Shaping Our Leadership Imagination: The Influence of Culture
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Culture shapes the way we lead. Whether this leadership is exhibited in business, government, or the church, the influence of culture is fundamental in forming the way we lead. Ernest White comments that we who are in pastoral leadership are more influenced by culture than we may care to admit. Through reviewing ways in which pastors have been formed by models of leadership, he declares that the appropriation of these models "demonstrate[s] a well known axiom: culture and society shape leadership after their own likeness."[1]

If this is true, if culture shapes the way we lead after its own likeness, how then does culture shape us? A few months ago I was speaking with a seminary graduate who was wondering out loud as to why so many of his fellow graduates were seeking to engage in ministry within the context of the "American Dream. "Why are they going after the pastorates which provide a comfortable income, hold a certain prestige? Why are they not entering ministry to do ministry wherever that might be?" he asked. My simple response was that this American culture is what has formed them – they were not formed in an alternative way. And so as Americans, we know little else except to think about ministry within the cultural context of all that is American.

Culture can be a difficult thing to grasp because it is all around us and largely unexamined. Like fish in water, it is the milieu in which we live. In giving definition to culture, George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder express that "[c]ulture consists of the integrated systems of beliefs, values, and behaviors held by a people. Culture frames our human existence. We cannot know ourselves apart from possessing a particular perspective."[2] Yet, culture is not something we are born with, but rather we are born into it and it shapes our perspectives. Richard L. Hughes states that "[c]ulture refers to those learned behaviors characterizing the total way of life of members within any given society."[3] Therefore, we are shaped by the culture through our daily interactions with family, with neighbors, and with strangers. We learn how to behave as we interact with others in our societal contexts and thereby the ethos of our culture shapes and influences what we value, what we believe, and how we act. In short, culture shapes the way we view and experience life.

We may only begin to notice our culture when we either encounter persons from other cultures or we experience some kind of crisis – either involves us in developing a deeper awareness, or gaining a different perspective on our culture. In encountering persons

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[1]Ernest White, "The Crisis in Christian Leadership," *Review & Expositor* (Volume 83, Number 4, Fall 1986), 547. In his article, White highlights three models which have shaped the way clergy have engaged in leadership: the bureaucratic leader, the CEO leader, and the Media Marketing leader. He notes, "By any criteria of effectiveness, none of the three models of leadership . . . can be discounted. Each has been and continues to be an awesomely powerful implementation of leadership . . . . and can be employed for good" (551), nevertheless, they are leadership models derived from the culture.

[2] George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, "Assessing Our Culture," *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. by George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 53.

[3] Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, and Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 1996), 540.

from other cultures, we become aware of our own culture when we see them acting in ways which, from our perspective, are, at best, different, or at worst, just plain wrong. When we experience a crisis, our world is shaken and in this state we are opened to view life from a different perspective, enabling us to see as we have not seen before – if we have "eyes to see," and "ears to hear."

For me this change of perspective was precipitated in leaving pastoral ministry to pursue doctoral studies in education. The pastoral ministry I left had left some scars upon my soul, and so my family and I took some time to be on "the other side of the pulpit" in order to be restored. It was from the perspective of being on "the other side of the pulpit" that I began to realize what kind of pastoral leader I had become. In viewing the ways the pastors of the churches we attended engaged people and carried out their responsibilities on Sunday mornings, in ways which seemed to be benignly manipulative, I began to see that I had pastored in the same way – I had tried to be a successful pastor and I had "bought into" some of the same ways of exercising my pastoral leadership. It was a style that did not connect with me at all while I lived life on "the other side of the pulpit." This caused me to begin asking why I led the way I did, and, what influenced me to exercise pastoral leadership in this way? I began to realize this approach to leadership was more culturally shaped, rather than one formed by biblical and theological understandings.

