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Learning Leadership in Context

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Introduction

Once upon a time we believed that a good theological education was acquired in the classroom and that knowledge gained by examining various texts was to be applied later in the context. More recently, we have come to suspect that as a mode of theological education, this “trickle-down” process is more likely to lead to people who know about theology in a theoretical sense but who are less able to do theology in the context of a pastoral situation. Theological educators are now persuaded that a good theological education necessarily involves a significant interaction between texts and contexts.

It is true that issues specific to a local or global context need to be examined critically in the light of the historical tradition and vision promoted through classroom engagement. When the biblical text is opened up within the context, both the context and the text itself are interpreted in fresh ways. When the context is considered to be a serious partner in the process of theological education then theological assumptions and visions are appropriately challenged by the reality of what is happening in particular circumstances. The context itself becomes a source of new theological wisdom and action. Context really does matter.

For the purposes of this article “context” will refer to any organizational system, people or surrounding environment which provides occasions and experiences for ministry, learning and growth. “Leadership” will be defined as a commitment and contribution to the quality of life, work and society. Those committed to leadership within the church and world seek to

create conditions in which people can be fully human, reflecting the image and glory of God. Church leaders are concerned for the realization of the realm of God, for justice, peace and the integrity of all creation. Leaders live by a pervading understanding that all that they do either contributes to or detracts from the fabric of life for everyone. Whatever we do in the web of life we do to ourselves. Leaders know this. It follows that learning about leadership cannot be divorced from context and that all contexts are connected in the web of life.

While much about leadership can be studied in the classroom (e.g., leadership theories, leadership styles and approaches, traits and outcomes of leadership), the nature of the context itself exerts a profound impact on the questions of leadership and upon the methods and behaviours that are appropriate. Theological education that has as its purpose the preparation of persons for church leadership takes place in a variety of contexts. It is easy to imagine some of the differences required of leadership in rural, inner-city, or prison contexts. Thus the context becomes an active participant in shaping and creating particular understandings of leadership.

The people in the context clearly contribute to the development and formation of actual leaders. Sometimes this happens serendipitously, and at other times by intentional reflection. People to whom legitimate authority is given to exercise public leadership within a context are appropriately accountable and in a position to receive feedback on their words and actions. Jerald Apps, in his book *Leadership*, states that "there is no such thing as the abstract study of leadership. If you are going to be the kind of leader we need today, you learn by working on the job."¹

The question of how we learn about leadership in context can be explored from several angles. Since I am a Director of Theological Field Education, I will focus upon how we learn about church leadership in the diverse contexts of supervised field education placements. Field placements can be congregational, institutional (e.g., hospitals, prisons, schools), community-based (e.g., food banks, shelters, funeral homes), rural, suburban or urban. Field placements can be in local or global contexts. The availability of such diverse placements underlines the fact that context is an important consideration in education for church leadership.

In this article I will highlight three questions about learning leadership in context. First, what do we need to learn about leadership and what kind of leadership will be helpful to the church as it enters the 21st century? Second, how do we pay attention to context and the ways it affects the nature of leadership? Third, how can the context become an intentional participant in the development and formation of effective leadership for the church?

Church Leadership and the 21st Century

In turbulent and rapidly changing times leadership requirements and challenges are great. Massive economic restructuring, political reorganization at global, international and regional levels, and the technological, communication and information explosion all impact the question of what kind of moral and ethical leadership will be necessary. It is not difficult for us to imagine the worst and best case scenarios for the next century of human interaction. Yet we cannot say with assurance what, exactly, the next several decades will need in terms of leadership.

This suggests that the development of leadership capacity should now be considered an ongoing, lifelong process. Traditional models of leadership focussed upon characteristics and qualities of leaders, the effectiveness of leaders, and upon approaches, styles and methods of leadership. There was much talk of whether leaders were made or born. Several leadership theories such as trait theory, situational and transactional approaches, and management paradigms were popular. Now we are aware that there is no "best way to lead" nor is there one dominant model of leadership. It is clear that a "technical" approach to leading based on lists of skills to develop and recipes to follow will no longer suffice, if it ever did.

