

Earlier in the year I attended a weekend retreat which had the theme “Courage to Lead”. After three years in the role of Synod Superintendent and without any real training for the job I realised it was high time I took some time out to reflect on the task of leadership.

The thought of being a leader isn’t one that I’ve ever found particularly easy. As an introvert I’m a lot happier working behind the scenes. I also trained for ministry at a time when it wasn’t very fashionable to talk about leadership. I guess the church was going through one of those angsty periods when the whole idea of leadership sounded a bit too directive. The focus when I was at college was on enabling and empowering people rather than leading them and that’s still the kind of language that most appeals to me.

Over the years, however, I’ve come to see that leadership can’t be avoided. In any institution there needs to be a person or group who will take on the responsibility of oversight which is about doing things like helping to build a common purpose, making sure we hold onto our vision, keeping a sense of the bigger picture, nurturing the best in others, giving direction in times of crisis and on occasion making hard decisions. Without a person or group who is charged with doing these sorts of things, a parish, business or Synod will falter, lose its sense of unity and direction and struggle to move forward.

The “Courage to Lead” retreat was described as an opportunity for people in leadership to reconnect soul and role, to be personally renewed and to become forces for positive change in their workplaces, professions and communities. The event was based on the ideas and writings of the Quaker educator and activist Parker Palmer who has done a lot of work in the area of leadership and spirituality or leadership as an inner journey.

That, for me, was the big learning of the retreat: the idea that leaders need to be on an inner journey for who we are as leaders is just as important as what we do. Leadership isn’t just about the tasks we undertake; it’s also about the way we are as people. Our values, character, attitudes and personality are all as essential as our skills. As Paul said in today’s reading, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”, a life characterised by qualities like humility and gentleness, patience and love.

Parker Palmer argues that the best leaders “work from a place of integrity in themselves, from their hearts”. If they don’t, he says, they “can’t inspire trustful relationships [and] in the absence of trust, organisations fall apart.” That question of integrity is really important. Parker suggests that in any group or institution people look at the leader and size them up, asking “Is this a divided person or a person of integrity? Is what we see what we get? Is he or she the same on the inside as on the outside?” Is this a person we can trust and follow?

When I thought about it that seemed really obvious but also very logical: that people look at us to decide whether our values, character and integrity make us leaders who can be trusted. Now when I say “us”, I’m not just talking about me as Synod Superintendent or those of you who are presbyters. We’re all of us - lay and ordained - leaders in our parishes, our local communities and our cultural groups so what I’m saying applies to us all. Our people are looking at us to see if we are leaders who can be trusted.

They’re looking at us to see if they can see qualities like fairness and honesty, patience and compassion, gentleness and courage. They’re looking at us to see if they can see the ability to be vulnerable, to change our minds or admit when we’re wrong. And especially they’re looking at us to see if they can see people who stay true to who they are, who try to live by the values they profess and who stand up for the things they believe in.

If they can see those kinds of things, they’ll be far more likely to give us their trust and commit themselves fully to the work we’re engaged in together. They may even take our actions as a guide to their own and seek to live with similar values, character and integrity.

Now all of us practice integrity in different ways. For some of us it means staying true to gospel values in our workplaces. For others it’s about taking a stand for justice and inclusiveness in the face of opposition or indifference. For some of us it means honouring our identity and finding ways to hold onto important cultural values in a new land. For others it’s about staying in relationship with people despite deep disagreements, even in some situations being able to put the wounds of the past behind us in order that we all might move forward with grace and forgiveness.

None of these things is easy; sometimes they can feel like the hardest things in the world. Yet when we practice integrity we become the kind of leaders that our people trust and want to imitate. For when we stay true to ourselves - to our values, our beliefs and our identity - we give others the courage to do the same. And we build up the body of Christ.

Source:

L.J. Rittenhouse, “Leadership and the Inner Journey: An Interview with Parker Palmer” in *Leader to Leader*, Fall 2001, pp.26-33

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