Their strength is in the strength of their convictions and their passion to do the right thing. And they are self-sacrificial and give their lives to turning their biblically shaped vision into reality. They're risk takers. But the difference between an effective leader and a martyr is that the effective leader fosters a process whereby *the congregation as a whole* can discern and own where God is leading the congregation.

One test of whether a leader is "imposing a vision" or "leading with conviction" is to ask this question: Is the leader truly open to where a congregational process of discernment might lead, or does the leader already have a predetermined outcome in mind? At the same time, it would be incorrect to conclude from this test that leaders should never have convictions and a vision that propel them in a certain direction. While effective leaders understand the reciprocal nature of leadership (i.e., the influence of leaders and followers upon one another), they also have biblically shaped convictions regarding the church Christ is building, a church that is called to be engaging in its worship, faithful in its teaching, strong and deep in its fellowship, self-sacrificial in its outreach and service. These biblical convictions rightly propel leaders and the community they lead in a certain direction. Effective leaders make good judgments about the best way to set forth those convictions, set direction, and engage the community in achieving its biblical purpose.

But what if the convictions of the leader and the values of the congregation are at such odds with each other that the leader cannot express his or her most basic convictions without confronting and judging the congregation? In most situations, the leader who thinks this way has already guaranteed conflict and failure. By the very question, the leader has set up a win/lose outcome. He or she would do well to take a different approach: Every Christian Reformed pastor and congregation is on record as believing what the Scriptures and the confessions teach. The convictions and values all members of the CRC share in common are unfathomably great in number. The effective leader accentuates and holds up the best of the congregation's beliefs and values, and then, in a loving and safe environment of mutual trust, helps the congregation confront the gap between its own values and current realities. Effective leaders help people come to the point where they judge themselves. And effective leaders are transparent in confronting the gap between their own values and their

Some congregations have finely polished vision statements but are floundering, while other congregations have little "paperwork" to show for their vision, but have a clear sense of direction. The important thing is not what's on paper but what actually propels pastors and congregation to sacrificially serve Christ together. What's the vision that propels your congregation?

On a continuum between having a leader in your church who strongly imposes a vision or one who waits until the church arrives at its vision, how does your church function?

Most congregations want a "strong leader." What do we really mean when we say we want a strong leader? Is the strength of a leader determined by how much resistance the leader generates? By how far out in front of the congregation the leader works and how much criticism the leader is able to endure? By how much progress the congregation makes in reducing the gap between its stated values and its current realities? By something else?

own lives! Effective leaders stand *with* a congregation in learning, not *over* a congregation in judgment.

Effective leaders have competencies that help a congregation function as a healthy system (i.e., deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways).
Leaving aside the debate as to whether leadership is a matter of natural talent or learned skills, there are clearly competencies that leaders can learn through training. We should not overstate the distinction between character and competence, or between natural talent and learned skills. However, the attributes discussed above in the section on character tend to be more deeply embedded in who a person is, whereas the competencies listed below tend to be skills that can be learned by a wide variety of persons. These skills include

- listening and encouraging skills
- communication skills
- understanding authority, including the differences between formal and informal authority
- understanding the importance of clear structures and practices of accountability
- understanding dynamics and processes of change
- understanding issues involved in cross-cultural ministry
- understanding the dynamics of conflict and how to lead through conflict
- motivating people to perform at their full potential
- building support for and ownership of a process of change
- using win/win problem solving techniques
- understanding the congregation as a system
- understanding the critical nature of *pace* when it comes to change
- understanding the difference between courage and the temptation to martyrdom
- understanding the pitfalls of charisma
- knowing the difference between solving problems and creating opportunities for learning

Congregations with leaders who possess these specific leadership skills are more likely to deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways.