Even the very notion of "leadership" itself has been scrutinized of late. Original definitions of leadership (which included concepts of directing, influencing, controlling, setting the pace, heading an expedition or group) have been critiqued by voices from the margins. Definitions which gave the appearance of placing leaders "above" others or assigning them higher value have been rejected. We now know that the "heroic image" of leadership, where one person assumes all the responsibility for

leadership, not only inhibits any leadership sharing but also runs the risk of burnout. Viewing leadership as “one-way” (leaders lead and followers follow) blinds us to the reality that leadership fundamentally involves a relationship between leaders and their constituents.

In the 1980s effective leaders were described as those who pursued *excellence* with great vigour and determination. Good leaders kept one step ahead of the group, achieved the most with the least friction, induced respect and co-operation and got positive results. Many leaders in the 1990s can be characterized by terms such as *facilitator, animator, or enabler*. These approaches, while seeking to achieve maximum participation of diverse parties and the elimination of authoritarian tendencies, frequently result in the exclusion of the leader’s own insight, wisdom or vision and an inappropriate relinquishment of genuine authority. Kenneth Callahan, in his book *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, argues strongly that “[t]he time for leaders has come, the time for enablers has passed. In the church culture of the 1950’s, it was possible for the church to focus on developing enablers. In the unchurched culture of the 1980’s, it is decisively important that the church focus on developing leaders.”²

In what remains of this decade and beyond, many of these elements of leadership need to continue to be valued and developed. However, inasmuch as they also can contribute to the promotion of individualistic or hierarchical models of leadership, the relevance of which is questionable for leadership in the 21st century, the nature of leadership itself needs to be in a continuing process of learning to lead.

We need to pose the question: “Does theological education still lead us to believe that there ought to be a theory, a how-to-article, book or guide sheet that will give directions for most, if not all, leadership situations?” The reality today is that, in many situations, we simply do not know what to do. Personally, I often feel that I just take a deep breath, start doing something, make it up as I go along and hope that, if I pay enough attention to what is going on, something will be learned or gained in the process.

Leaders in the 21st century must develop a capacity for leadership that goes beyond gaining leadership skills. Of course,

certain basic competencies, such as communication and interpersonal skills, will continue to be important. However, leadership in the emerging age must reflect the ability to lead in ambiguous, unknown and difficult situations where reliable information and "we've done it before" strategies simply are not available. This emerging perspective on leadership will reflect a shift from "a mechanistic attitude marked by objectivity, control, predictability, competition, efficiency, and single views of knowledge to an attitude that values context, shared power, multiple relationships, and varied knowledge sources in which predictability is often impossible."³ Learning leadership becomes developmental, never static, always in flux.

Leaders increasingly will need to experiment "on the spot" with leadership methods. Since the overall context generally is volatile and rapidly changing, leadership approaches may not always be known to the leader prior to trying them. Skills and approaches are often likely to emerge as leaders invent them by taking risks and participating in new situations. In essence we become less like painters and more like artists.

The artist, of whatever sort, tends to possess extraordinary competency with respect to such things as the nature of his or her materials, the history of the particular art, the ways the artistic product is likely to be experienced by others, methods of working, and the like. But all of these unitary competencies are subordinate to something else: the expressiveness of the artist, whether we call this expressiveness "creativity" or "insight" or "inspiration" or whatever.⁴

In this sense, leadership becomes the art of moving beyond the basics in order to attempt to wrest coherence and meaning out of reality and that which even is beyond our grasp or presently comprehended. Since meaning evolves and is created in relationship with others, learning about leadership best happens in context. In the act of describing reality in the presence of other persons, a deeper realization of meaning begins to emerge. Drath and Palus actually define leadership as this sort of *meaning-making*:

