

# Local Leaders in the Global Church

Author: Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj

Date: 29.07.2010

Category: Indigenous Leadership

Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on 'Local Leaders in the Global Church.' Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

Jesus ...called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve, designating them apostles, that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ... Mark 3: 13-15

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. 2 Tim 2:2

## An Enduring Priority for the Church

The importance of leaders and continuous leadership development for the church has been recognised from its earliest days. As Mark narrates, Jesus chose the twelve, trained them and sent them on a mission. Paul likewise mentored many, among who was Timothy. He in turn developed other leaders for the church. This practice, which has been worked out in various ways, has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of the church over the centuries.

In more recent times the significance of leaders and leadership development has been underlined yet again. At the 1974 Lausanne Congress an influential document was produced called the Lausanne Covenant. Article 11 expressed the firm resolve of the Congress thus: '...we are committed to indigenous principles and long that every church will have national leaders who manifest a Christian style of leadership in terms not of domination but of service.' 1. In that same tradition of reflective and engaged evangelicalism the Manila Manifesto, produced in 1989, declared in Affirmation 12: 'We affirm that God has committed to the whole church and every member of it the task of making Christ known throughout the world; we long to see all lay and ordained persons mobilized and trained for this task.' 2. As we stand at this critical juncture in history of the church the Cape Town 2010 Congress will do well to reiterate the importance of leaders and the urgency of that solemn responsibility of leadership development. By first reaffirming the calling and character of leadership, second clarifying its current context and third highlighting some challenges and opportunities of and for local leaders in the global church, it is hoped that this paper will assist the congress in doing just that.

## Leadership in Church & Mission

Sound leadership is crucial for the successful functioning and progress of the church. Christian history is littered with examples of visionary leadership that numerous people have provided. Some of them, like Bishop Polycarp and Bishop Cyprian in the second century, exercised leadership during times of threat and helped preserve the Christian community. Some of them, like the evangelist John Sung in early twentieth century China and Bishop V.S. Azariah around the same time in India, provided leadership to large movements toward Christ. Look around the world church today and one can see men and women who are effectively exercising their leadership gifts for the glory of God and thus building the church.

At the same time one must admit that the converse is also true. Ineffective leadership has cost the church dearly. In almost every diagnosis of the problems facing the church ineffective leadership

shows up as a major flaw. In the New Delhi World Inquiry Report: Evangelising Our World Inquiry produced under the auspices of the Lausanne 2004 Forum for World Evangelisation, for example, we find that, 'the lack of effective leadership' is one of the major obstacles to evangelism. 3. If that was not alarming enough the secondary effects, as demonstrated in other interconnected obstacles noted in that report, raise serious cause for concern. It appears then that leaders are key figures in the church; they can indeed make or break the gospel witness of the church. Consequently our reflections on mission and the church will need to intentionally devote attention to the role and significance of leadership.

That a general consensus exists, at least within the evangelical section of the church, on the calling of every Christian to 'make disciples' is well recognised. However, that this calling of making disciples involves the exercise of leadership is not necessarily well understood as it perhaps ought to be. If at all leadership and mission intersect it is in the exercise of the particular responsibilities, as an incumbent of an official position in an organisation, not otherwise. That leadership is thought only to attend a particular position implies that leadership generally involves the exercise of authority over others.

When we turn to the scriptures however we find an entirely different vision. If we look at Matthew 28, for example, the resurrected Jesus commissions his disciples for mission. He identifies himself as the one to whom 'all authority' is given. Based on this self introduction he then invites them to 'make disciples of all nations.' Following that he promises that he will be with them 'always, to the very end of the age.' It is important to notice here that all authority belongs to Jesus Christ alone, not to us human beings. If leadership in mission is exercising authority we find no warrant for that in Mathew 28. On the contrary, what we do find is that all authority belongs to Christ, and it is in that capacity that he calls us to make disciples of all nations. In Christian mission 'authority' resides in Christ alone, not in the missionary's experience, nor his economic power, or his theological/technological acumen. Ours is the claim, not to authority, but to be covenant partners of Christ, the one who now stands as victor over sin, death and the devil. Leadership in mission is therefore not exercising authority; rather it is standing under the all pervasive Lordship of Christ and following with gratitude and in obedience to his calling.

