

# Leading the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## *Part Six*

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(*Number 7, September 13, 2002*) In this issue of the *Leadership Connection*, I continue to work through my definition of a leader. It is the following: Christian leaders are servants who use their credibility and capabilities to influence followers in a particular context to pursue God's direction for their lives. In the following, I want to focus your attention on the Christian leader's followers. A Christian leader is a servant with the credibility and capability to influence followers...

Are leaders' followers important to their leadership? Leadership can't happen without followers. There can be no leaders without followers. Peter Drucker writes, "There's only one characteristic common to all leaders-followers... The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers."

Leadership is a relationship between the leader and his or her followers. Followers are most crucial to any leadership event. If followers won't follow, it doesn't matter how gifted or competent leaders are. There is no leadership without followers. You can shout from the rooftops, "I'm a leader, I'm a leader!" But if you turn around and look behind you, and no one is following, guess what? You're not a leader!

The quality of followers is also a factor. Drucker correctly observes that an organization is only as good as its people. He writes, "People determine the performance capacity of an organization. No organization can do better than the people it has." Thus, leaders are only as strong as the people who surround and support them. No doubt about it, followers of quality are vital to leadership. But what is a follower? What is the key to responsive followers? And how do effective Christian leaders handle follower opposition? The rest of this issue will answer these three questions.

A follower in the church context is one who is both able and willing to follow leadership to accomplish the ministry's mission. Church followers would likely consist of three primary groups: A governing board or boards, the staff, and the rest that make up the congregation. Though some of these people are in positions of leadership, they're all followers at some point. Leaders are followers and good leaders make good followers. In fact, if you can't follow well, you would make a poor leader. The greatest leader ever to walk this earth was a follower. The Savior submitted himself to the Father and followed his will (Matt. 26:39, 42).

Our second question asks what is the key to responsive followers? The answer is the follower's ability and willingness to follow. Both are vital to good followership. Every Christian has the ability to follow. The one condition for biblical followership in ministry is that they are believers (Eph. 2:8-10). God also gives to every Christian all that he or she needs to follow and serve in the body of Christ. This includes the Holy Spirit that provides the spiritual power necessary to serve him (Acts 1:8), and natural and spiritual gifts that supply the tools necessary for service (1 Cor. 12:7). What does all this mean? God has provided all that is necessary for all believers to serve him and follow those that serve him in some leadership capacity.

So, the issue for followers is not ability but willingness. The question becomes are followers willing to accept another's leadership? Will they consent to and support the leader? That is where the "rub" comes. Leadership takes place by common consent-the consent of the followers as well as the leaders. There is a "willingness transaction" that takes place between the leader and followers. Leaders must be willing to lead, but followers must be willing to follow. The question for followers is how willing are they to follow a leader? Is there a commitment to following?

The last question of this issue is, How do effective Christian leaders handle follower opposition? Emerging leaders must understand that there will always be people that

oppose their leadership, and some that oppose any leadership. Established leaders don't need a reminder, they live with these people. Opposition comes with the territory.

There are several wise approaches that the leader can pursue in dealing with the wrong kind of opposition. **First, be extremely careful about reading email or snail mail from opponents that won't sign their names.** Some experienced leaders advise that you not read them at all.

**Second, listen to disgruntled followers in private, not in public.** Some have discovered that they can often get their way in a church by regularly complaining in public. Often this happens in smaller churches that view themselves as one big family. Leaders in these churches value happiness and want to keep the family happy. Thus, astute detractors will complain and let everybody know that they're unhappy. Unsuspecting leaders – especially governing boards – will give in to them and ultimately allow them some control of the church.

**Third, don't accept hearsay from opponents that supposedly speak for others.** For example, disgruntled people in airing their differences with you will often mention that others agree with their objections to your leadership. They do this in an attempt to justify their objections. The idea is that they object to your leadership, and they must be right because supposedly there are others out there that agree with them. Only agree to discuss what has happened to these individuals that are present and do it in private. If they claim that there are others, ask them to send those others to see you.

**Fourth, follow the directives of Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:15-20 rigorously.** In these passages, the Savior gives us wise counsel about how to deal with church problems in general and those that may require church discipline. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus instructs us that if we're aware of someone out there that has something against us, to drop whatever we're doing (even if it's worship), go see that person, and attempt to resolve the problem.

In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus tells us how to deal with those that sin against us. In verse 15, he instructs us to go to the offending party and deal with the matter in private. Leaders must apply this truth to those that wrongly oppose them. It's rare that some of these people are ever confronted. When the leader does so, they may find resolution or the detractor backs off. Regardless, pastors or better their boards should confront these individuals in the spirit of verse 16. This lets them know that the board backs the pastor and will take it to the congregation if necessary. Those that fail to reconcile with the leadership must be disciplined and asked to leave the church in compliance with verse 17.

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