

LEADERSHIP

GROUNDED IN GOD'S MISSION

Leading God's people in uncertain times

Leaders and congregations are anxious about what is coming next in this time of major change and disruption. They are searching for a way of hope in this moment. That hope is rooted in understanding and choosing to participate in the mission of God. The way forward in this time of dislocation is in congregations re-centering their lives around the mission of God in the local communities where they live. The task of leadership is the forming of their people in ways that shape them around Jesus' mission.

Too often leaders feel overwhelmed by the demands and burdens of being managers and fixers of problems. They are expected to address questions like: "How will we grow? How can we find more volunteers? How can we make our church financially viable? How do we make ourselves more relevant?" etc. etc. An effective leader has come to be defined as someone who problem-solves, sets direction and offers a clear vision of how to move everyone forward. The expectation is that we lead in the same way as a CEO or manager leads any organization.

If we are God's people in this disruptive moment something else is needed. There is a tension between what the Bible tells us about leadership in disruptive times and the expectations that leaders will fix the church or have a vision that will solve the problems. **Our vocation is forming a people who embrace God's mission.** Scripture offers us a way of being God's people in these disruptive times. If you are a leader who recognizes that it was this vision of participating in God's mission which first drew you into your vocation but that it got lost along the way in managing church, running programs and trying to convince people to buy endless new vision proposals, consider this disruptive space as a fresh call to re-engage with the mission of God where you are.

Let's briefly look at **three proposals** for this different kind of leadership.

THREE PROPOSALS

1

ORIENT OUR PEOPLE TOWARDS GOD

A first task of leadership is helping people to define reality. This involves how our people come to see that God is present and acting in the midst of the disruptions. Scripture is filled with stories about encountering God right in the midst of chaos and disruption

The Genesis creation stories describe an unformed void. Darkness seems to define reality. This opening section of Genesis took on its present form in Babylon where the Jewish people had been taken into a devastating captivity. In the Babylonian catastrophe, leaders had to interpret (make sense of) what had happened. Their work was to assist their people make sense of a reality that, on the face of it, was the end of their world. Amidst competing interpretations of what had taken place, some leaders saw that their task was helping their people see what God was doing. They knew that without this awareness, there wasn't a hopeful way forward. Their way of doing this was helping the captives to re-enter their founding texts. It would be in these texts that people could start to make sense of a reality that didn't make sense. For the captives, their world had been taken from them. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. The Babylonian gods had won; they had proved to be more powerful than Yahweh. This was a profound crisis in which no one knew what to do. The captives (including the priests) wrote Psalm 137 to express their sense of abandonment:

*By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept
When we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps,
For there our captors asked us for songs,
Our tormentors demanded songs of joy,
they said: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a
foreign land?*

In this context, some leaders, recognizing what was at stake, re-entered their tradition and framed these first chapters of Genesis. How do we lead in disruption? In Babylon, they interpreted their disruption through the first words of the Bible:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

This is a declaration of reality. It is a confession that reorients a dispirited people toward God. It declares: the chaos is not the reality. Reality is that God is present in the midst of loss. God is acting to make all things new. These leaders knew that the exiles had to come to this place of naming the presence of God in the midst of their disruption for there to be a hopeful imagining of a future. The journey started with their seeing that God was acting right there in Babylon.

**GOD IS
PRESENT**

The work of the people in Babylon was not in developing strategies for returning to Jerusalem or fixing the Temple. It was discerning where God was working. The people wanted their leaders to come up with a plan to get out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem. Many leaders offered those strategies and many of the exiles did try to go back to Jerusalem. But the work of leadership was to reorient their people toward seeing God at work right in the midst of Babylon.



WHAT CAN THIS MEAN FOR LEADERS TODAY?

We find ourselves in a disruptive time. The work of leaders is to assist their people to see how God is already present and at work making things new.



WHY IS THIS SO DIFFICULT

When people are functioning out of anxiety, they want to see concrete solutions to what they have defined as the problem. They want measurable, clearly defined solutions. Attending to the unpredictable and unmeasurable work of God is not seen as being valuable.

**MAKING ALL
THINGS NEW**

2

GET CLEAR ON THE STORY THAT IS SHAPING US

A second task of leadership is assisting our people to become clear on the story that will shape them. The Babylonian captives were confronted with competing stories explaining what had happened. The story we choose as an explanation will determine the decisions we make about what needs to be done. The stories proposed offered different ways of responding to the calamity of exile. The story they chose would be critical to the actions they took. One story invited them to dwell in the shock and depression of their loss. Their response was to be angry at the situation and blame those around them. This was such a major story that it came to be written into their communal songs (Psalm 137). It is a lament for Jerusalem, a confession that they can't sing God's songs in a strange place. They couldn't worship in the ways they wanted or do the things they did in Jerusalem. It was hopeless. Lashing out, they wanted to kill the babies of Babylon.

A variation on this loss-story turned the anger and despair into strategies to plan a future as a self-circumscribed community in Babylon. They would refurbish the traditions and thrive as a minority.

One story offered an optimistic interpretation of what had happened. Many leaders concurred that the exile was punishment but, with renewed optimism, predicted a quick return to

Jerusalem. This story told of a temporary situation.