In recent years studies have confirmed that leadership models or styles are culturally-based. Michael H. Hoppe argues that ". . . in thinking about leader development and leadership, culture matters; culture largely determines the boundaries within which leader development and leadership are understood and practiced."[4] He further expresses, "[t]hus while culture facilitates certain practices, it also tends to inhibit others, thereby limiting the behavioral options that its members consider important and relevant."[5] The American culture perpetuates the idea that persons can control their own destinies, which ". . . is totally alien to most of the world cultures."[6] Though other cultures exhibit similar values in leadership as the American culture, it seems that the American context places a higher cultural value on individualism. Hoppe and his colleagues have identified at least seven leadership values that represent the American approach to leadership. These include:

Individualism: the right to the pursuit of one's own happiness
Equality: existential equality among members of society
Work: hard work and achievement as the basis for a good life
Change: openness to change and self-improvement
Data: preeminence of empirical, observable, measurable facts
Practicality: preference for inductive and operational thinking
Action: progress and taking action as individual duties.[7]

Global leadership studies conducted by GLOBE[8] examined sixty cultures and characterized

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[4] Michael H. Hoppe, "Cross-Cultural Issues in the Development of Leaders," *Handbook of Leadership Development*, 2nd ed. Ed. by Cynthia D. McCauley and Ellen Van Velsor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 334-335.

[5] Ibid., 335.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 336.

[8] GLOBE refers to *The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research*

them by their organizational culture and leadership. Their findings related six differing preferred leader styles.

- The *performance-oriented* style, which stresses high standards, decisiveness, and innovation; seeks to inspire people around a vision; and creates a passion among them to perform
- The *team-oriented* style, which instills pride, loyalty, and collaboration among organizational members and highly values team cohesiveness
- The *participative* style, which encourages input from everyone, delegation, and equality
- The *humane* style, which is patient, supportive, and concerned with the well-being of others
- The *autonomous* style, which is characterized by independent, individualistic, and self-centric behaviors
- The *self-protective* or *group-protective* style, which emphasizes procedural, status-conscious, and "face-saving" behaviors.[9]

GLOBE's findings revealed that the Anglo cluster of nations, which include United States, Canada, in addition to nations within Germanic and Nordic Europe reflect the value of a performance-oriented leadership style. Whereas, the leadership style that this grouping of nations values the least is the preferred style of nations from the Middle East, Southern Asia, and Latin America, that being the self-protective or group-protective leadership style.[10] Also, other empirical research ". . . has demonstrated that what is expected of leaders, what leaders may and may not do, and the status and influence bestowed on leaders vary considerably as a result of the cultural forces in the countries or regions in which the leaders function."[11]

So it becomes clear that culture is significant in understanding why we lead the way we lead. The lesson to be learned from this is that we need to become more aware of the cultural assumptions that inform our leadership approaches. It is when we become aware of the cultural values and beliefs which shape the way we lead that we are more readily able to discern what motivates our style of leading. It is with such understanding that we can begin to assess whether such culturally-laden leadership styles represent the kind of leadership that we want to exercise in and through the life of the church. And so we begin to ask ourselves: if the church represents an alternative culture as the community of the reign of God in the world, is there a different set of values and beliefs which are to guide the way we are called to exercise leadership?

Yet before we examine this question, we need to recognize that the question of culture is compounded by the realization that leadership has become the chief concern of clergy and church alike. Seeking to be relevant, to be effective, to be successful, pastors for

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[9] Hoppe, 345.

[10] Ibid., 345.

[11] Robert J. House, et al., *Cultural Influences on Leadership and Organizations: Project Globe*, unpublished paper, 4.

more than two decades have had an almost obsessive fixation on leadership. Leadership has garnered such attention, I believe, in response to numerous voices announcing that the church is in the midst of a leadership crisis. George Barna is one of these voices, who over fifteen years ago declared,

> Having spent much of the last decade researching organizational behavior and ministry impact, I am convinced that there are just a handful of keys to successful ministry. One of the indispensable characteristics of a ministry that transforms lives is leadership.
> This may sound simplistic. Unfortunately, relatively few churches actually have a leader at the helm. In striving to understand why most churches in this country demonstrate little positive impact on people's lives, I have concluded that it is largely due to the lack of leadership.[12]

In response, pastors not wanting to be counted among those contributing to the crisis turned to whatever resources they could find to enable them to be more effective church leaders. As one pastor of a large and growing congregation expressed, "I read anything I can find on leadership, it's that important." To gain an edge, pastors turned to resources that were not limited to an ecclesial context, but sought out leadership literature primarily from the corporate business world. Yet, similar to the church, business was also in a leadership crisis, in fact there is "a widespread perception of a lack of leadership in our society."[13] As a result, we have at our fingertips a great volume of literature on leadership, presenting numerous understandings and approaches. Yet, in spite of the plethora of resources on leadership, there seems to be little amelioration of the crisis. In fact, George Barna has all but given up. He regards his ten year strategy to revitalize church leadership as having failed and he blames it on the lack of pastoral leadership.

