

## *Questions 'Decisive' Leaders Should Ask Themselves*

**Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, Manila, Philippines**

The APNTS 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary “Leadership” seminar focuses on the subject, “Questions ‘Decisive’ Leaders Should Ask Themselves.” The presentation is built on this basic assumption: the followers whom we as Christians lead have a right to expect in their leaders something more in the relationship, something greater than the leadership provided by individuals with whom they live and work who do not profess faith in Christ.

In other words, as much as leaders want to be known as decisive, with our decision-making marked by firmness, and our action by certainty and conclusiveness, even more critical in leading others is a distinctively Christian quality of caring and depth of communication. **Caring for others is the mark of greatness, more so than decisiveness.**

Our testimony of faith in Jesus Christ must increasingly inform and transform the way we live in and lead a faith community, as that community is expressed in the home, Sunday school class, youth group, church board, local congregation or seminary. As we lead a faith community, we must guard and wisely choose what shapes us. Will it be the latest relevant leadership text, or the timeless truths from biblical texts like the Sermon on the Mount?

I wrote a question thirty-five years ago, early in my ministry at the European Nazarene Bible College that remains with me to this day. The question is:

**How can we live together within this diverse Christian community in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?**

Students at ENBC lived in a small multi-cultural campus community on the Swiss-German border while studying Bible and theology in English as a second language. Their first languages were different, cultural traditions varied regarding ways of meeting and greeting each other and food options provided for them by the dining hall staff were often unfamiliar. Expectations, instruction preferences, and course material became the focus of numerous discussions. I asked my question often.

Living together as a Christian family in a diverse Christian community in Europe prepared me for a later cross-cultural assignment in Asia. Following Dr. Don Owens, founding president of the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, I found myself challenged with leading this very culturally diverse graduate-level theological seminary of the Church of the Nazarene. Again, on this campus, I continued to ask my previous question.

In the midst of working with graduate students at APNTS from both economically strong and weak countries, another question arose.

**If, 'in Christ, all things are made new' (2 Corinthians 5:17), then how does our relationship to Christ convert the way we live and lead in a Christian community of faith?**

What phenomenal lessons I learned at APNTS about life together in Christian communities! And, at APNTS, I crystallized my understanding of Christian leadership.

Christian leadership begins with humble service to others to enable them, through teaching and example, to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ, to fulfill their ministry to each other, and their mission in the world.

During my 18 years at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, I probed another life-together question:

**In conflict situations, when good and godly people differ and sometimes collide over vision, values, traditions, policies and programs, how can I lead in these situations, really lead (and serve) with the mind and spirit of Christ?**

Along the journey, I began to realize the questions I was asking myself and seeking to answer related not just to cross-cultural education and organization institutions, but also to local congregations and even individual Christian families. What I was asking was a fundamental question for Christians maturing in their faith:

**How does my testimony of holiness of heart and life transform the way I both mentor others in the Christian faith and model before them a vibrant, maturing Christian life?**

This is a life question for us. It is also a leadership question! Amid conflicting expectations, multiple constituents, differing denominational backgrounds, various

levels of maturity, and multi-cultural perspectives, how can we live together and lead with the mind and spirit of Christ? How *is* our testimony of faith reflected in our family relationships and in our leadership lifestyle?

In the context of our life situations and leadership assignments, especially in our families and local churches, we are often placed in close Christian community. We quickly become aware of others' strengths and weaknesses. Our own personality differences soon become obvious. Our specific life and leadership location becomes a dynamic laboratory for learning how to live together as God's family.

In these situations, how do we respond to conflict under pressure? Where is the "something more" or "greater than" in our leadership and fellowship roles and responsibilities?

**THE ANSWERS TO OUR PROBING QUESTIONS are equally profound. They are: 1) deeply spiritual in nature, 2) intensely relational, 3) strategic in planning and implementation, and 4) profoundly impacting on others.**

**"Whatever happens,"** Paul admonishes us, *"conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ"* Philippians 1:27. This challenge is also given in Ephesians 4:1 when he urges the believers to *"...live a life worthy of the calling you have received."* These two passages from Paul's prison epistles challenge me when I am confronted with good and godly people who differ with me – even collide with me – over the vision and values in my ministry assignments. I continue to learn what it means to "walk worthy...."

