LEADERS ARE BORN, NOT MADE: WRONG!

by

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Of course, there’s an element of truth to it. Leaders have certain inherent gifts of intelligence, communication, winsomeness, etc. But in every area of American life, there are men and women who became leaders, not because they were born to lead but because they were called to lead. The vitality of organizations and communities rests in large measure on how leaders are identified, nurtured, and even trained for leadership. Relying on genetic selection won’t work.

The mythology of leaders who are born, not made, is especially common in the life of American churches, says Stephen Lewis, National Director of the Calling Congregations Initiative of the Fund for Theological Education in Atlanta, Georgia. “Many people think that religious leaders come from God, maybe with the help of the pastor,” he says. “They think it’s between you and God, and only after you receive your personal call does a congregation become involved. What we want to do is to help congregations see that it’s part of their own calling to raise up a new generation of leaders. We want them to recognize themselves as communities of call.”

This program, funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., aspires to be a national movement to encourage and equip congregations and church-related organizations to identify and nurture future pastoral leaders. The Calling Congregations Initiative represents a new strategy for the Fund for Theological Education, long known for its fellowship programs for ministerial students and for racial ethnic minority students interested in ministry and/or doctoral work in religious studies.
“Of course, we’re interested in the final product—talented men and women entering ministry,” says Rev. Lewis. “But with this program we’re shifting the focus toward the origins of leadership. We want to build an infrastructure of calling — congregations, church-related organizations, church judicatories. What we’re really about is awakening their ecclesial imaginations so that they recognize calling people to ministry as part of their own calling.”

Rev. Lewis’ own story reflects the heart of the Calling Congregations Initiative. He grew up in the Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC. “That community really supported me and created space for me to explore the larger meaning of life and to be with people who told me it was all right to ask those deep questions,” he says. “The pastor, Dr. Clifford Jones, was very comfortable being around young people and their questions.”

He recalls the church allowing him to put up his paintings and drawings, but what he vividly remembers is when “Mother Pearson” (Mrs. Mary Pearson), told him, “God has his hand on you.” Rev. Lewis says, “The community knew my call before I did. It wasn’t just one person. It was the entire community calling me. They encouraged me to ask, ‘What do I want to do with my life? What do I care about? What is waiting for me to do?’ It was that freedom and openness and depth that really made a difference.”

But Rev. Lewis’ actual entry into ministry was delayed. After receiving a business degree from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, he went to work with NationsBank, now Bank of America. “The whole time I was aware of this deep longing that I recognized early on,” he says. He eventually entered Duke Divinity School and received his M.Div. in 2000. Since then he has been a parish minister at Trinity African Baptist Church in Mableton, GA, served at the Institute of Church Administration and Management at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, and then moved to the Fund for Theological Education.

The need for the Calling Congregations Initiative is both historical and urgent. Many denominations abolished their national offices of vocation in the 1950s and 1960s, Rev. Lewis notes. With their disappearance went one part of the ecology of call in American Protestantism. As congregations were buffeted by social and religious change since the mid-twentieth century, they increasingly ignored the need for future leaders and gradually withdrew from identifying and nurturing leaders.

But it is the contemporary leadership need across Christian denominations that is driving the Calling Congregations Initiative and Lilly Endowment’s grant-making. In brief, churches need younger leaders and different leaders. The National Congregations Study, based at Duke University, reveals that the median age of pastors leading congregations rose from 49 in 1998 to 53 in 2006. “This
seems like a large change in only 9 years,” the report dryly notes. The National Congregations Study also revealed that the average age of pastors is older than the average age of the American population. The percent of people in congregations led by someone 50 or younger has declined from 48 percent in 1998 to 39 percent in 2006.

Complicating the leadership picture still further is a shift in vocation among seminary students. According to the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, even though seminary enrollments are level or growing, fewer students have an interest in leading a local church as a pastor and enrollments in M.Div. programs which prepare them for parish ministry are declining. Therefore, local churches have to consciously cultivate the quality leaders they want for the future.