Matthew 28 goes on to clarify that we who are called to make disciples are invited to do so through the baptising of new believers and teaching of obedience to the precepts of Christ and his Kingdom. While these two precise activities do not exhaust mission they are an important part of that calling. In the exercise of such responsibility, and others that constitute mission, clearly leadership is involved, but to be sure it is a leadership that exercises wholesome influence rather than exerts dictatorial authority. The biblical idea of leadership that the global church today desperately needs to reclaim is 'national leaders who manifest a Christian style of leadership in terms not of domination but of service.'

Christian leadership is therefore servant leadership. This concept and practice of servant leadership did not originate with the management guru and author Robert Greenleaf. 4. On the contrary this is, in fact, one aspect of Jesus' unique contribution to human relationships and society. In his life and ministry he taught and ably demonstrated an entirely new world of leadership and service. He demonstrated what it means to lead as one serves, and what it means to serve as one leads. As we seek to follow this lifestyle that Jesus taught us we will undoubtedly exert wholesome influence on people and in doing so live a life of servanthood, which in the Kingdom of God is a life of leadership.

If all of us are called to make disciples, which we are, in doing so we are all equally called to be servant leaders under the authority of Christ. If leadership is thought of only in terms of holding a position and/or wielding authority only a few will qualify. If, on the other hand, leadership is thought of as exerting wholesome influence on people at all levels then leadership is for all. As all of us seek to lead others into the Kingdom of God, the Church needs all these disciple makers to assume their role as leaders, but leaders who are Christ-like servant leaders. The church and world desperately need leaders who will serve and servants who will lead.

## New Realities of 21st Century Christianity

For our present purposes I would like to highlight briefly three implications that seem to stand out. If Christianity is being reconfigured by this massive growth in the majority world it would first of all mean that Christianity of the 21st Century will be characterised by a healthy polycentrism. No longer can we think of Rome and/or Canterbury and/or Colorado Springs as the primary representative centres of Christianity. To be true to this new reality called World Christianity we will now need to accord Buenos Aires, Chennai, Lagos, Nairobi, Santiago, Seoul, Shanghai and other such places equal if not more importance. For it is in these specific places and their hinterlands that the gospel has taken deep root and is initiating far reaching transformations among peoples. It is from such centres that the gospel is spreading to populations that have had little Christian exposure and bringing about a massive change to what the church will look like. For example, we now see that mission is not necessarily a movement from the west to the rest but is in fact from everywhere to everywhere. 5. Brazilian missionaries are serving in Africa; African missionaries in the UK; Indian missionaries in the US; Korean missionaries in Central Asia; Philippine missionaries in the Middle Eastern Gulf states and the list could go on.

If such a polycentrism is significant in this new era it leads to my second point, that of a healthy pluralism. By this I do not mean that Christian theology will become relativistic and will allow culture to determine its content. On the contrary, what I mean is that unlike the previous era the gospel cannot be represented by a western image and Christian history cannot be guided by a western master narrative, political, economical or theological. Rather as the gospel takes root in numerous local cultures and traditions a variety of expressions, not as mere exotic decorations, but as fundamental to its understanding and practice will sprout up around the world. Genuine Christian spirituality will find expression in multiple forms that will only serve to enrich the church worldwide. Such a healthy pluralism will indeed come closer to the vision we find in Revelation 7:9. The large crowd we see there is made up of every people, every language and every nation. This glorious diversity however is united and made one as they worship God.

