



SPRINGWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES

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Leadership Characteristics: The pursuit of clarity and naming reality

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When Nicholas Wolterstorff insisted, some time ago now, that the purpose of Christian Schools was to raise up students who were “radical dissenters”, some were dismayed and perhaps others were given reason to pause and ponder, particularly when it was the case – and still is, I believe – that many parents enrol their sons and daughters in Christian Schools so that they will be sheltered, away from the secular assumptions and beliefs that give rise to educational practices in State Schools and from explicit practices in those schools such as swearing, bullying, drug use and promiscuous sexual behaviour. Most parents are hardly intending or hoping that Christian Schools will turn their little ones into “radical dissenters”. They want them to be sheltered, protected and kept safe.

In the October 2005 *Christian Teachers Journal*, Richard Edlin (former Principal of the National Institute of Christian Education, with whom I worked for many years), wrote an article in which he affirmed Wolterstorff’s assertion about the “radical and culturally offensive nature of the Christian school”, further envisioning that “our schools should be training grounds for dissent and reform in the name of Christ”.

What ought to be the case? That Christian Schools are safe places of shelter *or* places for the formation of radical dissenters? Can both happen? The *negative* – places of shelter away from; and the *positive* – places to form and fashion radical dissenters.

My understanding is that *both* can be achieved – our schools ought to be safe, secure teaching and learning communities for shaping and equipping students with the character and capacity to radically dissent, contend with, stand up against, critique, live with discomfort and have the courage to agitate for new and different ways, even when they are on their own in a sporting team or subsequently a university classroom or work place. I believe the gospel demands, or invites, both. However, this will depend on outstanding leadership within our schools and perhaps a fresh appreciation of the sort of leadership Christian Schools ought to be giving to the entire schooling sector.

This evening, I want to reflect on issues of leadership. My thoughts are largely drawn from biographical reflection on a long involvement in Christian education in many different ways, most recently at Laidlaw College, a tertiary institution offering Diplomas and Degrees in Counselling, Teaching, Theology, Biblical Studies and Ministry. I have not been in Primary, Intermediate or Secondary School classrooms for quite a while now. I am increasingly feeling my distance from those contexts and my decreased capacity to speak into them.

What does great leadership look like? What do great leaders look like, whether we are thinking of classroom teachers, school executive leaders or Board members?

For many years now I have loved Max DePree's memorable description of leadership: "The first responsibility of the leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the leader is a servant".

Leaders are those who, out of gratitude and their commitment to serve, gift their organisations with clarity. Sometimes we use the term "vision" for what I am talking about, however, I prefer to firstly speak about clarity. Leaders define reality, that is, they have the capacity to deeply "get", and then articulate, who and what we are and what we are to do. This takes wisdom and courage among other things. This is crucial if leaders are to lead well.

The most troubling leadership I have experienced in various organisations with whom I have worked has been leadership that is ambiguous, even distant or absent, at times untrustworthy, sometimes impulsive, characterised by knee-jerk reactions, unexplained changes and finally pragmatism.

Lack of incisive leadership clarity eventually leads to loss of confidence across the organisation, loss of a sense of safety and thus, loss of the willingness to be vulnerable to one another, resulting in colleagues pulling back to bunkered down individual work, without much joy or a shared sense of belonging to something bigger. Talk is driven underground. The community is fractured.

I have recently been challenged by the writings of Etty Hillesum (1914-1943), a young Jewish woman, who was killed in Auschwitz. In terrible times, she wrote:

I try to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes, and to discover the small, naked human being amid the monstrous wreckage caused by man's senseless deeds. ... I am no fanciful visionary, God ... I try to face up to Your world, God, not to escape from reality into beautiful dreams.

This is the commitment of leadership – not to idealism, nor fanciful escape, nor ambiguity, certainly not to absence, rather to the clearest possible understanding and articulation of "reality". Our institutions and our students depend on this. Leaders must become people of clarity who gift clarity to their institutions no matter how costly that may be.

How is this achieved? And what sort of clarity am I talking about? I suggest the following.

- **Clarity about the gospel of Christ – deep immersion**

Clarity is at least in part, God's gift to those who know God deeply; to those who seek Christ, who immerse themselves in the gospel of Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness. This is a non-negotiable for leaders within the Christian schooling movement.

It is a theme throughout Scripture – Mark's gospel account is special in this regard. In Mark 8 Jesus gifts clarity of sight to a man who had been blind. We read:

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village." (TNIV, Mark 8:22-26)

And in light of the finished work of Christ, the prayers of NT apostles for those who believe:

¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms ... (Ephesians 5:17-20)

Immersion in the gospel of Christ and all things in light of the gospel is a life commitment and crucial starting point. Clarity is both God's gift and our responsibility as we seek him. And *participation* in the gospel of Christ's dying, burial and rising must shape our leadership. Recently I have been drawn to Katongole and Rice's book *Reconciling All Things*. In it they describe leadership, particularly with regard to bringing together communities that have been fractured or broken, in these terms:

The ministry of reconciliation requires that the body of the leader become not only a site of suffering but also a site of holiness – a site of both dying and being raised, crucifixion and resurrection ... leaders are ones who absorb pain without passing it on to others or to themselves.