Many denominations report the paradox of a surplus of clergy and the paucity of ministers for small and rural congregations. At the same time, they also find they do not have enough ministers to lead large, multi-staff congregations. “There are significant problems of supply and demand for leadership in American churches,” Rev. Lewis says. “But at the end of the day our initiative is not a short-term approach but a focus on nurturing healthy, robust leaders and communities that any organization needs.”

He adds, “People in pews want vibrant leaders. They ought to be thinking about talent succession. They can’t take good leadership for granted. Ninety percent of all pastors are over the age of 35. What does this say about the need in the future? We are trying to address that by helping those congregations that are willing to take up the challenge of finding leaders for the next generation.”

Rev. Lewis and the Fund for Theological Education began their work on leadership by identifying four types of pastors:

- Some were not going to encourage anyone to be a pastor.
- Some would encourage people inquiring about ministry to explore other options and then come back if they were still interested.
- Some pastors acknowledged that they needed to do more in this area.
- Some said, in effect, “Of course! This is what it means to be a pastor and a church.”

They also found four types of congregations engaging in vocational work:

- Some were intentional and self-conscious about identifying people for ministry. “They basically made a decision that this is what they were going to do,” Rev. Lewis states, “and we see these congregations all the time.”
• Other congregations were characterized by their cross-generational approach. These were located near seminaries, colleges, or universities, and they focused their work on students.
• Others simply accepted vocational nurture as a long-standing tradition, and they were proud of it. “They’ll say, ‘We’ve sent 15 of our sons and daughters into the ministry,’” Rev. Lewis notes. “It’s part of who they are.”
• Other congregations were single-generation churches, mainly composed of young people. “These are likely emerging church congregations,” he concludes.

Rev. Lewis says, “The nay-sayers don’t impede our work. At this point we’re focusing on the pastors and congregations who really want to make vocation a part of their identity. As we build the network, we will also want to reach out to those who currently don’t recognize what is at stake for the future of their churches and communities.”

Then, says Rev. Lewis, they looked for the “sustainable practices,” “the vocation care practices” of these calling congregations, and they found these characteristics:

• Calling congregations create welcoming space for those who are interested in ministry, and they support this inquiry across generations.
• They help young people ask the big questions about life: “What do you want to do? What do you love to do? What difference do you want to make?”
• Then they offer space for theological reflection: “Where’s God in this story? The biblical story and your story—how do they connect?”
• They also create opportunities for people to understand how their gifts can be used in various forms of ministry, such as internships and leadership roles.
• They provide financial assistance to students enrolling in seminaries.

“What we want congregations to embrace is noticing leaders, nurturing leaders, and naming leaders,” Rev. Lewis states. “We want them to engage in vocation care.”

One of the results so far is a striking paradox. The more pastors and parishioners focus on the vocation of others, the more they are driven back to examining their own vocations. Rev. Lewis says, “We hear people saying, ‘I didn’t know I had a vocation to impart vocation to others,’ or ‘I now realize I can’t talk about God calling someone without being able or willing to talk about how God called me.’ Lay leaders especially tell us, ‘I never realized how I could make a difference. I thought vocation was only a matter of the pastor and God.’”
More than 70 percent of the Calling Congregations Initiative’s budget goes into its work of building communities of “vocation care.” Specifically, selected congregations and church-related organizations are awarded “Cultures of Call” grants of $5,000 to $10,000 to develop innovative local programs to “notice, name, and nurture” future leaders. The Initiative also supports regional peer groups and a congregational curriculum it has developed recently to focus on vocation. It also provides Congregational Fellowships for young church members to enter seminary, which must be matched by the congregations. FTE also hosts an annual Calling Congregations Conference in Atlanta where local leaders can connect and explore best practices with one another.

Over the last five years, 2004-2009, the Calling Congregations Initiative received 277 applications for the matching Congregational Fellowship program and made 180 awards to help students pay for the first year of seminary. More than $680,000 was devoted to supporting the ministerial study of these students—half of which came from their own congregations.

The process of applying itself has positive results. “We’ve found that even when we didn’t fund a particular fellowship,” Rev. Lewis says, “congregations went ahead and paid for the student anyway.”