A related challenge in leadership development is helping *congregations* to be healthier and more effective in their working relationship with congregational leaders. Some of the features of healthy congregations include

- strong commitment to the church's purpose
- healthy practices of communication within the congregation and between congregation and leaders (communication that,

among other things, keeps truth and love, accountability and support together in creative tension)

- deep congregational practices of prayer for leaders and the congregation as a whole
- a congregational culture that takes responsibility for its problems and doesn't blame or scapegoat the pastor or other leaders
- the ability to constructively deal with conflict
- leadership decisions guided first of all by the church's purpose, not by a desire to keep peace at all costs

If you are a pastor or other church leader, what two or three skills from these lists do you need to enhance to be more effective? If you are a member of a congregation, what two or three skills from these lists does your congregation need to enhance to be healthier?

Situations in which there is effective leadership will be marked by a confluence (a convergence, a coming together) of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry opportunity, and resources that is a gift of God's Spirit and that enables a leader and congregation to move forward together in realizing God's purposes.
Leadership is exercised not in a vacuum, but in a particular time and place, with a particular group of people who have a particular history, by pastors and other leaders in particular points in their life journeys, in a particular cultural and social situation. The best leaders humbly acknowledge that they were "in the right place at the right time"—that a multitude of factors, some of them beyond their direct control, "came together" to produce relationships and events that resulted in great good. The best leaders will not claim that they could go to the next town and produce the same success story all over again. One of the principles that govern leadership is a unique and unrepeatable confluence of factors that come together in the leader/follower relationship and broader ministry situation. "Synergy," "convergence," and "luck" are words leadership theorists use to describe this phenomenon. "Providence," "gift of God's Spirit," and "answers to prayer" are words Christians use.

Understanding the role of confluence in congregational and institutional life is critical for several reasons. First, it keeps a leader humble. Beware of leaders who think the flourishing of their organization is all their own doing. Second, it keeps leaders flexible. Different circumstances dictate different leadership emphases and strategies. The effective leader constantly adapts to new challenges and opportunities. Third, it explains why the same person is not equally effective in all situations. Some leaders are fabulously successful in one setting and anything but successful in the next. All leaders and followers need to recognize that confluence is not a matter of easy formulas and steps, but of gift, grace, and surprise.

If your congregation has experienced the gift of confluence—things coming together in ways that are nothing short of a gift of God's Spirit—be sure to say "thank you" to God soon and often!

However, this reality of confluence cannot be used by leaders as an excuse for passivity: "Oh, well, things don't seem to be coming together this year. We'll see what happens next year." Effective leaders trust that as they take responsibility for matters of character, convictions, and competence that are within their

control, God will work in and through their faithfulness to create this confluence of factors that constitute shalom and blessing.

For Christians, all four of these factors underscore the constant need for fervent prayer and openness to God's leading. But confluence especially underscores how dependent the church is on God's blessing upon the labors of leaders and congregations.

5. Why do we call this a "reciprocal" understanding of leadership?

"Reciprocal" literally means "back and forth" or "both ways." In any situation involving leadership, influence goes both ways. Leaders shape those they lead, but also are shaped by those they lead. In an extended definition of leadership, Jerry Zandstra points out that leaders both motivate and are motivated by their followers ("What Is Leadership?" unpublished paper, 2002). Leadership is *reciprocal.*

Thus, leadership can be understood only in terms of the leader in relationship to those being led. Such a reciprocal understanding of leadership leads to mutuality and partnership in ministry.

Rev. Rick Williams expressed this mutuality beautifully in a lecture he gave at Calvin Theological Seminary on April 11, 2002, entitled "A Glimpse of Pastoral Leadership in a Multi-Racial Church." When asked about leadership style, Rick answered,

> I know of a number of pastors who articulate for the congregation where the church ought to be going, and their challenge is to bring them along. I'm not that kind of a leader. My strength is to bring people together and say, "OK, this is what I think we should be thinking about; and now let's talk about it and pray about it." I'm always amazed by two things that happen then—how much better the ideas are that they come up with together and how much more responsibility they take for advancing it. I see my responsibility as being a catalyst and making sure we are asking the right questions and facilitating the discussion.

