



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."

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