More than 20 percent of Calling Congregation’s budget focuses on educational events with church judicatories to acquaint them with the need for the program and the resources — both money and material — available through the Initiative. The rest of the budget goes into publications for congregations and a research project on calling congregations led by Dr. Dori Baker, Scholar in Residence at The Fund for Theological Education. (Findings will be published in *Greenhouses of Hope*, Alban Press, forthcoming 2011.)

According to Rev. Lewis, the Calling Congregations Initiative has found three things that are crucial in developing the vocation care movement:

- Communities with a sense of vocation.
- Relationships with individuals with a vocation.
- Stories of vocation.

*Regarding communities:* “We’re discovering that it takes a community to care for vocation, and that is enhanced when congregations have explored their own vocation,” Rev. Lewis declares.

*Regarding relationships:* “After his baptism, the first thing Jesus did was to find others, to build a leadership team, and then to send them in pairs to practice the gospel,” Rev. Lewis says. “We have to help people get beyond the notion of a
call as an individual or private thing. It only happens when one person is bonded to another.”

Regarding stories: “Story-telling is absolutely crucial,” Rev. Lewis emphasizes. “Only by telling your own story do you discover your own vocation, and only by narrating it can you inspire others and awaken them to the fact that they too may have a call.” He notes that they are preparing a resource, “Look for God Always,” which he describes as “a powerful tool for helping people listen with God’s ears.”

Rev. Lewis says the stories of people involved in the Calling Congregations Initiative are profoundly moving. He cites as one example the pastor of a large, urban United Methodist congregation who preached a series of sermons on “my call,” “our call,” and the call to pastoral ministry. He alerted the congregation to the fact that he planned to issue an altar call on the last Sunday. The day came with inclement winter weather, but 467 attended worship. From the congregation 33 men and women came forward.

“If we create the space for calling, if we really ask the deepest questions about life and its meaning,” Rev. Lewis says, “we’d be amazed at how many people we would find. They will say, ‘My life matters.’ ‘My congregation matters.’ We’d find a robust group of people who will come forward.”

Rev. Lewis discards the idea that the Calling Congregations Initiative is only about shortages of human resources in the church. Instead, he emphasizes, its primary purpose is to engage people at the deepest levels of their souls and to help them listen to God speaking to them through others and their communities.

He is fond of quoting Rabbi Hillel, the first century Jerusalem sage, who said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?” Rev. Lewis observes, “Those are the questions people are asking or should be asking, and we need to give them the space to ask them and the people to listen to them. That means congregations.”

Rev. Lewis acknowledges that the Calling Congregations Initiative confronts a daunting challenge. Building an infrastructure for vocations to the ministry will not happen overnight, he admits. He sees the work of Calling Congregations in three, overlapping areas of endeavor. One is building the infrastructure of congregations and church-related organizations that are committed to vocation care. A second is helping congregations support people going into ministry with the Cultures of Call grant and its matching fellowship program. The third is the long-term task of actually revitalizing leaders in the church of the future.

How long will this take? Rev. Lewis quietly replies, “I don’t know. This is really long-term work. I really don’t think you’ll see the deep impact of what we’re doing for 15 or 20 years.”
“But,” he adds, “we’re on to something. We know that there are congregations and individuals out there who really want to be involved in something like this. Those are the ones we are working with. So, I’m really excited about this.”

His enthusiasm is evident in everything he describes about the movement. “We hear so much about the decline of the church, especially its mainline Protestant denominations,” he says. “This program is a contradiction of that narrative of decline, which comes out of a theology of scarcity. We need to realize that we’ve inherited a theology of abundance. What we’re doing is both a contradiction of and a protest against decline.”

He adds, “We do want to change the world. We do believe the churches are shapers of culture. We can do that and we have done that. We need to start living out of that abundance.”

“What we’ve learned,” he concludes, “is that we can make a real difference. Young people will answer the call to ministry.”

“We’ve also learned that people are longing for an opportunity to find a vocation, including and especially a vocation in ministry.”

And, he says, “We know that we can successfully create the connections to build and nurture an ecology in which people can hear God’s call.”

For more information about the Calling Congregations Initiative, go to http://www.thefund.org/programs/calling.phtml.

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