Everything was turning around. The trends were moving in the right direction. It was time to make plans for a return. In this comforting story, existing patterns and habits wouldn't need to change; everything was going back to normal. It was a popular story among leaders because all they knew were their roles back in Jerusalem. They didn't know what to do in Babylon and, therefore, couldn't imagine it as the place where God was gestating a different future.

Finally, there was a story from the strangest of people - the prophet, Jeremiah. It was a story that didn't fit anyone's expectations of how God was at work. Jeremiah's word was dissonant:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce...Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper..."

While the energies of most leaders were focused on getting back to Jerusalem (back to normal) or accommodating to the situation - Jeremiah's story was about imagining a radically different way.

A DIFFERENT WAY



WHAT CAN THIS MEAN FOR LEADERS TODAY?

Many competing stories are vying for the attention of leaders. Our work is to assist our people rediscover the story of what God is doing in this moment among them.



WHY IS THIS SO DIFFICULT

The stories shaping us are ingrained into our organizational identity; as such, they have become invisible to us. We have personal stakes in or emotional attachments to them so we struggle to let them go. They stand in the way of us seeing how God is at work creating something new.

3

DISCOVER GOD MAKING THINGS NEW IN UNEXPECTED PEOPLE AND PLACES

In the chaos of the Genesis story, the Spirit is making the world new. The Gospel of John uses the language of Genesis 1 as its opening words: *In the beginning was the Word*, then very deliberately says, *the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it*. Jesus is making all things new right in the midst of our disruption and chaos. The “darkness” cannot, not ever change or confound that.

Disruption, therefore, is the place where God is making all things new. It is the womb of God’s creative power. It isn’t a calamity to be fixed. It is the womb of God’s new future and nothing can change the trajectory of God’s creative purposes.

The biblical writers are continually making this declaration. Disruption is where we see the new thing God is seeking to do among us. The biblical stories tell us that God turns up in the most God-forsaken places. This is where we are invited into unimagined ways forward. Here are examples of God turning up in unexpected people to continue making all things new.

5 Abram and Sara

3 In the societies of that time, Abram and Sara
2 were nobodies, nomadic Semites wandering

around the edges of societies. They were old and, therefore, useless. Sara, long past the age of childbearing, had nothing to offer the world. They were not the people you turn to in a crisis. Yet, this is the couple God chose to start the journey of remaking the world. From this washed up, insignificant couple God blesses the whole human race. God looks in different places and to different people than us when responding to chaos and discontinuity.

Lydia

The story of Lydia (Acts 16) is an illustration of God turning up in utterly unexpected people. Paul and his companions set out to visit cities and plant churches, primarily, through synagogues. This was their normative strategy. Acts 16 makes it clear this strategy wasn’t working. This band of leaders were disoriented. We are told that on two occasions the Spirit prevented them from carrying out their strategies. In this situation of disorientation, they are brought into contact with Lydia. As a woman, she was not someone in whom they would look to see God at work. But this was exactly where the Spirit was forming this new movement of Jesus - outside anything Paul had imagined.

Peter and Cornelius

Luke tells a similar story about Peter and Cornelius. Nothing in Peter's understanding prepared him to see God at work in a Gentile, Roman soldier. Indeed, his dream of the clean and unclean food suggested that he had a very particular understanding of where and how God would, and would not, work. This was a huge disruption: contrary to Peter's expectations it was among the "unclean" (Cornelius) where God was creating another future.

In Corinthians 1:26-29, Paul zeroes in on this question of where God is at work making a different world by reminding the Corinthian Christians who they were:

... think about who you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many of you were influential; not many of you were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world and the despised things - and things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.



WHAT CAN THIS MEAN FOR LEADERS TODAY?

Disruption has come to us. Our people need to see this disruption with different eyes, to see God's mission in the disruptions. This requires a posture of curiosity from leaders. It calls for a readiness in leaders to see and expect God's ways to be revealed among our people and in our community even when we're not immediately sure where or how that happens.



WHY IS THIS SO DIFFICULT

Many of us as leaders are not confident in the conviction that we can see and name what God is doing with and through our people. Our energies have been focused on developing strategies, plans and programs for our people to sign on to. But in and among our people, the Spirit is making things new in our church, next door, down the street and in the communities in which we live.

POSTURE OF CURIOSITY

CONCLUSION

In the midst of massive change and disruption, this biblical rationale for grounding leadership in the mission of God offers us a hopeful way forward. Our vocation is to orient people to God, continue to get clear on the story that is shaping us and discover God making things new in unexpected people and places. Like a

midwife, the task of leadership is to participate in calling forth what the Spirit of Jesus is birthing among us for the sake of our communities. In laying down some of our plans, programs and strategies, we can be freed to discover together how we can shape our life around the mission of God.

GROUNDING DECISION MAKING IN THE *Mission of God*

Leadership Team
Video and
Discussion Guide



Invite your leadership team to consider one of the ways Scripture gives us a model for how we make decisions. This free video and discussion guide helps you introduce the importance of paying attention to how God continues to make things new in unexpected people and places.

Learn more or download the free resource here: themissionalnetwork.com/leadership



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