Meaning can be thought of as a cognitive and emotional framework (an internal structure of ideas and feelings) that allows a person to know (in the sense of understand) some world version (a representation of the way things are and the way they ought to be) and that places the person in relation to this world version. Given this way of thinking about meaning, meaning-making then consists

of the creation, nurturance, and evolution (or revolution) of these cognitive and emotional frameworks. When the making of such frameworks happens in a community of practice (people united in a common enterprise who share a history and thus certain values, beliefs, ways of talking, and ways of doing things), then we can say that leadership is happening.⁵

Rather than training individuals to be leaders, the focus here is upon viewing leadership as part of a context. Leadership becomes a community-specific process in which everyone is engaged. In this model, people are encouraged to develop their own leadership in ways that improve everyone's ability to participate in the process of leadership.

The result, then, is a new perspective on leadership which says we must be immersed in a continual and contextual process of learning about leadership. Becoming a leader is more of a lifelong journey than a definitive endpoint. One could say that the sign of a good leader is one who is constantly asking the question: "What am I learning in this context now?" The most significant learning about leadership that we can be about in the 21st century is to develop attitudes and a set of competencies for continuous and critically reflective learning about leadership in context.

The Nature of Leadership in Context

Recently a Master of Divinity graduate wrote about her experience of being settled on a rural pastoral charge in Newfoundland, a severe contrast to the urban places she had lived. In reflecting on the nature and exercise of her leadership within this new and different context, she wrote:

It has been intriguing getting to know these people—they are friendly and generous, but someone "from away" is never really accepted. The clerical title allows access to people's lives that someone moving in here would not have in another role. It has been delightful, too, discovering the rich assortment of traditional music and of writing that seems to be an outlet for people of all ages here. Their church music is dirge-like, but their other life music is anything but a dirge. I've even found myself to be handed an accordion periodically at someone's house or an event.⁶

In this brief illustration we can see how context has the potential to teach us about our leadership. Context exerts a profound impact on the development of church leadership and

there are many layers to the question of context which need to be explored.

As stated earlier, the focus of this article is learning leadership in the context of theological field education. The context of the field placement is engaged in several ways. Even at the beginning of the placement, as the learner becomes oriented to the setting and starts to develop a learning plan, an awareness of the complexity of the context is fostered. The learner begins to see beyond the ministry tasks which he or she might be involved in to the wider mission, ministry and neighbourhood context of the placement. Then, as specific tasks of ministry are performed during the field placement, and reflected upon in supervision, the learner is presented with opportunities to see, verify or modify the values and assumptions embedded in leadership actions. As well as this intentional reflection on specific leadership activities, the wider ministries of the placement can be observed and reflected upon in a critical manner. Thus the values, expectations and assumptions embedded in both the placement and the learner come to light.

Learning about leadership in context requires developing an appreciation for the complexity of context, as well as practising skills of reading and understanding a particular context. The congregation or ministry context is a culture in its own right and deserves a humble watching and listening. Specific elements and issues of context need to be engaged in order to learn more fully about the impact of context on leadership matters. These elements include a social and theological analysis, as well as descriptive categories which help to assess major characteristics, strengths, gaps, conflicts, crises, norms and shared values.

Early in the field placement, participants can be encouraged to observe, gather information, analyze and reflect in supervision upon the elements and issues discovered. The information might include the following areas:

1) Community analysis: (a) location: urban, suburban, rural; (b) programs and needs/gaps in the community; (c) relationship of organization to the wider community (does it represent the centre or the edge of the wider community?).

2) Organizational analysis: (a) history (common history, defining experiences, traditions); (b) membership (active, inactive, total); (c) age, gender, relational status, ethnicity, edu-

cation, occupations, economic class; (d) symbols, rituals, social norms.

3) Programmatic analysis: (a) mission statements and goals; (b) worship, education, pastoral care, outreach, etc.; (c) quality of programs; (d) gaps between needs and programs.

4) Plant analysis: (a) physical structures, buildings and conditions; (b) relationship to needs and programs; (c) special features.

