

Corporate Leadership in the Oversight

This contribution deals with some neglected aspects of leadership skills which are called for — or have to be acquired — in the behaviour of elders as fellow-workers and supportive colleagues in oversight.

The conventional wisdom about the meaning of leadership is taken from secular and sacred history — the larger-than-life, charismatic leader who towers above his contemporaries, enjoys great personal renown and leads in the grand style. This ‘great man’ theory of leadership with little acknowledgement of followership has undoubtedly obscured our recognition of other graces of relationship. Our Lord himself, as he struggled with the ineptitudes of his own disciples as they argued about preferment, warns us:

“ . . . you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant . . . ”
(Mark 10:42, 43 NIV)

“ . . . the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 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 22:25, 26 NIV)

The Apostle Peter counsels his fellow elders:

“ . . . not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock . . . ”
(1 Peter 5:3, 4 NIV)

The whole tenor of scripture teaching regarding leadership in the Body of Christ is opposed to any practice of tyranny, despotism, power seeking, gratifying prestige or any imposition contrary to the mind of Christ. Yet, the facts are that, in the short history of our own movement of churches, these unhappy marks have been only too evident over the years. What then goes wrong? Do we acquire or choose unsuitable candidates for leadership responsibility, despite their public gifts?

We are committed from scripture principles — now being rediscovered in many places — to a pattern of pluralistic leadership of equals before God, holding together and guiding the local Body of Christ as the organs authorised by the Holy Spirit so to undertake “ . . . for the edifying of the body ” (Eph. 4:12). It is the overseeing group which is ‘multi-gifted’ for this purpose collectively and not the separate individuals. We have often lost sight of this corporate function in the midst of the personal gifts for the ministry also bestowed on its members, and on others not in oversight.

The working out of these collaborative gifts comes to the present-day local church not in the form of an O.T. patriarchate nor, even, a N.T. apostolate nor, least of all, as an institutional hierarchy, inherited and tolerated by many today. Our privilege and opportunity — indeed there is little else left for us distinctively in church governance — is to demonstrate the effective operation of shared authority in our fellowships. For this, we need to learn, or recognise again, new skills of leadership not always apparent amongst us.

New words and ways in leadership

In his recent book on 'Morale', John W. Gardner argues that leaders have always been generalists; that is, they have been exposed to experiences that broaden their horizons, lift them out of their specialities and introduce them to other worlds and other views. This calls for temperamental qualities which are not universally endowed — our Lord's disciples and the apostolic band showed ample signs of difference between them in these respects. The mere bringing together of capable individuals does not inevitably produce an effective working group. Much unlearning and divesting of behaviours is often needed to allow the members to grow together into maturity.

For instance, the very words which we sometimes use to describe leadership behaviour reveal our underlying assumptions and attitudes towards followers. Directing, commanding and instructing modes may well have a place in limited situations calling for decision in crisis, but if these become regular patterns of behaviour, then we belong to the 'authoritarian' end of the leadership spectrum. We are given to 'telling' others what it is they have to do and 'selling' ideas to be adopted by them as their own.

There are other options of leadership style which the elder must consider and acquire if he can. His experience of work in other settings and his lifestyle background may prove hazardous to any likelihood of change to more appropriate models of behaviour for Christian leadership. For example, admiration for the 'cut and dried' regime of military leadership by those who derive comfort and security in being told what to do has certainly stunted growth into Christian maturity and the corresponding civilian model of bureaucracy imposes great limitations on the body-life of the church. Likewise, problems imported into oversights by 'captains of industry', 'board directors' and other professionally trained elders make life difficult for the others. In these work situations, many have learned not to "esteem others better than themselves" and will find tribulation in acquiring ease in a 'team-centred' leadership group. We have all to learn that 'authority' is God-given but people-recognised; it cannot be imposed as in the secular models, but acceptance comes as we learn to mediate the leader role in grace and love.

