

# Give Us Leaders, Not Managers

*Ideas to  
ponder from  
the Methodists*

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and  
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*Speaking to delegates assembled for the 1989 Annual Council of the General Conference, North American Division president Charles E. Bradford called for leaders to become truly leaders, not simply managers. In such a time as this, he said, the church needs more men and women of vision to move God's church ahead.*

*Following his thoughts, we present this provocative article by two Duke Divinity School professors who are calling for more leaders and fewer managers within the slowly declining United Methodist Church. While the SDA Church differs in important respects from the United Methodist Church, the ideas presented here deserve our consideration and, where applicable, implementation.*

**L**eaders are persons with a vision that they are able to articulate. They can name the needs, desires, and hopes of the people. They have a charisma that inspires confidence. The people sense that the leader understands them and is working on their behalf. Because of this, they will follow into new and uncharted paths.

Leaders establish new institutions; they revitalize and reform old ones. They tend to be controversial because they inevitably challenge existing social structures and accepted ways of doing things. Leaders will inspire both love and enmity, but never indifference.

In contrast, *managers* accept the validity of the institutional status quo and give their attention to its maintenance. They see that everything is done correctly by the proper person and consistent with precedent. In due course, the institution becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to serve a larger goal. Because managers assume the validity of the organization, they expect the constituents to be loyal to and supportive of the institution. This loyalty is expected even if the people do not feel that the institution is serving them and even if they are opposed to what the institution is doing.

Managers' status is derived from their particular positions. A great deal of time and energy goes into defining and protecting one's area of responsibility, or "turf." It does not matter whether the manager thinks of himself or herself as a political "liberal" or "conservative"; any change is threatening and will be resisted.

Every institution needs both leaders and managers; there are certain routine tasks that must be attended to. The problem has become that the United Methodist Church is dominated by managers. Maintaining the institution is their major concern. More attention is being given to the form and composition of church organizations than to



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ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN CHADWICK



what these groups are actually accomplishing.

### What Jobs Are Considered Important?

The proportion of the *Discipline* [the polity book of the United Methodist Church] devoted to the general agencies is an indication of the importance given to this part of the church. It is generally accepted, particularly among clergy, that the most significant positions are administrative and bureaucratic. The individual who moves from being a pastor of a local church to a position in a general agency is perceived as being promoted. The reverse is also true, as one who leaves a bureaucratic staff job to become a local church pastor is perceived as having been demoted.

To rectify past practices, which tended to exclude minorities and women, the denomination has been placing them in administrative and bureaucratic posts. A complicated quota system has been set up to ensure that women, ethnic minorities, persons with handicapping conditions, youth, young adults, and older adults will be represented as voting members of agency boards.<sup>1</sup> Executives are under considerable pressure to employ minorities and women. It is a curious, almost tragic circumstance that has led our women and minority members to accept the notion that the way for the church to rectify past inequities is to have more female and minority managers.

The result of all this is that much time and energy goes into management of the institution. This is time and effort that is not going into preaching, winning persons to the gospel, building up congregations, and ministering to people. The sad fact is that the newest group (minorities and women) to move into leadership in the denomination has accepted some of the least desirable and most organizationally conservative values of the persons it is attempting to displace. Nothing is changing but the actors. Minority bureaucrats fail to increase our minority membership. People do not join a congregation, saying, "Let's become United Methodists; they have an agency executive who is Hispanic."

All too often we have tried to attack the problem of the lack of ethnic evangelization by our church by removing effective ethnic pastors and moving them into positions that cut them off from the possibility of evangelizing anyone into the denominational structure beyond the local church.

### The Rhetoric and the Reality

The self-image of most denominational officials is not that of institution managers. Many of these people probably see themselves as leading the church into the battle against such evils as racism, sexism, ageism, "handicapism" (an awkward contribution to the language invented by a church agency), and perhaps even other

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"isms" yet to be discovered. The rhetoric is that of bold leadership; the reality is that of control and maintenance of the institutional status quo at all levels of the connectional structure and suppression of alternative points of view.

### The Desired Type of Leader

It is axiomatic that people get the kind of leaders they want. If this is the case, then United Methodists, and particularly the clergy, want managers who will care for and preserve the institution as it is. Managers tend the institutional machinery. They are not threatening because they can be counted on to see that no radical changes will be made and that no tough choices will be faced. They may be dull, but they are comfortable. There will be some conflict, but it will be among people or groups who aspire to be the managers. We are told that there is nothing wrong with the machinery; we just need more female or

Black or conservative or liberal managers to run the machinery. The names on the doors change, but not the machinery; so nothing changes. The long-term result is a kind of institutional dry rot, which preserves the form after the strength has gone. The end result is, predictably, fatal.

Clergy tend to be comfortable with the denominational managers because they can be trusted to maintain the status quo. They are the main beneficiaries of the machinery. The laypersons who are elected to denominational offices in both the annual conference and the general church seem quickly to take on the perspective of the clergy. Despite the attempt of United Methodism to include laypersons in and on the various agencies, there is little evidence that it has had any effect in altering either the style or the direction of the denomination. The machinery is greater even than the laity; it turns all of us into managers.