5) Operational analysis: (a) decision-making structures; (b) budget; (c) staff (including relationship to committees); (d) leadership (concentration/spread, style, gifts and skills); (e) use of power (is it overt or covert? are there well-defined power bases within the lay leadership? whose interests provide a direction for the church as a whole?); (f) handling of conflict (addressed, hidden or covered up—where are the dissenting voices?).

For those unfamiliar with gathering such information, learners can be guided toward documentation, people, places and questions which help to develop skills of observation and analyses that are transferable to a variety of contexts.

Of course, in addition to the descriptive elements listed above, learning about leadership in context is enhanced by probing the multiplicity of contexts within and around a particular context. For example, how do the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of the wider context affect the nature of leadership within the specific context? How do systemic or governing policies affect or contribute to definitions and expectations of ministry in the setting? The nature of ministry exercised within a prison setting will be qualitatively different from that of a high school, hospital or church. What is required of leadership within each of these settings will be influenced by, at the very least, regional and national policies, client populations, and social climate and opinion.

We need also to ask: What is the context of the person engaged in ministry and how do personal experience, family background, and life history affect the leadership that is provided? What personal and theological assumptions are carried about leaders and leadership? Similarly, what assumptions are made about others? What resources, experiences, strengths and gifts can be brought in leadership to the context? What

skills, resources, experiences are already present in the context? What personal values are appropriate for this context and which are not? What new values might need to be considered that may be more consistent with this leadership context?

All contexts are simultaneously local and global. We are living in a time when who we are and what we do truly requires a *world view*, moving from thinking and acting locally to thinking and acting locally and globally at the same time. Learning leadership in this kind of global context means being aware that multiple belief systems, diverse peoples, cultures and customs reside within each and every context in which we find ourselves engaged in ministry. In this sense, every theological field placement is a cross-cultural experience that will involve feelings of disorientation and discomfort. Learning about leadership in context is aided by persons choosing placements that will test their zones of familiarity and challenge them to cross established boundaries of comfort. If we truly believe that learning leadership is a lifelong and contextual process then leaders will be measured not so much by the knowledge or expertise they possess, but by their capacity to learn from the unknown, the unexpected, the unfamiliar. As David Ramey suggests, the task of leadership requires "the courage of conviction to venture beyond our comfort zone of existing knowledge and experience to discover new and alternative ways of thinking, acting, and behaving to lift ourselves and our organizations to greater levels of accomplishment."⁷

For many of us, learning involves a transformation as we bring old ideas, previous experiences, and long-standing beliefs and attitudes into question, examine them and then modify or leave them behind. The supervisor (ordained or lay) and other designated people within the context (usually referred to as Teaching Parish Committees, Site Reflection Groups, or Lay Training Committees) are foundational supports and guides for this process of learning about leadership.

The Role of the Context in Developing Leadership

The context itself plays a critical role in assisting the development of leadership capacity. The field placement enters a partnership with the theological school in which all parties demonstrate a commitment to the process of developing leadership for the church. This process includes the committed

involvement of a supervisor and other designated persons who seek to create an environment for continuous learning, to develop the capacity of the learner for critical self-reflection, interpretation and action, and to understand together the nature of leadership.

In much of the literature concerned with leadership development, a remarkably consistent finding is that there are two basic dimensions which need to be addressed in context. These dimensions have less to do with gaining knowledge or acquiring skills and more to do with developing new perspectives which enable us to see and hear differently what is happening in the context. The first dimension is the cultivation of a habit of critical reflection on experience and the second is the development of a heightened awareness of self and patterns of relationship with others, including attention to patterns of communication and conflict.

In the preparation of persons for church leadership the first dimension necessarily embraces reflection that seeks to illumine and interpret the theology present in human experience. When day to day behaviour is infused with a habit of theological reflection that seeks to draw out the faith-meaning expressed within a specific context, then it becomes possible to provide leadership that leads to contextual sustainability and meaningful long-term values, visions, and purposes.

The field placement contributes significantly to leadership development in several ways. These include the provision of real opportunities to test out and exercise leadership, consistent and concrete feedback about communications, interactions and actions, and supervision which reflects critically on models, visions, assumptions, convictions and methods of leadership.