The needed approach is to cultivate a shift from the ‘authoritarian’ end of leadership style towards the ‘consultative’ and ‘participative’ end. That is to say, we involve others and share in decision making with them. Only in this way will we get commitment and ‘owning’ of policy decision. The vocabulary of behaviour also changes with the move from aggressive instructing words towards enabling and facilitating words. We speak about helping, caring, guiding, counselling — the true concerns of the overseer (*episkopos*) who leads but does not drive his flock. Indeed, in the descriptive passages (1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1) of the ‘good office’ of a bishop, the apostle includes many qualities which make this case. He speaks of the overseer as one who is “. . . temperate . . . prudent . . . uncontentious . . . not self-willed . . . not quick-tempered . . . just . . .” and so identifies a pattern of behaviour which is not very evident in our secular models of leadership.

There are many other desirable traits to be sought after in the character of the elder. He must be a ‘harmoniser’ bringing others together in exploring their differences and in seeking reconciliation. He has to learn how to compromise effectively, yielding status in conflict situations in interests wider than his own. On the other hand, he has to resist the temptation to want his own way by trying to dominate his colleagues or manipulate those less resistant to his will. Alternatively, he may ‘withdraw’ from the discomforts of participative sharing with others and so deprive the oversight of his contribution. Many have problems of *identity*, that is, “Who am I in this role and who are they?” and of *control*, that is, “What can I get away with in this situation and is that enough for my needs?” These issues, amongst others, reveal a confusion between individual and group goals which only the Lord’s ‘light yoke’ of learning will solve.

Becoming members one of another

Learning to grow together as an effective working group has occupied the research studies of many bodies concerned with interpersonal skills in the management of all kinds of organisations. But the oversight of a local church is a uniquely prototypic group not to be found outside of its scriptural definition as a body of elders responsible to one Head who is present in the spirit and whose guidance is sought by prayer and supplication. This arrangement of relationships is, understandably, not usually recognised in secular studies; nevertheless, we can learn much from the insights available to us from many sources and be thankful for them in the Lord’s provision for our growth in grace.

The oversight should be a good example of successful *team* behaviour, that is, the members are supportive and complementary to each other and not in competition. To achieve effectiveness in this way, a mature group will demonstrate the following characteristics, amongst others:

- (i) a clear understanding and mutual agreement on its primary and secondary tasks, and how to achieve them;
- (ii) an openness of communication between the members, in which all the necessary facts, ideas and feelings are 'put on the table', so that each can freely 'level' with one another in the Lord's work;
- (iii) a high development of mutual personal confidence between the members so that sharing without danger and disadvantage can become possible in an 'authentic' and 'valid' relationship;
- (iv) a tolerance of a wide range of individual behaviour which makes effective use of all member resources without individual domination;
- (v) a working towards consensus decision without creating imposed, minority-crushing processes;
- (vi) a capacity to review and modify its behaviour objectively to meet changing circumstances.

These criteria are not easy to realise and create discomfort for many oversights who have allowed themselves no renewal or transfusion to revive their activities over the years. There is often an agreed complacency to 'leave things as they are', to suppress dissent and to ignore danger signs in their work. This syndrome has been called '*groupthink*' and manifests itself in a series of major symptoms which we may well recognise:

- (i) an illusion of invulnerability, that, as we hold the truth, albeit in earthen vessels, our decisions will be secure;
- (ii) discounting warnings and ignoring needs for re-consideration of past and present policy;
- (iii) pressures against any member who expresses strong arguments against the group stereotypes — e.g. "we have always done it this way" — implying disloyalty to the leadership;
- (iv) individual's self-censorship of his doubts, misgivings or counter-arguments, minimising these against the apparent group consensus — e.g. "well, maybe they are right after all";
- (v) shared illusion of unanimity about the majority view on decision; does silence mean consent?
- (vi) emergence of self-appointed mindguards who 'protect' a group against adverse information which might shatter its complacency — e.g. "Mr. X might not like us to do that".

A number of practical measures to offset the '*groupthink*' tendencies of close-knit groups have been proposed and can usefully be employed in building the oversight team:

- (a) seeking for a genuine, non-directive leadership with open value judgements, avoiding steering decisions towards a chairman's favoured views;

(b) passing the role of group leader as 'navigator' around the members and providing a 'critical evaluator' or 'devil's advocate' to stimulate the examination of assumptions and to encourage constructive criticism;

(c) dividing into two or more groups, separately working on the same topic, reducing the promotional effect of one elder's 'hobby horse';

(d) inviting one or more qualified colleagues to sit in on discussions from time to time and to challenge the 'in-group' opinions and assumptions;

(e) holding 'second chance' meetings on important issues to reconsider major decisions, thus avoiding premature enthusiasm taking over from more sufficient corporate judgement.