Some might misunderstand this reciprocal approach to leadership as being too weak, as lacking in vision and direction. But such is not the case. Being committed to good congregational process doesn't mean that a leader lacks strong convictions. Rather, he or she has wisdom in "asking the right questions" and strategically guiding the congregation forward.

Many congregations today say they want "dynamic" leadership. What do you think they have in mind? In what ways is this consistent or inconsistent with the view of reciprocal leadership explained in this booklet?

6. This reciprocal understanding of leadership has also been called "adaptive leadership." Why is this concept important for congregations to understand as they think about leadership?

The concept of "adaptive leadership" is often misunderstood. Adaptive leadership does *not* refer to the pastor adapting to a congregation or a congregation to a pastor. "Adaptive leadership"

is leadership that helps the congregation see the gap between its stated values and its current realities, and then adapt in ways that move the congregation closer to its values. Adaptive leadership helps a congregation see the disconnect between what it is and what it ought to be, and then learn and adapt accordingly. For example, a congregation that understands God's call to be a caring, accepting fellowship but is dominated by cliques faces an *adaptive* challenge—adapting *from* what it is (a fellowship dominated by cliques) *to* what it says it wants to be (an accepting, inviting fellowship).

In the leadership literature, "adaptive challenge" is usually contrasted with "technical solution." The congregation that is dominated by cliques and is cold to visitors no doubt desires to have more members join their church. But the temptation is always to reach for a *technical solution.* Examples of technical solutions are better signs on the walls, or more greeters, or a Visitor Center that gives information to visitors. Those may all be fine things to do, but they don't get at the *adaptive challenge*—namely, that the congregation itself must change. They must be more interested in the visitor than in touching base with their best friends.

Adaptive challenges by definition go to the heart of things and involve deep change. One of the biggest mistakes leaders and congregations make is confusing "technical solutions" and "adaptive challenges." Most congregational problems are not problems that have technical solutions. If a congregation's problems were only technical, they would have been solved long ago. Most congregational problems are adaptive challenges: How do we adapt from who we are to who we say we want to be? How do we align our stated values and our current realities? Adaptive leaders don't talk about "solutions" as much as they talk about "learning": What can we learn together? What have we learned through this?

This model of leadership is usually associated with a systems approach to leadership and lies behind much leadership training in North America today. Approaches to and theories of leadership come and go. Our goal is not to endorse a particular theory of leadership, but rather to find ways to talk about leadership that are faithful to biblical and theological principles, transcend past polarities, and give us positive models of leadership.

7. What are some ways to identify and positively describe effective leaders?

One of the main points of this study has been that leadership is not first of all a set of traits in one or more people designated as "leaders." There is no such thing as a single "leadership personality." Rather, leadership is a reciprocal relationship between leaders and the larger community.

Even so, leaders, no matter what their personality, act in certain ways. There are certain things leaders do, certain habits they practice, certain character strengths they seek to develop. The qualities listed below summarize many of the different points

What are some recent gaps you have seen in your congregation between your stated values and your current realities? Have you addressed these gaps as adaptive challenges or as technical problems?

If you had to pick a metaphor for church leadership, which would you choose: fireman, shepherd, CEO, farmer, architect, engineer? If you had to pick a tool for leading, which would it be: hammer, towel, club, wheelbarrow?

made in this paper. No leader has all of these qualities in equal measure. The list is not meant to make leaders feel more inadequate than they often already feel. This list is meant to be a positive checklist for all of us who want to be the very best leaders we can be.

Effective Christian leaders

- are godly in character, manifesting the life of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit
- pray fervently
- are emotionally healthy and able to function effectively in a variety of relationships
- see the world in optimistic and hopeful terms
- listen carefully
- are trustworthy
- are self-sacrificial
- create ownership of ministry vision
- utilize the giftedness of others
- acknowledge that resistance to effective leadership is normal and unavoidable
- are not afraid of conflict
- are persistent in the face of conflict
- are resilient in the face of setbacks
- are respected by all members of a group even if not always liked or agreed with
- bring people together, building consensus across lines of competing viewpoints
- get people talking about their differences in ways that promote learning, listening, and insight
- understand the importance of clear structures and practices of accountability
- stay in close contact with those who are resisting their leadership
- absorb the normal tensions and anxieties present in any community of people without overreacting and thereby escalating tensions
- understand and manage the process of change
- are humble and take little credit for the good things that happen around them

Take time to identify some qualities from this list that characterize your church and its leaders, and thank God for these qualities! Then take some time to prayerfully identify ways that you as a congregation (including leaders and congregation) can grow.