Much learning takes place as we live and face situations we have not faced before. We experience and, as we experience, we learn. In some instances, we have time to experience and then reflect on the experience and learn from it. In other situations, especially ones that are unanticipated, we experience and learn simultaneously. It is hard to learn "theory" about courage. We learn courage by taking risks and by emulating those who exhibit courage. Even when we are afraid to try something we try it anyway. Whatever happens, the field placement provides a safe learning environment that allows us to be vulnerable and to enlarge our zone of comfort.

In the field placement, learners have the freedom to practice leading groups, experiment with team-work projects and lead vision-making or long-range, goal-setting processes. By taking such exploratory steps we learn to act with a new mind while assessing the congruence of our insights with the practical realities of life and events as we imagined them. Thus, the context serves to provide the kind of human resources, structures and actual experiences which will continue to serve as frameworks for learning about leadership.

In his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schon indicates that a fundamental leadership capacity is the ability to engage in a continuous process of reflection in action. He also indicates that teaching this skill is a fundamental responsibility of those who seek to educate others for professional leadership. This capacity for critical self-reflection enables leaders and those they serve to be able to analyze actions in the midst of activity, in order to find a deeper ground of meaning, purpose and strategy. This is a stance toward life and work that provides for simultaneous contemplation and action, allowing us to observe and act with the skill of choosing more appropriate solutions and priorities for the tasks at hand.

Supervisors and site reflection groups teach this skill when they meet regularly with participants to reflect on their involvement in the field placement. They can ask learners to describe what they did and why they did it in particular leadership situations. In the act of describing in the presence of others, a deeper realization of meaning begins to emerge. Observable changes also can be noted and commented upon.

Examples of substantive material which can be carried into reflection sessions include the following:

- * leadership situations which caused pleasure or satisfaction;
- * leadership situations which caused strife, anxiety, pain;
- * leadership situations which were totally unplanned, caught you off guard, and in which you had to exercise leadership immediately, without preparation.

Critical reflection can be drawn to deeper levels by the following questions:

- * When and where did the event occur?

* What was the background to the event?

* Who were the people involved? What roles did they have? What did they do?

* What dimensions made it pleasurable or troublesome? Why?

* What feelings did you have during or after?

* What were your theological assumptions? What were theirs?

* How did you respond then? Later?

* What went well? Why? What did not go well? Why?

* What would you now do differently? Why?

Ultimately, leadership has less to do with controlling the circumstances of our work and more to do with responding to those circumstances in such a way that they transform the leader and the constituency to new levels of self-awareness and action. Strong leadership will always ask the question: "What are we called to do differently as a result of our experience?"

These days, our critical reflection on experience often reveals to us that our old knowledge does not fit and that we need to unlearn, or "reframe", our knowledge in the light of the present context. If common sense says we are supposed to "hug the wall" then we may well need to try leaning away from it! Some knowledge will be brought forward and some may well need to be set aside and replaced. It is this capacity to stand apart from our immediate circumstances which allows us to gain perspective, interpret actions in the light of larger visions and create new strategies or opportunities for more effective leadership. These days pastoral contexts require much more than "worker bees" or "maintenance ministry". Leadership for the emerging age requires critical thinkers and creative people who recognize that we can no longer always be prepared and that what may be called for is innovation and courage.

Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is reported to have said, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."⁸ Learning leadership in context includes developing a spiritual awareness or consciousness that will sustain us through the joys and dilemmas of leadership. One of the most important factors in the effectiveness of leaders may be the attention that they pay to their own inner journey. Such personal awareness is only partially

achieved through solitude. Learning is always in relationship with others as well as self. Personal awareness is heightened through actual engagement with and among people in a particular context who can observe us and share honestly with us their perceptions of our words and deeds. By providing a mirror for us, others allow us to see what we do from different perspectives.