I love these words. They have certainly been true for me at Laidlaw over the past two years. They capture the essence of gospel immersion and participation for leadership.

- **Clarity about our cultural times – sincere engagement**

We must be equally committed to sincere engagement with the cultural times of which we are part. This is necessary if we are to expose and contend with the idols of our times exalted in alternative gospel ("good news") stories, idols of which our students are very much aware, to which they are drawn. We must have clarity concerning idols of our times.

I have found myself fascinated in the last couple of years by the *Twilight* series. This fascination began when I watched the first Twilight movie on a plane flight between Sydney and Auckland. Wondering why Twilight had become a cultural phenomenon, I decided to read the novels. I then did some research into the author, Stephanie Meyer. This is mediocre but alluring literature for young readers. Stephanie Meyer writes from an explicit Mormon faith commitment. Her story is about salvation – salvation from mere humanness to a transcendent, limitless life. The following extract is about Edward's salvation:

“I was born in Chicago in 1901.” ... “Carlisle found me in a hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen, and dying of the Spanish influenza.” ... “I don’t remember it well – it was a very long time ago, and human memories fade.” ... “I do remember how it felt, when Carlisle saved me. It’s not an easy thing, not something you could forget.”

“How did he ... save you?”

A few seconds passed before he answered. He seemed to choose his words carefully.

“It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint necessary to accomplish it. But Carlisle has always been the most humane. The most compassionate of us ... I don’t think you could find his equal throughout all of history.” (pp. 251-252)

And having been saved by Edward, a vampire that Bella marries, with whom she then conceives a child that is more than human, Bella discovers a flourishing life. She becomes, as it were, *more than human*:

The cottage room was something from a fairy tale ... it was a place where anyone could believe magic existed. A place where you just expected Snow White to walk right in with her apple in hand, or a unicorn to stop and nibble at the rosebushes. Edward had always thought that he belonged to the world of horror stories. Of course, I’d known he was dead wrong. It was obvious that he belonged here. In a fairy tale. And now I was in the story with him. ...

A very, very small part of my head considered the interesting conundrum presented in this situation. I was never going to get tired, and neither was he. We didn’t have to catch our breath or rest or eat or even use the bathroom; we had no more mundane human needs. He had the most beautiful, perfect body in the world and I had him all to myself ... (*Breaking Dawn*, pp. 445-447)

This is the stuff of new creation, escaping mortality, becoming super-human. Yes, it is idealistic, romantically idealistic, however its appeal has been enormous, because it responds to some of the deepest longings of the human heart, strong longings for young people seeking to work out issues of identity and belonging in their early teenage years.

The gospel of Christ and its vision for humanity and for good life always *contends* with pretenders. We never proclaim Christ in a vacuum, rather in the marketplace of ideas and practices, contending stories, false gods and idols, alternative loyalties and loves. This collision of stories – true and false – is fundamental to the discomfort we experience as human beings, to choices we make everyday about what to believe and how to live. We must know what to *celebrate* in our cultures, how and what to *critique* in our cultures, and how and what to *confront* with gospel hope and truth. So must our students.

Contention ... celebration ... critique ... confrontation ... all of these are terms for those who have learnt to think and act incisively; who have not embraced unquestioning passivity and compliance. And sometimes it seems we are still content with passivity and compliance.

Just a couple of weeks ago Laidlaw College had a controversial speaker address a topic about which Christians hold strong, even passionate views. I cannot begin to describe the amount of

criticism we attracted for hosting a debate evening on this controversial issue. I was initially stung by the criticism. It made me aware again that for many within Christian churches, debate, robust dialogue, disagreement, wrestling with different viewpoints etc. is not a welcome pursuit. It is not seen as seminal to our humanity or discipleship.

I reminded our antagonists of the story of G. K. Chesterton, the renowned Christian author and theologian. G. K. was 5 years of age when his younger brother, Cecil, was born. At Cecil's birth, the precocious Gilbert reportedly announced, "Now I shall always have an audience." If Gilbert was hoping for a quietly passive younger brother, he was to be shocked. As soon as Cecil could speak, he refused to merely listen to Gilbert. He insisted on debate. And as the boys grew up together ... they disagreed about everything.

We are told that although the brothers engaged in relentless debate, each had a deep love for the other. They often argued, but never quarrelled. Apparently they once debated for 18 hours and 13 minutes! The problem with a quarrel, according to G. K, is that it so often interrupts a good argument.

God, grant us great debate partners. And may our schools be communities of robust and courageous dialogue and questioning. Too often, in a simplistic pursuit of certainty, we choose to only surround ourselves with those who echo back to us our own biases. We don't seriously allow for contending points of view. At too early an age, we stop really thinking deeply. We settle in our own traditions, baptising them as the only truth. This, in spite of the fact that we know from the Scriptures that all of us are finite and fallen beings who are exhorted by God to diligently search for knowledge and wisdom as for silver and gold. How much we need robust debate partners.

