

How to follow the leader: Five habits of healthy congregations

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue



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When their pastor's tenure came to a sudden and disappointing end, members of First Church took the usual steps: they called an interim minister and formed a pastoral search committee. But then they took an unusual step: they created a leadership task force and directed its members to delve into such questions as "What's involved in leading this congregation?" and "What type of leadership do we need and will we support?"

First Church was off to a good start. There's a lot to be learned about leadership, both in the classroom and with on-the-job experience. Today there are many books and articles on congregational leadership. Seminaries have responded to the need and offer courses and even degrees in leadership. There are dangers, however, in overemphasizing leadership as a key to success. At the congregational level, members may begin to think that getting the right leader will magically fix a church's problems.

Fortunately, the First Church governing board didn't end its charge by asking questions about leadership. Members insisted that the task force also give attention to the practice of what they called "followership." What are the responsibilities of a congregation and its members, they asked, to make the relationship with a pastor work well?

Following doesn't command the interest that leading does. While most high-powered colleges and universities would, for example, describe their mission as "preparing tomorrow's leaders," it's difficult to imagine a college that would tout itself as "preparing tomorrow's followers." But following is crucial. First Church members took the word *followership* from Unitarian minister Paul Beedle, who defines it as "the discipline of supporting leaders and helping them to lead well. It is not submission, but the wise and good care of leaders, done out of a sense of gratitude for their willingness to take on the responsibilities of leadership, and a sense of hope and faith in their abilities and potential."

Beedle cautions that many are wary of leadership and know that it can be conceived and practiced as an authoritarian exercise of power. A better alternative recognizes good leaders and good followers, who act as partners, with those in one role enhancing and contributing to the growth and flourishing of the other. Good followers remain free to think for themselves but recognize a responsibility to help leaders lead well.

What is the nature and practice of good followership? For Christians, it's hardly a foreign concept. After all, the Gospels begin with Jesus saying, "Follow me." A disciple is a student of a teacher, an apprentice of a master. To be a Christian means "following Jesus"—listening to him, learning from him and doing what he does.

If following is an essential starting point and foundation for Christian faith and life, then the stories of the disciples provide an important dose of realism; it turns out that they aren't especially good at following Jesus. Whether it's Peter telling Jesus that suffering and death aren't part of the program or James and John lobbying for key positions in the new administration, the disciples aren't paragons of faithfulness and insight. They are works in progress.

And so are we. By becoming mature and engaged followers of the leaders we call and elect in the church, we demonstrate one aspect or expression of Christian discipleship. I would suggest that there are five ways that we can work on being good followers.

Good followers recognize that leadership is necessary, important and difficult work. I worked with a congregation in a university neighborhood that was unsure about the value of leadership. Its members didn't really think they needed a pastor, so they hired a "coordinator of ministries" who would synchronize the

expression of their many gifts and interests. "We have lots of smart, capable people in our church," they argued. "We don't need someone telling us what to do."

Of course good leaders seldom "tell people what to do." Instead, as Ron Heifetz says, they help a congregation to identify its own most pressing problems and important challenges, and then to mobilize faith and resources to take on those challenges.

In this respect leadership is not mainly an office, title or position; it is a function, and it can be a dangerous one. "You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs and habits of a lifetime," says Heifetz. You may have a passionate conviction about a project or the future and want people to share it, but when you tell them something they don't want to hear but need to hear, they may see only what they have to lose and not what they stand to gain. Leadership is necessary for the health and vitality of congregations, and it is tough, challenging work. A leader can't do this work unless there are followers who respond to the leadership and are willing to take some risks.

Good followers share a commitment to a larger congregational purpose or mission and the priorities derived from it. Often troubled congregations experience what consultant Peter Steinke calls "mission drift." They lack a clear or shared sense of core purpose. Their documents may cite familiar biblical texts on the church's mission and they may have a lengthy mission statement, but it remains an ideal and an abstraction. They do not function in ways that are compelling but have a host of interests and agendas that are in competition with one another.

This is where discipline comes in. The First Church congregation put it this way: "Followership requires an overriding commitment to the good of the organization regardless of whether there is complete agreement." I would add, "Good followership entails a commitment to the mission of the church." Healthy congregations will have different groups and interests within the larger whole, but will regularly refocus on their common purpose.

Leaders are more likely to be successful and effective when there is a clear shared purpose, one that is biblically grounded and theologically sound—and leaders may have to guide the work that leads to such a purpose. They will then continue to emphasize and interpret it, keeping their congregation aware of and focused on its vision.