Third, is the fact that Christianity's relationship with culture will be characterised by multiple patterns. For example the pre-eminent model that western Christendom inhabited was a Constantinian one. Here a close relationship existed between church and state which in turn granted the church much power and privilege. It was from such a high pulpit that the church preached its gospel. World Christianity however inhabits an entirely different model, the model of the servant-Christ who lives in, speaks to and challenges society and the powers that be, not from the vantage point of power and privilege, but rather from the vulnerable position of powerlessness. The face of Christianity will be recognised by its deep and genuine spirituality that thrives in adverse circumstances. This will be true in at least three particular areas. First, any survey will clearly attest that a vast majority of the growing church is economically poor. Second, though Christian growth is remarkable Christians in the majority world remain a social and political minority. Third, as recent developments prove this poor minority face severe religious persecution. The growing church in the majority world will therefore have to deal with such imposing realities. It is from this encounter with poverty, minority status and animosity fresh and new patterns of Christian engagement with society will have to develop.

### Local Leaders in a Global Church

If, as noted, no less than a reconfiguration of Christianity is underway and no less than mega changes characterise our context what are the opportunities and challenges for the leadership of the church and mission in the 21st century? How can local leaders exercise their ministry in this global world? To be sure, answers to these important questions will be varied because they will have to be worked out by Christians from their own particular contexts around the world. But one thing is certain: the response the church mounts will not only impact current reality but will also set the trajectory for future generations that follow us. If so momentous is our responsibility as we stand at this juncture our answers will surely need to be theologically sound and missiologically effective. For if our theology and missiology is to be true to its biblical roots and hence true to itself all our theology needs to be missiologically focused and all our missiology needs to be theologically grounded. 6.

In this present attempt to address these weighty questions I would like to delineate briefly some implications for indigenous leadership of the three observations I made earlier. The first pertains to the healthy polycentricism that characterises 21st Century world Christianity. If God is doing a mighty work around the world local leaders can take heart that our inability (or even our ability), our lack of resources (or even our resources), our lack of power and privilege can indeed be transformed in his mighty hands as valuable tools for his service. As we are seeing, the Spirit of God is able to employ what we have and do not have to accomplish his grand purposes. The growth of the church in the majority world is testimony to this fact. The raising up of multiple centres of Christianity is evidence of this truth. It is God's work, and as Jesus says truly in Matthew 16:18, 'I will build my church,' we are experiencing its outworking.

This should inspire confidence in us as leaders around the world. For far too long we have depended on external agents and external resources to determine the shape and set the course of our missionary passion and involvement. We have for far too long inhabited and exhibited a hand-me-down or second hand mission consciousness. Things are changing though! Through the miraculous work of God we are now at the centre of his action. We can confidently claim that our missionary involvement and passion is not necessarily refracted through or controlled by 'supervisors' and 'experts' from outside, but rather is motivated and guided by a personal love for God and a dependence on the Holy Spirit. Our experience and expertise in mission is a direct result of our relationship with Christ. The confidence that stems from such a recognition ought to enable us respect and value the story of God's work in our lives, churches and nations. We need to recognise that our stories carry equal weight as any other story does. Our stories are no less significant and no less illustrative of God's mighty acts. We need not be controlled and inhibited by what was thought to be 'accepted convention' by others. Rather under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to be sure it is not our ingenuity but only under such divine enabling, we can confidently move forward to serve the world in the name of Christ and his kingdom.

The second implication pertains to a healthy pluralism that we find around the world church. For far too long the Christian faith has been seen as a western religion that is guided by leaders, institutions and money in and from the west. In fact this has been cited as one of the main reasons for its unsuitability for the rest of the world. However, 21st century Christianity is a colourful tapestry woven together by diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic strands that the world church contributes. These spiritually deep rooted and culturally relevant expressions of Christian faith are indeed offerings that the world church presents to God in return for his abundant goodness and grace. They are hymns of praise to the Triune God of the Bible. This prompts us to say that Christianity is increasingly a world phenomenon, not just by virtue of its presence but more importantly by virtue of its plurality 'ethnic, linguistic and cultural. This is indeed cause for celebration!