> The strategy was flawed because it had an assumption. The assumption was that the people in leadership are actually leaders. [I thought] all I need to do is give them the right information and they can draw the right conclusions. . . . Most people who are in positions of leadership in local churches aren't leaders. They're great people, but they're not really leaders.[14]

How do we navigate out of this quagmire? We have adopted model after model, style after style, approach after approach in leadership and we are still struggling – the church is still struggling. Could it be that our attention has been misfocused? Could it be that the leadership literature we have turned to formed us in ways which are culturally antithetical to the way Christ calls us to lead within his community?

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[12]George Barna, *Today's Pastors*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 117.

[13]J. Thomas Wren, *The Leader's Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), ix.

[14]Tim Stafford, "The Third Coming of George Barna," *Christianity Today* (Vol. 46 No. 9 August 5, 2002), 34.

A Loss of Pastoral Imagination

Numerous others would agree that there is a dire need for leadership within the church. But what kind of pastors have we become in being shaped largely by our societal and cultural contexts? What seems to have suffered in this frantic cultural appropriation of leadership models is a biblical orientation of what it means to be pastoral. Eugene Peterson, in *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, describes the kind of pastoral leaders we have become:

> The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns– how to keep the customer happy, how to lure customers away from the congregation down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.
>   Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping, to be sure but shopkeeping all the same. The marketing strategies of the fast-food franchise occupy the waking minds of these entrepreneurs; while asleep they dream of the kind of success that will get the attention of journalists.[15]

Though Peterson caricatures the worst representation of pastoral leadership in our American context, many pastors have attempted to serve both the church and the world, unable to step away from the siren song of success and significance. There seems to be little alternative; if pastors want to be good leaders, they simply must be influenced in the ways of leadership that are considered successful, whatever the context. Yet, I have come to discover that the most effective non-church leaders are formed more deeply by their faith resources, than what society proffers as important, in the exercising of their leadership. Could it be true for pastoral ministry as well? Could pastors discern a way of leading that embodies a different notion of success and effectiveness, than that marketed by our western culture?

A few years ago, Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Foundation introduced the term "pastoral imagination" to describe "a way of seeing into and interpreting the world which shapes everything a pastor thinks and does."[16] In elucidating this concept he drew comparisons with those in the legal field who might be described as having a "legal mind." By this he meant lawyers "have been formed–by their legal education and by their years of professional work in the law–in a particular way of seeing and thinking that is particular to that profession. It consists of a penetrating way of knowing that enables really good lawyers to notice things, and do things that others of us . . . simply cannot see or do."[17] Similarly in relation to artistic imaginations, in which artists "have an imagination and an intelligence that enables them to draw upon what they perceive in the world and contemplate in their souls to create new

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[15]Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 1.

[16]Craig Dykstra, "The Pastoral Imagination," *Initiatives in Religion* (Spring 2001, Volume 9, Number 1), 1.

[17]Ibid.

objects that in turn help the rest of us apprehend reality more deeply,"[18] so do pastors have a particular "way of perceiving, understanding and relating to the world that has distinctive characteristics."[19] Dykstra describes that the formation of the pastoral imagination involves

> the constant interplay of attention to Scripture; sorting through the gospel's call and demand on them and their congregations in their particular context; leading worship, preaching and teaching; responding to requests for help of all kinds of myriad people in need; living with children, youth and adults through whole life-cycles marked both by great joy and profound mourning; sustaining unending responsibility for running a small (or sometimes fairly large) non-profit organization with its buildings, budgets, public relations and personnel issues–the unique confluence of all that both requires and gives shape to a distinctive imagination unlike that in any other walk of life.[20]

Though what Dykstra describes may be more supportive of the pastoral role within Christendom, the cultural adaptation of the church to culture, in relation to the "running" of the church with its buildings and budgets, he also points out the shaping of the pastoral imagination by Scripture and its being lived out by the faithful community. It seems, then, that the pastoral imagination so richly formed ought also to provide a unique perspective on leadership, a perspective that is formed by a similar attention to Scripture and the numerous experiences that form the pastoral imagination for other areas of ministry. But this seems rarely to be the case. As already argued above, the leadership styles adopted by pastors have, more times than not, been shaped by cultural forces, cultural influences, that seem to be antithetical to the influences that shape the pastoral imagination. How did we as pastors give consent to this dichotomization?