Good followers cultivate relationship and trust. Some years ago Michael Kinnamon, who recently stepped down as general secretary of the National Council of Churches, reflected in these pages on his contentious and unsuccessful candidacy to head the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination ("Restoring mainline trust: Disagreeing in love," July, 1992). Kinnamon noted that in some ways there wasn't much difference between his supporters and opponents. All of them, he said, offered a support that was conditional and not based in relationship or trust.

"I began to worry about some of the many supportive letters I was receiving. To say 'I am pleased with your nomination because we agree on A, B and C' is not fundamentally different from saying 'I urge the church to reject your nomination because we disagree on X, Y and Z.' Both responses point toward what may be a critical issue before us: the incredible and growing politicization of our life as a community."

As Kinnamon saw it, support for his candidacy was conditional and limited. "You have my support if I have your agreement on a specific list of issues." Failure to toe this line would quickly result in withdrawal of support. While this ideological approach is more common in national denominational life than in the local congregation, trust remains in short supply. Followers must offer support that's not conditional or fickle. They must support a leader and be able to disagree without severing the relationship.

First Church called this issue "management of expectations." "Followership allows room for disagreement, but also requires the management of expectations."

Some traditions call the partnership between leader and follower "covenantal." Unlike a contractual relationship, which spells out what each party will give and get in the deal, a covenantal relationship asks each party to commit to a relationship without knowing in advance everything that the relationship will entail, require of each party or give back.

Good followers practice the art of learning and giving good feedback. I recall overhearing this conversation between one of my own mentors and a parishioner at the door of the church after worship. "That was a great sermon," said the parishioner beaming. The pastor replied, "What was great about it?" Her question seemed abrupt, even rude, to me. But the pastor knew that effusive praise can be easy and even unhelpful. She was asking for something specific.

In her book *Becoming the Pastor You Hope to Be*, Barbara Blodgett gives extended attention to the difference between praise and feedback. She argues that praise is short-lived and often counterproductive in the long term. Honest feedback is more valuable.

Blodgett notes that praise tends to focus on the person ("You are the best pastor we've ever had" or "Your sermon was the greatest sermon ever"). Sometimes this extravagant praise flips over into equally extravagant and unfocused criticism ("She's just the wrong pastor for us"). Feedback, in contrast, tends to focus on actions and behaviors.

"The difference between praise and feedback often comes down to the difference between generalities and specifics, as well as the difference between person-focused versus action-focused reflections," says Blodgett. "The latter require more work of your observers. We pastors need to train ourselves and others not to praise *us* but rather what we *do*. There is a subtle but important difference for example between being told, 'You really know your Bible,' and 'That was a great Bible study.' And even better than 'That was a great Bible study' is to be told 'That was a great Bible study because you helped us connect the Good Samaritan story to our own lives.'" While giving thoughtful feedback is more work, it is part of the practice of good followership.

Good followers keep boundaries. In recent years, clergy have heard a lot about boundaries, particularly those that have to do with sexual behavior. Parishioners need to observe boundaries too. Troubled congregations often have a pattern of too many people treating everything as their business, their arena of concern and their involvement.

Take personnel issues. When a member of the church staff is put on probation, disciplined or even terminated, it is the business of only a few people: the employee, his or her supervisor and the personnel committee. Yet it's common for all sorts of people in a congregation to think it's their business and to insert themselves into the situation even though it's against the law to discuss an employee's record or performance with people who are not in one of the roles or positions cited above. When this happens, serious problems become crises.

Sometimes congregations do business the way six-year-olds play soccer—they play "bunch ball." Everyone runs to the ball. Everyone has to be in on every decision. No

one plays his or her position. It doesn't work in soccer and it doesn't work in church life and governance. Good following means knowing what tasks and business have "your name on it" and which ones don't. It involves a respect for the roles that help govern a congregation and not overstepping them.

Congregations that honor boundaries do so by committing to the regular training of lay leaders. A Presbyterian church in North Carolina holds an annual event for its elected elders. On Friday evening all who have ever served as elders (more than 200 people) are honored at a banquet featuring a speaker. On Saturday there is a training event for current lay leaders. In addition, the pastoral staff of the congregation stresses faith formation as a part of its training and equipping of lay leaders. The investment has paid off. The leaders are also followers. They feel valued when they're training and learning, and they experience spiritual growth. They've learned that congregations that invest in lay leaders get both stronger leaders and better followers.

I spoke with a member of First Church about its focus on followership. She said, "We've realized we too have a part in making this work." I'm pretty sure she already understood this bit of wisdom, but I'm also sure that all congregations need that reminder.