Such a plurality should facilitate creativity. For some, creativity may seem like a 'worldly' attribute that has little to do with church and faith. However, when we examine our scriptures we may notice that creativity originates in God. Look closely at his creation and it will be difficult to miss that fact. But significantly the story does not end there. When God granted humankind a responsibility to care for his creation (Gen 1:28; 2:15) part of the gifting he gave to us was freedom and creativity. Such gifts were to be employed in the service of God, to work and create something that would please him, that would glorify him. Indeed we were endowed with creativity to create culture that would glorify God. When some of us hear the word culture we immediately think of the dangers of syncretism and shy away from engagement with culture for fear of being 'contaminated' by it. This has been the bane of the church for far too long. As we find Peter in Acts 10 going through a conversion of sorts, we also need to be transformed so that we may genuinely engage with peoples and cultures so that all of it may be brought captive to Christ. The demographic changes that we see in the world church needs to be supplemented, in a much more thoroughgoing fashion, with a deep transformation of the cultural expressions of the church. Such creativity will make our faith feel 'at home' in our respective cultures yet ensure that we remain 'pilgrims' in the world.

The third observation made earlier pertains to the multiple patterns of Christian life and presence that

we find in the world. Look around the world and you will recognise that 21st century world Christianity inhabits a variety of models of Christian life and presence. For the most part these models do not follow a top down approach that was true of Christendom; rather the bottom up model that characterised the early church seems to represent a common feature. Think of one of the fastest growing churches in the world, the Chinese church. Here the political arrangement under which the church is tolerated has few parallels in history or the contemporary world. Yet the officially recognised church and the underground church are thriving despite all the obstacles. As God is building his church in China the manner in which Chinese Christians work out their Christian life and presence vis-a-vis their political powers will be unique. As a result China has and will continue to have much to teach the world.

This recognition of multiple patterns around the world should encourage us as leaders to preach and practice a costly discipleship. Perhaps because of the cosy relationship that the church enjoyed with the state, such a stress was not made. As a result we have developed a less than rigorous Christianity content to rest assured on the privileged position that our close alliance with the state provided. Christianity was forced to make a number of compromises as a result. World Christianity however cannot afford such a luxury, for she lives and grows in difficult indeed adverse circumstances. In such a context we will need to revisit the gospel and recognise its potent challenge to us: 'Take up your cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). Along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a unique exception in western Christendom, we will have to reiterate that, 'When Jesus calls a man he bids him come and die.' We cannot continue to spread the lie, 'Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved' or represent the gospel as, 'Come to Jesus and he will give you a ticket to heaven.' Costly discipleship will have to be taught as the lifestyle that we are all invited to adopt irrespective of where we live. This lifestyle will then work itself out in the economic, social and political fields. In these fields we leaders will need to preach and practice the virtues of sacrifice and service, generosity and gratitude, victory in and through vulnerability - virtues which we see eloquently demonstrated in our Lord Jesus' life. Lest we assume that costly discipleship will not be attractive for the world and hence sacrifice depth for the sake of breadth, the early church is an example of the magnet that costly discipleship really is.

## Conclusion

The Scriptures teach us that the Church worldwide is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:27). It is here in the church that we find a genuinely global reality which is also locally constituted. Affirmative of both the local expressions and representing a global reality the church is truly a unique reality. Indeed the church is the only entity on the face of this world that can demonstrate an organic global unity yet continue to be characterised by a glorious local diversity. Though it has become a cliché, a genuine expression of the saying 'unity in diversity' can truly be found in the church.

Local leaders who are part of this global church have an awesome responsibility to shepherd their local flock in ways that are truly reflective of its essence. The wholesome influence that they are called to exert is to serve the people of God by leading them deeper into discipleship. But as we noted, such discipleship is to be practiced in the contemporary world with all its promise and peril. In the midst of all the peril we must stress that the only sure 'promise' that we can cling on to is found in Mathew 28: 17-20: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' If this is our assurance, we will be known by confident, creative and costly servant leadership. Such a lifestyle will surely contribute to the spread of the gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ's name.

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presented at the gathering were later compiled in Judson Birdsall ed., Living and Leading like Jesus (Pasadena, CA: Wm Carey Library, 2007)The Cost of Discipleship (London: SCM, 1959) pg. 79