It is becoming obvious that the concern regarding leadership is much more foundational than merely finding the right resources. There needs to be an understanding as to why it is so difficult to form our leadership imagination in ways that form our pastoral imagination. Why is it that for leadership we turn to more secular-oriented literature, which we would never consider consulting for other pastoral practices? There may be a couple of reasons.

Alan E. Nelson makes the comment that to gain understanding for leading the church, one must turn to extrabiblical sources. He states that "some Christians have not kept pace, thinking that the Bible is a manual for leaders. **That is a problematic way of thinking**. The Bible was not intended to be a leadership text, even though it illustrates the concept through many of its stories."[21] Further he expresses, "the Bible talks about leaders and asserts a foundational character sketch of persons who excelled, but it does not provide us with the finer points of the leadership process."[22] In some ways, Nelson's reasoning is circular; it depends upon the process one has in mind. Yes it is true that the Bible is not a handbook on leadership, but it is also more than illustrative of what leading is to encompass under God's rule. Trying to find a leadership process within the narrative of Scripture that seeks

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 2.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Alan E. Nelson, *Leading Your Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 46.

[22]Ibid, 48.

confirmation from our culture is to miss the unique perspective of a process that may represent an alternative to what has culturally shaped us.

A second reason is that it may have to do with our desiring to be seen as relevant, effective, and successful in the eyes of society. Such a perspective might not be a problem for the church if we were to understand pastoral ministry as serving civic purposes, wherein church and religion serve the culture in order to create a citizenry which contributes to a moral ethos of society. In a consumer-oriented society, it seems that church involvement can become another facet of an overly busy lifestyle that needs to be squeezed in among other important aspects of life. Therefore, it would seem reasonable that the church vying for a piece of the "societal or cultural pie" requires a leadership approach that emulates the best of business or government in order to draw attention to what value church life has to offer in supporting the cultural status quo. There is hardly a downside, then, to use marketing approaches to attract religious consumers to the religious products the church has to offer. Indeed, there is nothing fundamentally flawed with this kind of leadership, if the church is meant to be a part of the same cultural landscape.

However, there seems to be something terribly wrong with this picture of reality. Even pastors who have uncritically adopted culturally-appropriate leadership styles, flinch at the thought of the churches they serve as accommodating themselves to the culture. But in exercising leadership that is formed more by the culture, rather than biblical and theological perspectives, what else can the church become? This seems to be our situation in our North American cultural context. It is not so much that this has been a conscious decision on our part, than it has been a non-decision – it merely is an outgrowth of being socialized into our culture. It is not by any malicious intent or purpose that our leadership imagination is shaped by the culture, we are merely exercising leadership in ways that are congruent with our cultural context. Without critically examining our culture and the way we do what we do, we cannot help but lead in ways which are in harmony with the culture.

Perhaps such a critique may be considered too harsh, but it does come close to the truth, perhaps too close. George Hunsberger indicates that indeed the church in North America has succumbed to being such a cultural, consumer-driven commodity. He relates that,

> in the North American setting, we have come to view the church as "a vendor of religious services and goods" . . . . To this notion we attach the language of production, marketing, sales, and consumption. A congregation becomes a retail outlet or franchise of the denominational brand. Staff at all levels become sales and service representatives. The denomination is the corporate headquarter in charge of everything from research and development to mass media imaging.[23]

Though again, many pastors and church members may bristle at such an assessment, he finds evidence for such a critique in the majority of church mission statements. Often statements state something like, "The mission of this *church* is to nurture its *members*" which is then followed by a number of commitments of the church.[24] In response Hunsberger argues:

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[23]George Hunsberger, "Sizing Up the Shape of the Church," *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America,* ed. by George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 337-338.