These processes replace conformity pressures, 'win-at-all-cost' attitudes, individual eccentricities, poor implementation of decisions and many other negative outcomes of bad group strategies. The 'leader' cannot create these relationships by himself; they are a function of group development. But an oversight which makes good decisions, innovates successfully and carries out its plans effectively is worth a great deal of time and energy investment in its growth. Defensive and protective behaviour is minimised and only significant differences need to be worked through. Control processes of superiorities, ego-defences, 'checks and balances' become unnecessary. True delegation and accountability will grow in the Lord's service.

"Fitly framed together"

The organisational structure of the local church as part of the Body of Christ also needs corporate study. Once again, the conventional model of an enterprise represented as a 'genealogical tree' or as a 'pyramid' with their hierarchical levels of command and direction does not do justice to the 'body-life' of a fellowship of believers. These are '*mechanistic*' approaches to organisation needs and, even in the large bureaucracies which are the main exponents of this form, the model fails to represent the true state of affairs between the members. It denies the interpersonal nature of living organisations which our churches must certainly seek to be.

We look for a structure which will meet the needs of all the body-members to offer worship and service in fellowship together. This calls for the effective involvement of everyone in an integrated pattern of activity and support ". . . fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies according to the proper working of each individual part . . ." (Eph. 4:16). Any representation of this 'body' model is bound to be '*organismic*' in nature and cellular in structure, with the Lord in the centre with whom all members are in touch, so that the metabolism of the whole body remains healthy, growing and effective in moving towards the stature of its Head.

In the midst of this life activity is the oversight with its unmistakable responsibilities for the innovation of activities, for setting up linked work groups and being wholly in touch with the members and their aspirations. They are not on top, like some Olympian pantheon, nor yet on the periphery, with only marginal awareness of the reality of church life, but right in the middle of all the action which it is their concern to encourage and guide in loving service to the members of the local body. Their corporate skills will be tested in creating an effective structure which will meet today's needs in our churches. For instance, a system of *communication* which works will be a priority — how do members learn of their leadership's plans? Do they ever see the oversight minutes or read a bulletin of information for discussion? How well organised are church members into their own work groups and are they given adequate resources to discharge their tasks? Do they know what and who are in other projects? These are some of the earlier issues involved in letting others know what they are entitled to learn in our fellowships. And what of *decision-making*? Who makes decisions in the church and at what levels? Do the elders know how to *delegate* authority and responsibility correctly to other church members — and then leave them alone to get on with it? These processes occupy a vast amount of research and practice in the secular world and it would seem that in these skills “. . . the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Luke 18:8) in application. Whereas most of us are accustomed to making up our minds on an individual basis, the oversight has to learn how to take decisions collectively and to ‘own’ their judgements as a body. This is new ground for many elders and suitable training and preparation for this shared pattern of behaviour for those, both in office and in prospect, is a ministry which is badly undertaken at present. We look to the day when some requirement of corporate management skill will be a ground of choice for office and we would encourage Bible college study organisers to include substantial amounts of training in these aspects, even at the expense of some of the traditional subject matter. Otherwise, there is little testing of a young person's leadership insights and capacities, no matter how useful a teacher and preacher he may turn out to be.

New Wineskins for Church Leadership

In his book *New wineskins*, Howard Snyder adds as his sub-title “changing the man-made structures of the Church” and he goes on to show how so much of our assumed activity stems from artefacts of the past, born of a more limited outlook and of little further value to the church's life and work — “. . . no one puts new wine into old wineskins, for the new wine bursts the old skins, ruining the skins and spilling the wine. New wine must be put into new wineskins” (Luke 5:37-38 Living Bible). If we are to contain and succour the new people and things of the

spirit, then we will respond to the challenge of unlearning and relearning many collegiate skills — planning objectives, setting targets, organising action and measuring results — we shall constantly be seeking out men and women of talent who can respond to the Spirit’s call in new ways, yet “. . . we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

Further reading

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