While United Methodist laypeople will patiently tolerate managers as pastors of local churches, they welcome and respond to leaders. Laypersons want their church and their pastor to be effective. Members talking about their minister will often say, "He is a good man, but . . ." This is followed by some comment that reflects disappointment in a pastor who is uninspiring, unimaginative, and perhaps downright dull.

Dozens of congregations that are in trouble have been studied. These studies reveal that the three factors most important for revitalizing these dying congregations are *leadership, leadership, leadership*. In a declining congregation, the pastor appears to be depressed, impotent, immobile, not in control, a passive victim of the surrounding neighborhood or of the squabbling lay leaders or of the national bureaucracy; any alibi is given for the pastor's inability to see a vision of the church and to communicate that vision to the laity.

When pressed to lead, these managers become rigidly legalistic, invoking one paragraph in the *Discipline* as their authority because they lack the leadership skills to convince, to convert, and to persuade. On the other



hand, researchers can point with joy to a number of United Methodist congregations in which almost any obstacle has been overcome by the firm, visionary, enthusiastic leadership of a pastor who is a leader.

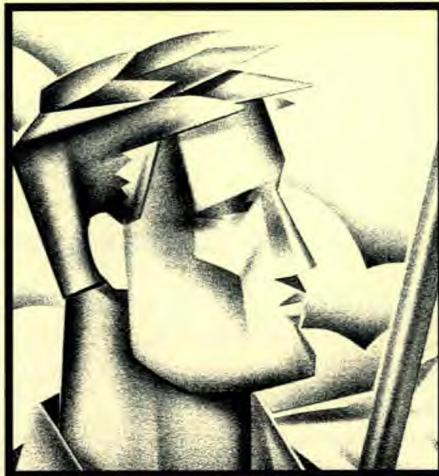
Take the case of the United Methodist church in Ossining, New York.<sup>2</sup> Three years ago their pastor, the Reverend Paul Bowles, was told, "We're old; we can't do much." Today the attitude is different.

For many years the Ossining church had no Sunday school. It had been 35 years since the last Vacation Bible School. By 1983 there was barely a child left to light the candles on the altar. *Hopeless* was the tenor of all conversations about the parish's future.

The pastor went to work. During that summer he made 375 calls. He also spent time finding and training Sunday school teachers. When the prospective teachers were asked to name their greatest fear, they replied, "What if nobody comes?" But somebody did come; the day Sunday school opened, 30 children came.

Other things happened. The children brought brothers and sisters. Many had never attended Sunday school. Some parents followed. Their youth group grew to 20. Ten young people were confirmed in 1985 and 12 in 1986; there are now two children's choirs. Last summer's vacation Bible school had 92 participants. The church is now a vital agent of ministry in families and the community.

Growing and effective congregations have ministers who are leaders, not managers. Vital denominations have leaders who lead, who chart new courses, and who inspire persons to follow, not simply to manage the institutional status quo. A strong leader releases strength in all of us. Too many clergy and laity today feel impotent, unable to move, because they have been so effectively thwarted in their earnest efforts to get things moving. While we agree with most of Bishop Wilke's *And Are We Yet Alive?* in its enthusiastic call for renewal, we predict that such calls will produce only cynicism and de-



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spair if we fail to attend to the specific changes that are needed to turn our enthusiasm into the power to be effective. A revitalized United Methodism must place persons in official positions who are leaders and not simply managers, persons who have a vision of what the church can be and who inspire other people to risk making that vision a reality.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

If it is true that the United Methodist Church is dominated by managers instead of leaders, the question is What, if anything, can be done to change the situation? A change in the type and style of people now directing the denomination is not only possible but also absolutely essential.

First and most important, *United Methodists must become more assertive*. We are too passive and accepting of what church officials do. There is an ethic at work that believes that one should not disagree or make waves. Such action is thought to produce conflict that will greatly damage the church. Mavericks are silenced or

driven out. When this is combined with the feeling that persons in the local church cannot influence what the denominational agencies do, the result is a debilitating lethargy.

Furthermore, a kind of halo effect surrounds the minister. Some laypersons are reluctant to challenge the clergy because the laypersons seem to feel that to do so is almost like challenging God. The laity assume that the clergy—by training, vocation, or divine gifts—automatically know what is best for the church when, in reality, the clergy may be among the least able to look honestly at the church. This is particularly true in regard to denominational officials. United Methodists, both clergy and laity, must demand leaders and not simply managers who will maintain the institutional status quo.

Because an institution employs the type of leaders the constituents want, the people, if they desire, can have a different type of leader. When the institution is not doing well, the people tend to demand a change in leadership. The United Methodist Church has not been doing well. "If my company had lost 13 percent of its business in the past 20 years, I would be out of a job," one corporate vice president told us. Resistance to ideas for innovation can be expected from those who have presided over our current decline. It is time that the people called the church officials into account and demanded changes.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> The 1984 *Discipline* provides that each annual conference shall nominate at least 15 persons to a jurisdictional pool, out of which the managers of the various general agencies are elected. This pool is to contain clergy (including at least one woman), laywomen, laymen, and at least one person from each of the Asian American, Black American, Hispanic American, and Native American minority groups. Age categories include youth, young adults, and older adults. Finally, the nominees must include persons who have a handicapping condition (par. 805.b).

<sup>2</sup> "Depressed Church Reaches Out for Cure," *People to People* 2, No. 1 (1986): 1.

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