Indeed, the entire fourth chapter of Ephesians speaks directly to the questions asked above. Spend time reading the six chapters of this prison epistle. Then, focus in on Ephesians 4:1-3, 7-11, 15-16, 25-32, as well as 5:1-2, and 5:15-21.

**Whatever happens,** we are to be *"imitators of God...and live a life of love"* (5:1-2) in leading and living together as the People of God. When we do not live like this, regardless of our position in the home, local church, district, university, or seminary, we *grieve* the Holy Spirit (4:30a). The Spirit of God is deeply concerned about the speech of His people.

**Relationships within a faith community are intensely theological.** God Himself inspires and empowers this holiness lifestyle within us, calling us and enabling us to walk worthy of our calling (see also 5:15-21). We must not only hear and read His

words. We must respond and obey them, even if we disrupt our culture, family tradition, or natural inclinations. There is a Christ-culture to which we must aspire and deeply embrace.

Ephesians 4:25-32 instructs us in how we are to live and lead with the mind and spirit of Christ. We are co-laborers *together in the body of Christ* (v25). The people with whom we work are God's own creation. Because of this fundamental Christian conviction, we are called to be *honest* with the believers (v25); *immediate* in dealing with conflict; (vs26-27); *up-building* with our words (v29); and *forgiving*, even when others do not forgive us (v32).

Words spoken and deeds done to us by others must never be permitted to create bitterness and resentment within us. Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Ephesians 4:29). Dialogue, for Paul, is a sacrament. God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative in forgiving those who hurt us. (See also Chapter Six.)

When we ignore our family relationship within the faith community and treat those with whom we live and work as a means to an end or persons to be manipulated for our purposes, Satan gains a foothold into the fellowship. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict and divides the "community of the king." It is a travesty when believers see in their leaders such attitudes and actions that are no different from behavior exhibited by their supervisors on the jobs and elected officials in the neighborhood who do *not* profess faith in Jesus.

The people we lead and those we mentor can and should witness in us a way of living and leading greater than or qualitatively different from the way they are guided by leaders who do not identify themselves as followers of Christ. The mind and spirit of Christ in the life of the leader are what the people we lead, and others who watch the way we lead, expect to *see* in a Christian who seeks to lead decisively and faithfully!

And they will support and follow us as we consistently, intentionally, and aggressively model and mentor them with:

**Clear Vision**, including strategic planning;

**Deep Humility**, including intense listening; and

**Intense Resolve**, including persistent praying.

**Vision** refers to seeing things at a great distance. A vision is a consuming, passionate, and compelling inner picture. (See the *Cambridge English Dictionary*.) An important function of leadership is creating a vision of the organization's preferred future. The leader, by divine inspiration, can see the invisible. Vibrant and motivating personal and organizational vision statements are expressions of optimism and hope. They are big dreams of what we would like ourselves, the church, seminary, or ministry organization to be and do.

Having a clear vision as a leader is essential, but it is not enough. Thomas Edison, the consummate inventor, is quoted as saying, "Vision without execution is hallucination" (Stolle, 2014). Leadership is the **transference** of vision. We live and lead within a *community* of faith.

It is essential, then, for theological vision to precede organizational vision. We envision or *see* the people we serve in the church as God's own creation, worthy of dignity and respect, before outlining what action is desired of them for the organization. Ownership of the vision cannot be solely that of the leader. It must be embraced and owned by the group who is asked to accept the vision and share in its implementation.

**Humility** demands intense listening by the person who leads others. Listening is so much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for an opportunity to respond. Nouwen (1997) states it beautifully: "The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously.... Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends...." We listen to what is said, and for what is not said. We observe body language. We listen for insights from brothers and sisters in Christ who help us revise a vision or plan or program and make it better. Again, the vision must be owned by the group who is asked to embrace it, and its implementation must be shared.