[24]Ibid., 339.

In a statement like that, to what does the word "church" refer? It sits over against the members, for whom it has a mission to do certain things. Church here refers either to the official governing body that feels responsible to meet the needs of the congregational members or those outside it, or to the staff whom they charge with that responsibility. But the members are not conceived, in such a statement, as *being* the church and themselves *having* a mission on which they have been collectively sent. Instead, they are the customers, the regular consumers for whom the religious services and goods produced by the "church" are intended. On such a model, evangelism devolves into membership recruitment, which may more accurately be called "capturing market share." This kind of "church" is in the business of religion, and its livelihood is dependent on having a sufficient number of satisfied, committed customers.[25]

In such a consumeristic accommodation of the church to culture, it is no wonder that pastors have turned to business and societal models as the resources for guiding their understanding and approaches to pastoral leadership, and by default, neglecting the biblical and theological sources which have helped form their pastoral imagination in other areas. It seems that where much of our ministry is shaped by our pastoral imaginations, our approaches to the development of our leadership imagination are largely culturally shaped.

However, in our world today as cultures collide, as different ways of being find their way into "our" ways of being, we begin to experience cultural disorientation. We begin to realize that everyone does not value, believe, or behave in the ways we do. For those less attuned, or less open, to the diverse character of humanity, they cry out for others to become like them, further exacerbating this disorientation. It is only as we begin to recognize that we live in a global village, realizing that we no longer live within monocultural environments, that we begin to be open to learn to engage life in different ways, making room in our values, beliefs and actions for other values, beliefs, and actions because we learn to view life and society through differing perspectives. It is in engaging this openness to the culture of others that we begin to see that the expression of leadership and leadership styles is also not monocultural, but is culturally contingent.

Likewise, in recognizing that as the people of God we are called to demonstrate an alternative culture while living out our lives in societal cultures,[26] we need to question what has influenced the way we lead and begin to explore different ways of leading that are more in harmony with the culture of God's reign.

Questioning the Cultural Influences that Shape Our Leadership Imagination?

As already stated the American culture shapes the practice of leadership in a specific way – a style that is performance-oriented and places high value on individualism, equality, work, change, data, practicality, and action. This is the culture many of us have grown up in and invariably it has also shaped our understanding and expression of how we are Christian. We look at these values and wonder whether these are not similar values espoused through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? For a growing number of pastors, the answer is no. As they begin to discover that culturally-influenced leadership practices are often antithetical to

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[25]Ibid.

[26] Insert several scriptural quotations about being aliens, sojorners in the land.

the values of the gospel, they begin to question how their leadership imagination has been formed.

For many years baby-boomer pastors succumbed to the temptation of seeking to be relevant, successful within society in order to attract people to Christ Jesus. Though God is not thwarted by our well-intentioned naïve actions, we are limited in participating fully with God in God's mission in the world when we continually choose to be formed by influences which are contrary to God's purposes. As we seek to be successful in our American context, our culture calls for us to exhibit a take-charge attitude, a focus on getting the job done, and a focusing on the task at hand. Henri Nouwen relates that this is largely due to the temptation of power whereby ". . . people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships . . . have opted for power and control instead."[27] Further, Margaret Wheatley relates the limitations of this kind of leadership approach, primarily in relation to leading people.

> All this time, we have created trouble for ourselves in organizations by confusing control with order. This is no surprise, given that for most of its written history, leadership has been defined in terms of its control functions. Lenin spoke for many leaders when he said: "Freedom is good, but control is better." And our quest for control has been oftentimes as destructive as was his.
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> If people are machines, seeking to control us makes sense. But if we live with the same forces intrinsic to all other life, then seeking to impose control through rigid structures is suicide. If we believe that there is no order to human activity except that imposed by the leader, that there is no self-regulation except that dictated by policies, if we believe that responsible leaders must have their hands into everything, controlling every decision, person, and moment, then we cannot hope for anything except what we already have a treadmill of frantic efforts that end up destroying our individual and collective vitality.[28]

Certainly, as we seek for our leadership imagination to be shaped by the Gospel, rather than the culture, we will need to ask questions regarding what is to influence us.

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[27]Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 79.

[28] Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 1999), 24-25.