There is an integral link between the outer paradox of success and failure in leadership and the inner personal struggle for wholeness. Inevitably, those who assume the tasks and responsibilities of leadership quickly realize the ultimate dilemmas of human life which face us personally, spiritually and relationally. The context contributes to our learning about leadership by giving feedback on our personal strengths and by helping us understand our limitations.

Learners can be encouraged to identify specific things they may want or need to develop as a leader, such as alternative means for dealing with conflict or strategies for sharing power. The process of learning usually includes clearing the mind of inner barriers such as fear of failure, success or change. It is precisely in avoiding the temptation to cover up or over-extend our strengths that we find the true inner strength to lead with courage and integrity.

In the field placement, participants will have experiences in which they encounter hardship, disappointment and struggle. Through them they can face and learn the limits of the ego and find the strength of character to give others the courage of their convictions to lead responsibly in any given situation. From Jungian psychology, the "shadow" of the human personality provides a helpful framework for understanding the less developed aspects of our personalities. In the shadow we find primitive, childlike and fearful expressions of the hidden resources within ourselves. This shadow has a fundamental and practical merit for the task of leadership. For example, the assertive leader who becomes more passive and responsive may make a breakthrough necessary to change the circumstances at hand.

None of us, however, is capable of achieving complete solutions to any human dilemma of consequence by ourselves. The measure of mature leaders is their ability to assimilate increasingly complex and sophisticated human paradoxes within

themselves, their relationships, their organizations. In addressing these enormous challenges, mature leaders learn through the voices of others in the context to rely upon those voices and call upon the strengths and abilities of others. Wholeness and integrity of leadership are achieved through the development and appreciation of relationships with others who bring diversity to our immediate context and circumstance. This is, in effect, claiming the wisdom and power of the people of God.

Supervisors and other persons within the context can pay attention to a learner's inner journey by considering the following kinds of reflection questions: Are you secure in your sense of self? Can you distinguish who you are from who the context expects you to be? Does the competence or strength of others threaten you? Do you see life in terms of win/lose? Does it feel like the outcome of this struggle is all up to you? What is your normal pattern of handling conflict? How do you feel about taking risks that might result in personal rejection? How liberated are you from the restraints of careerism or the gospel of success? How grounded are you in the midst of ambiguity and conflict? Where do you find support? What sustains you in the midst of struggle? Can you see discomfort as a sign that complacency is being challenged?

Knowing ourselves intimately and truthfully is our strongest foundation for leadership. "The key to understanding the art of leadership is to accept that it cannot be understood...The artful dimensions of leadership are felt, they are embedded in the leader's spirit rather than in the person's intellect."⁹ When we can lead from the knowledge of the depths of who we are then our leadership will be authentic, credible, and abounding in truth and grace.

Conclusion

As far as the church is concerned we know that the status quo can no longer remain. Leadership needs to be transformed at the same time as it is involved in the transformation of the church. We are in the process of meaning-making and developing leadership together in context. It is a lifelong and developmental process. Those who are affirmed as highly capable leaders will continue to learn throughout their lives. Perhaps, along with the apostle Paul, they discover that only fools for

Christ are sufficiently wise to become trustworthy and moral leaders of God's people (1 Corinthians 1:29). Though the pathways appear foggy, leaders enter the future with the hope of a people whose ultimate destination remains clear. Such foolishness surely will be wisdom enough for the journey.

Notes

- ¹ Jerald Apps, *Leadership for the Emerging Age* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994) 49.
- ² Kenneth Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Collins, 1983) 41.
- ³ Apps, *Leadership for the Emerging Age*, 18.
- ⁴ Ibid. 56.
- ⁵ W. H. Drath and C. J. Palus, *Making Common Sense: Leadership as Meaning-Making in a Community of Practice* (Greensboro, N.C.: Centre for Creative Leadership, 1994) 4.
- ⁶ Used with permission.
- ⁷ David Ramey, *Empowering Leaders* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1991) 94.
- ⁸ Ibid. 212.
- ⁹ Apps, *Leadership for the Emerging Age*, 157.