Case Study 4: Who's Wagging the Dog?

Rev. Schafer had not guessed his interim pastorate would get him in a pickle. Here he was, in the middle of a council meeting, and everybody was looking to him about what to do about Bill and Bill's beef.

Bill, a member of Lakeside Church council, had just bolted the meeting. He was mad. Few were surprised because Bill had been belligerent for a week, grumbling to others about the summer committee's owning the church. As Bill left, he let fly from the doorway, "This council has got to take charge of this church. They can't get away with this anymore. It's the tail wagging the dog. And it's not right."

For years Lakeside had a burgeoning attendance during the summer, dwarfing the regular congregation, with well-heeled folk with summer homes in the area and a variety of visitors who stayed for a week or two in cottages or motels in the area. More than a decade ago, the council had formed a summer ministries committee to plan the summer worship services, choose the pastors, and decide the beneficiaries of the offerings.

Over time this committee, with almost no changeover in membership, began making its decisions without approval by the council, selecting popular pastors for worship and choosing charities for the offerings. The offerings never included Lakeside's needs, and Lakeside, as everyone knew, was a congregation that was struggling financially.

Now the issue of responsibility and authority heated the council room. Right after devotions, Bill had burst out: "Listen, it's time to put that committee in its place. They can't be making decisions about this church. We are the council. Not them." With previous advice from Rev. Schafer, the chair had said the issue would not be discussed now but when the summer committee gave the council its report.

Bill jumped up and said he was fed up: "If we can't deal with this issue, how can we deal with other issues that are hurting this church?" He packed up his papers and said, "I am resigning right now. My wife and I will no longer be members of a church like this." Then he stomped to the door.

After Bill slammed the door, the silence was palpable. One member pulled the drape back to see Bill sitting in his car in the lot. Some wanted to go get Bill and invite him back; some wanted to send a delegation to his home in "a couple of days" and invite him back; and some wanted to settle the ministries issue without Bill or the committee "holding the council hostage."

The chair seemed flustered. He said to Rev. Schafer, "Will you advise us here?" Everybody looked at Rev. Schafer and waited for a response.

Case Study 5: The People Out There Coming In

Pastor Mike had a problem—at least he felt as if it were his. Unlike his previous church, Community Church was struggling—with him, with each other, and with the neighborhood. Evangelism, everybody believed, was important. But it wasn't easy. Some wondered if this church would survive.

At his previous church, a State university was almost next door. There Pastor Mike's ministry had gone well, with large numbers of university students involved in the church's ministries, including service and evangelistic programs in the community. These young adults and the other congregation members encouraged each other in ministry.

When Mike received a call to another church, one that also was close to a college community, he naturally expected similar results. And for ten years in this second ministry his expectations were met—the college students and other neighbors joined the church, doubling its size. But then, for no apparent reason, the church began a steady decline. Fewer college students came; some strong families in the church moved to suburban neighborhoods and chose churches nearer to their homes. The congregation that remained seemed to lose its heart for evangelism and its vision.

Pastor Mike and a few people close to him saw the demise and began to focus on neighborhood children, with clubs after school, Sunday school invitations, and more. The congregation at first went along with this emphasis, teaching and serving in the programs, but gradually backed away. One of the tensions was different expectations for the neighborhood children, who sometimes described their activities outside the church or used language that some parents did not want their own children to learn.

Now Pastor Mike had little energy to face these problems; neither did the council; and more longtime members were tired, leaving, or begging for change. Something had to be done.