



In Healthy Congregations, Leaders Challenge People

Do you ever wonder what it would be like to converse with Jesus, face to face? The gospels offer some pretty strong clues about how Jesus related to people. For one thing, Jesus seems utterly comfortable in his own skin—he knows who he is and what he is about. Jesus also is “transparent” and brutally honest with others. If I were in a conversation with Jesus I’d expect him to look me right in the eye and say exactly what he’s thinking, even if that troubled me.

This is the eighth of an 11-part series on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

This means that Jesus can comfort or challenge others, depending on what they most need. In the familiar story of the rich man (Mark 10:21-22), Jesus has an extended conversation with an earnest fellow who hankers for eternal life. He knows his Bible, but he lacks one thing. Gazing deeply into his heart, Jesus challenges him to give up the only thing standing between him and full life in God’s Reign: his possessions.

Jesus did not hesitate to challenge this man on the profound subject of wealth. Jesus upset the man’s equilibrium by naming the “elephant in the room.” Did Jesus do this simply to be provocative or unnerving? No. The text says that, just before Jesus issued his challenge, he looked at the man and “*loved him*” (Mark 17:21).

Leaders in Christ’s church love God’s people enough to look them right in the eyes and name uncomfortable truths. Leaders of disciples don’t shirk from upsetting the equilibrium in their relationships with others—even to the point of challenging them to address issues and respond healthily to changing circumstances.

In healthy congregations leaders challenge people. Indeed, that is a central role for leaders—to be “challengers.” However, this is not for the faint of heart. Most of us would rather avoid rocking the boat. But that “strategy” works only in a perfect world!

Effective leaders of Christian communities will be “challengers.” What does that look like, though?

- Such leaders realize that *people naturally react to change, which usually provokes anxiety in the congrega-*

tion. Such anxiety is a normal reaction to change; the issue is how this anxiety is managed.

- Such leaders *understand people’s natural desire to get rid of anxiety at any cost.* As Peter Steinke puts it, “Instead of analyzing the circumstance, seeking clarity, exploring a number of responses, and planning new directions, the congregation is overfocused on its discomfort.”

- Such leaders *cultivate the capacity to tolerate pain both in themselves and in others.* Rather than making decisions on the basis of other persons’ current “emotional temperature,” healthy leaders function on the basis of their beliefs and convictions.

- Such healthy leaders are also **able to take the long view of things.** They realize that if others initially resist being challenged—things may change down the line. Mark 10:17-22 ends with the rich man walking away from Jesus “grieving.” But are we sure that’s how his story finally ended? What if our Lord’s stark challenge planted a seed in the rich man’s heart that took days, weeks, months or even years to germinate?

We may never know the answer to that question. But we certainly do see congregations that flourish because they had tenacious, far-sighted leaders willing to issue mission-driven challenges that **did** eventually bear good fruit.

Bishop Larry Wohlraabe

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Recall a time when you or your congregation were challenged by a Christian leader. How did you or your congregation respond to this challenge? What were the outcomes of this encounter?
2. What forces are producing anxiety in your congregation right now? How is your church responding to changes that are coming your way?
3. Assess your own ability, as a leader, to tolerate pain in yourself or in others. What impact does your “pain tolerance threshold” have on your ability to lead?

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Northwestern Minnesota Synod
Connections
 Connecting the Congregational, Synodical, and Churchwide Expressions of the ELCA



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