



## Ministry as Leadership By Daniel O. Aleshire

How are the practices of ministry understood and how are they learned? Is there an organizing principle for all the functions of ministry, or do they remain a list of skill sets that require separate forms of mastery? To put it another way, are these various abilities oriented toward a common purpose? I think so, and that purpose is religious leadership.

I believe that *theological* education for ministry is *leadership* education. Theological schools educate persons who, soon after they graduate, go on to congregations, parishes, or nonprofit organizations and, in one form or another, exercise leadership. This is not generally the case with medical education, legal education, or graduate liberal arts education – the fields that theological schools often claim as cousins. In most other professions, leadership positions emerge over time. New graduates engage in clerkships, internships, residencies, or hold junior practitioner status before eventually advancing to leadership positions. One of the most unique characteristics of theological education is that graduates go *immediately* into positions of leadership upon graduation, if not before. The organizations they lead may be small, but from week one, the new pastor in a parish or program director in an organization is expected to lead.

Leadership has received a lot of attention in recent years. In fact, an entire academic field has grown up around it. A rich reservoir of managerial and psychological literature has been written for understanding leadership. This literature, however, does not provide a theological resource for understanding leadership in communities of faith and, as a result, leadership gets a lot of bad press around theological schools. I have heard conversations that associate leadership with autocratic or dictatorial patterns, making leadership theologically suspect. Some associate leadership with masculine patterns of work and find it troublesome to more gender-inclusive perceptions of ministry. Others perceive leadership as limiting the power of community, rather than empowering it. These critiques notwithstanding, I would argue that good ministry is about the exercise of leadership in communities of faith. Leadership in this context needs to be understood theologically, and I'd like to identify three characteristics that are important in ministerial leadership.

First, leadership is a *function of community*, not of individuals. A violinist playing a solo does not need a conductor but an orchestra playing a symphony does. Leadership is necessary when the task to be completed is attainable only by the work of a community. The literature I have seen on leadership focuses a great deal on the attributes, skills, and characteristics of leaders. These are very important, but attention also needs to be given to



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the vocation of the community, the community's responsibility for nurturing leaders, and the community's responsibility to function as a leadable ensemble.

Second, the *vocation of the community* is what counts most. Leadership is an instrumental activity, a necessary resource for the community to accomplish its calling. Leaders help a community do its work in three ways: they remind the community of its vocation – why it exists; they give organizational coherence and direction to the community, enabling the vocation to translate into concrete tasks; and they help the community find resources to fulfill its vocation, i.e., the talents and treasure it requires. Leadership is not a function of individuals who need to be in charge of something; it is a function of communities that need leaders to help them do the job they are called to do. Leadership is about empowering and guiding the community to fulfill its calling.

The third characteristic of ministerial leadership focuses on how it is practiced. Because leadership is exercised differently in different contexts, I will focus on parish leadership. Pastors lead by their preaching, teaching, administrative attention to the congregation's work, and their care of souls. These activities help the congregation identify and remember its mission, motivate the community to undertake the work it needs to do, and help the congregation find the resources it needs to fulfill its calling. A minister does not preach in order to lead, but preaching is an act of leadership. A priest does not teach in order to lead, but likewise teaching is an act of leadership. Preaching and teaching occur because something about faith, or Scripture, or the tradition, needs to be said and needs to be heard. The exercise of the normative activities of pastoral work becomes an act of leadership.

Dan Aleshire (ats@ats.edu) is executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS). This article is an excerpt from his new book, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools*, Eerdmans, copyright 2008 Daniel O. Aleshire. Used by permission. The book can be purchased at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com).