Great debate must occur within our Christian schools. It will only occur when firstly, I have learned to genuinely love those who disagree with me. Until I have learnt such love, I will never be genuinely free to learn from my antagonists. Secondly, I must develop the capacity to attentively listen; and thirdly, the ability to patiently question. Finally, I must be genuinely willing to change my view in response to the debate, for surely it is the case in real debate that I become vulnerable to my opponent. I submit the sureness of my viewpoint to the critique of this other person. I allow for the possibility that I may be wrong. Such debate will most likely be uncomfortable. But it is an important pathway to mature love, faith and hope for all who hope to give incisive and faithful leadership to churches and in the public arena.

- **Clarity about the organisation – grateful participation**

One reason I prefer "clarity" to "vision" is because in recent times the concept of vision has been somewhat hijacked by the reduced idea of just looking forward. Visional people are portrayed as goal setters. They articulate the future of the organisation. They look forward. I used to be a goal-driven person and might I say, at times, a pretty driven one at that. I was more interested in goals than motives, in outcomes than relationships. I was more committed to directing and perhaps controlling people and things than loving them.

Since commencing in the role of Principal at Laidlaw, I have spent a great deal of time seeking to gain *clarity* about the College as an organisation. This has caused me to give attention to vision in three ways – honest, inquiring, caring, listening, questioning attention to who and what we are:

- Heritage – where have we come from?

I have spent a large amount of time meeting with those who have been part of our heritage; who hold the memories and stories from long ago. This has been fascinating and fundamental in my quest for clarity.

- Here and now – who are we together?

I have worked hard at being *present* in the here and now of the College. It actually needs to be more than “presence” – it needs to be “participation”. Clarity comes from giving *attention*, then being *present*, but finally from *participation* in the hereness and nowness of the organisation. This requires time and effort. It also requires courage as we become aware of things that challenge us and beckon us to prayer and work.

- Hope – where are we going from here?

We must have clarity about where we are heading. This will emanate from leadership, however will finally be embraced by the community of the organisation. Too often vision is held by just a few, rather than by the community.

“Heritage”-“Here and Now”-“Hope” – these are three visional gazes which contribute towards clarity in leadership.

- **Clarity about ourselves – genuine evaluation**

Perhaps this is the most difficult of all! Genuine evaluation of oneself is crucial in the pursuit of clarity. To move towards his sort of clarity, a leader needs to:

- Engender trust in others – invitational
- Live with sincerity, without hypocrisy – not pretending, not hiding (workaholism can be a strategy for those who are hiding; I try to never say to others that I am busy ...)
- Watch and listen well – see and hear what others say about you as well as to you
- Reflect and debrief well – know yourself in reflection; walking in the mornings
- Pray constantly – nurture prayer
- Depend on colleagues, advisors and mentors – both inside and outside the organisation, others must be invited into conversation and critique

If we have leaders of this ilk – people of courageous clarity living out of immersion in the gospel, engaged in our cultural times, participating gratefully in the organisation, and deeply aware of who they are, we might think of ourselves and our schools in terms of C. S. Lewis’ portrayal of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

At one point in the story, Susan enquires of the beavers about Aslan: “Is he safe?” Mrs. Beaver says, “If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” Lucy then asks, “Then he isn’t safe?” And

Mr. Beaver utters this now famous line about Aslan: “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” The King is not safe, but most certainly good. And when Aslan arrives, as we read in Lewis’ novel, he dispels the winter, brings in the spring, breaks the Witch’s curse and ushers in new life. This is courageous and risky business – but it is also very good. It is the stuff of not just *radical* dissent but *redemptive* dissent and then renewal.

What sort of leadership should Christian Schools display? I have often answered this question in two ways. Firstly, that schools ought to be a *radical contrast* to those shaped by alternative stories, false gospels, other gods. We are not sanctified imitations of other school systems. The grounds from which we practice education, grounds shaped by the gospel, liberate us to imagine, strategise and practice education in ways that are surely distinctive and contrasting to schools grounded in other visions of life.

However, more than this, our schools need to recognise the responsibility to challenge and bring about the *renewal of the entire educational sector*. It must be our desire to seed renewal throughout the educational and schooling arena. We do not, in my understanding, establish our own schooling systems for their own sake. We rather embrace the greater intention of stirring up, of unsettling the entire schooling sector with a grander vision, with more faithful and creative practices, with greater wisdom and love.

There is considerable challenge and even tension with which we choose to live if we acknowledge these responsibilities. But I don’t believe the gospel impels us in any other direction than this.

May I finish with another quotation from Katongole and Rice’s book *Reconciling All Things*. They affirm leadership with the following words:

Leaders are the men and women of unclean lips who find themselves inadequate, in over their heads. Yet still they say with the prophet Isaiah, over and over again in the journey, “Here am I, send me!” (Is. 6:8).

May these words typify us. May they also come to typify our students and graduates.

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