



Lewis Center
for Church Leadership

Leading Ideas

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Leaders Stay Young

By Bishop William H. Willimon

What are the qualities of a good leader? Fortunately, Jesus defined leadership: *A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them. . . . But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."* (Luke 22:24-26)

In Jesus' topsy-turvy world, the most mature is the youngest. Most of us think we must spend years in school in order to grow up. The main factor in the clergy appointive process of my denomination is seniority. And it's a wonderful system, if you are sixty-three years old, like me, with forty years of experience!

But here comes Jesus saying, "If you lead in my Kingdom, you've got to be young." And of course, Jesus himself was a young adult. As I read the gospels – with Jesus lurching from this place to that place, always on the move, talking fast, dropping one bomb after another without giving us sufficient time to reflect and ponder what he's talking about – I think to myself, "Christianity may be a faith best suited for people under thirty-three!" And yet my beloved church has an average age of fifty-nine.

The church needs the questions, criticism, ideas and innovations of people under thirty-five. When we content ourselves with a church that limits its ministries mostly to the needs of one generation (those of us over thirty-five), we deny ourselves the energy, insights and good that youth has to offer. At this time in history, what we need most is not wisdom, continuity, and deference to the past, but rather Holy Spirit-induced originality, innovation, risk, and transformation. We can't wait for younger leaders to spend twenty years in ministry before we entrust them with serious responsibilities. We need them to take over now and do what novice, youthful, uninformed, inexperienced people do so well.

Yet, Jesus didn't say, "I want all my followers *to be* young." Rather, he said that he wanted his disciples to lead *as if* they were young. We are not to be like the aging, social-security-gobbling, AARP-entitlement-loving pagans. Instead, to quote Jesus, "the greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves."

It's easy to ask questions, seek help, crave mentoring, and learn new skills when you are just starting out – when you are unsteady, green, and goofy. But that's hard for those of us over fifty. We have been in this ministry so long we think we actually know just how to do ministry. We would rather tell you how to do ministry just like we did it than to say, "Our church really

has some great needs. We've tried some things, some of which God blessed and some of which God didn't. Kid, has God given you any bright ideas? Tell me!"

What would it mean for me, in my fourth decade of ministry, to "be like the youngest"? I bet it would mean to ask more questions, to be more honest about the limits of my way of doing things, to look for help from whomever God gave it to, and above all to remember that, in the words of Jesus, "God is of the living and not the dead." Jesus is always in motion and, if we are going to follow Jesus, we've got to be like the youngest.

My wife, Patsy, and I have noticed that since coming to this new ministry in Alabama, we feel oddly younger – as if we're in the first days of our marriage, as if we're at our very first church. I think it may be because the church has called me to a ministry for which I have no experience, few qualifications, and little knowledge. I have to ask for help, read boring business books on management, and get a coach – like I was twenty-something. And it's wonderful to be young!

There is something about our God that loves to raise the dead – to bring new worlds out of nothing, life out of death, a future where we thought all was past. A dead god can never surprise you. A fake god (idol) will never make you feel stupid. We cannot worship a living God without continually turning and becoming like a little child. Discipleship is a young person's vocation.

And we older pastors are fortunate that God is continuing to look out for us, to send us fresh new vitality. And all of us are fortunate to be saved by a living, itinerant God, who keeps rebirthing us, keeps refreshing us in our life's journeys, promises even at the end of our journey to say to us, "Surprise! Your life has not ended. It's begun. Arise! Be young."

Bishop William H. Willimon (wwillimon@northalabamaumc.org) is bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. This article is adapted from an address delivered at Wesley Theological Seminary's commencement on May 10, 2010, at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC.

The Right Question

*Leaders do not need answers.
Leaders must have the right questions.*

Jim Collins says that great enterprises take risks, but they avoid risks that might jeopardize their future. When there is uncertainty about possible new and risky ventures, Collins suggests three questions:

What's the upside, if events turn out well?
What's the downside, if events go very badly?
Can you live with the downside?

Mutual Mentoring

By Ann A. Michel

In a traditional mentoring relationship, an older, wiser colleague provides wisdom, counsel, and advice to a younger, less-skilled aspirant. Today, however, the notion of *reverse mentoring* is gaining traction as a way for established leaders to stay attuned to contemporary cultural trends. Few things could be more needed in the church today, given the importance of connecting with younger generations.

The concept of reverse mentoring invites us to think about mentoring in a different new way, reassessing our unilateral assumptions that:

- one partner in the relationship has all the answers
- one person gives wisdom and advice while the other takes it
- only one partner is the beneficiary of the mentoring relationship

What if we acknowledged that all good mentoring relationships are *mutual*? What if we sought a paradigm of mentoring in which:

- information and knowledge flow both ways
- there is give and take
- both partners learn from each other

In *A Work of Heart* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), Reggie McNeal suggests that the model for this type of mentoring is found in the way that Jesus and his disciples functioned as a mutual learning community. When we read the Gospels through this lens, we see how the very disciples whom Jesus teaches and mentors also teach and mentor him, serving as his sounding board and feedback loop.

Cross-generational mentoring relationships at their best permit young and old to *serve each other* in a spirit of humility and openness (Creps, *Reverse Mentoring*, 2009) with the goal of mutual growth and ministry development. And the focus must always be outward – not enhancing a leader’s effectiveness for its own sake, but for the sake of the church and the world. The goal of mutual mentoring must be to equip leaders – young and old – to engage emerging generations more effectively.

What might it look like in your congregation to invite younger persons and established church leaders to participate in conversations with the primary focus being on listening and learning by the leaders? Always keep in mind that the goal is to learn, not for the sake of keeping things as they are, but for the sake of understanding new realities so that the church can be as responsive to new generations as we experienced the church earlier in our lives.

There are maintenance pastors and maintenance congregations, and they need to live together.

James A. Harnish

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