We lead from our knees during this important process. Good and godly people often differ and sometimes collide with the leader. There is no place for arrogance; the only regret is that some may not embrace the majority decision. Vigorous discussions take place in board meetings or at other appropriate forums. However, when an official decision is made to move forward, the leader leads decisively even as she/he regrets that some within the fellowship may not agree with the majority decision. The leader refuses to be paralyzed when not everyone agrees with the recommendation. Instead, she/he moves ahead aggressively, though with deep humility. In these situations, we

lead with some pain and disappointment even as we move ahead with confidence.

**Resolve** insists that we do not give up. We persevere. We stay with it. We endure. This does not mean that we go it alone - just the opposite. Leaders work tirelessly to bring the group along and motivate them to implement and execute the plan and program as approved. Leaders dream great, God-inspired dreams, and are willing to pay the price - in time, energy, and patience - to see those dreams come true.

And we pray earnestly and persistently. We know that some issues are only resolved and dissolved through prayer and total dependence on God. We believe that God can work in us to become the change we desire to see in others.

Leaders know that we do not have the power to change others. Change can take place, however, within us! In the midst of experiencing honest and intense differences between good and godly people, the “pray-er” can be changed and transformed! Conflict situations can either produce growth or inhibit growth in the lives of leaders. Before God in prayer and others whom we mentor, both leaders and followers seek answers from Him to these two questions:

### **What can I learn? How can I change?**

In so asking and seeking God’s answers to these two leadership questions for *our* lives, *we* are changed! Increasingly, by God’s grace, we become the change we desire to see in others. Others around us may or may not be impacted by what happens within us, but what happens to us is transformative!

We grow. We change. We mature. And, in the process, we experience the peace of God, which transcends understanding. We are freed from insisting on change within others. Through earnest prayer, caring leaders ask the right questions, and trust God with the results, even as we are changed in the process!

Perhaps decisiveness about ourselves as Christian leaders is the most significant evidence of Christian leadership. Who am I in Christ, and what difference does this affirmation make in the home, on the job, in the congregation or board meeting? How important is the faith community I lead in shaping me as a Christian leader in deed as well as in word, title, or position? The people we mentor watch the way we wrestle with these questions.

Christian leaders often look at those who oppose us as being our enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43-47), Jesus instructs us to pray for those who oppose us, disagree with us and say critical things about us. These words can challenge us. But we must obey His words if we remain a faithful follower of Jesus. Those we lead are watching us and often follow our example as we respond to others, good or bad.

As we work in our organizations with the tension of holding to our vision for the future while holding just as firmly to the present realities, we model leadership behaviors that communicate:

1. Good and godly people often see things differently from the leader.
2. Many issues over which we experience conflict are simply culturally, ethnically, local community, or family-based and not a violation of scripture.
3. Differences that divide us have the potential to alienate members of the body of Christ and to impact the work of God in our communities negatively.
4. Caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect, and honor them, as God loves them.
5. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them.
6. Strong boards empower missional and visionary pastors; strong pastors embrace passionate and engaged boards.

We can serve as decisive and faithful leaders with integrity and grace as our testimony of holiness of heart and life continually transforms the way we live in and lead a faith community.

In so walking and leading in the spirit of continuing transformation into Christlikeness, we can believe that the Master teacher and leader, Jesus the Christ, will say to us at the end of our days, *"well done, good and faithful servant"* (Matthew 25:21). Well done.

When we come to the end of our journey, may it be said of us that we led decisively by providing "something better" and "greater than..." because we were prayerful, intentional and committed disciples of Jesus and mentors to His disciples! We modeled clear vision, deep humility, and intense resolve. We guided those whom we lead to answer the questions asked above. Both leader and led increasingly connected the faith

we profess and proclaim to the way we live and lead. What a legacy to leave behind.  
What a legacy!