



A Brighter Future for the Profession¹

Ted Ward

Watchwords of the day include *excellence* and *leadership*. These words both have a solid ring; they sound good. Along with motherhood and apple pie the words “excellence” and “leadership” promote warm fuzzy feelings. Surely anyone would be willing to rally to their call.

No one is really against excellence or against leadership, but it isn’t that easy. Neither excellence nor leadership has any meaning apart from standards. Further, neither excellence nor leadership are attainable without appropriate effort and action. Unfortunately, our society has come to the point where we have little agreement about what excellence really is, and we have even developed a sort of hostile resistance to leadership unless it helps us toward the goals we already accept. Into this confusion we must step cautiously when discussing either concept.

Is there such a thing as excellence in the leadership of Christian education? By what criteria would a congregation judge excellence in its Director of Christian Education? Is there any standard of excellence? Is there an accepted mark of professionalism?

Perhaps we must drop back one notch and ask a prior question: Is the leadership of Christian education a professional role? More to the point, since the majority of people who carry out the Christian education tasks of the local church are volunteers with relatively little training for their very important roles, is it appropriate for those of us who have had the benefits of formal training in Christian education to think of ourselves as “professionals”?

If the question is assumed to ask, “Are we superior or are we the only ones with worthy knowledge and skills?”—the answer is clearly no. But at a deeper level, there is a different question. Is something extraordinary expected of us because we are the trained and employed personnel within the educational ministries of the church? For this question, the answer should be yes.

To think of excellence in the leadership of educational ministries of the church apart from some concept of professionalism is difficult, if not impossible. A difficulty arises, however, because in theological seminaries and sometimes in Bible colleges the word “professional” is held to be a negative and undesirable term.

How strange that the fields of theology and ministry education have chosen to think of “profession” and “professionalism” as undesirable. In virtually every other vocational and occupational category, to be regarded as “professional” is a compliment. Disdain for a cold and business-like style in ministry is understandable, especially if by being businesslike the values of human warmth and closeness are sacrificed. But frankly, I prefer to deal with people who know what they are doing and who go about it with a sense of the worth of their work. We lose something important if we reject the positive aspects of professionalism. No one would want a physician who was less than professional. Why shouldn’t people engaged in the leadership of the ministries of education think well of themselves in terms of the really important matters of a profession?

¹ Ted Ward. A Brighter Future for the Profession. Unpublished document, 1988

The future of our vocation and occupational category, leadership for Christian education, is likely to hinge on the matter of its professionalism. What had been largely a role for women (one of the precious few sanctioned by the formal church), leadership for Christian education has become a form of salaried ministry because of the educational standards and criteria which have been put in place. Women have not quite been frozen out, but the pattern of change is there for all to see: when standards of education are raised, salaries are raised, men enter the competition more aggressively, and the occupational category becomes less accessible to part-time, non-credentialed, and voluntary persons—no matter what may be their gifts. But has a true profession been the result of these changes? Certainly not yet.

A profession is made up of people who know what they are doing—people who share a common purpose, base their work on a special body of knowledge, and utilize a set of skills for which they have undertaken a special form of training. A profession is an occupational category with distinctive concerns for quality and for quality control. Further, a true profession is self-policing so that the “bad apples” aren’t tolerated. (At least that is the way it works when the profession is in a healthy condition.) To fulfill this obligation, a profession maintains a code of ethics by which all of its members are expected to abide.

If present trends and resources continue in the years ahead, it is likely that the field of leadership for Christian education may become a profession. What remains to be accomplished in order to realize that brighter future? Utilizing the characteristics of a profession described above (as based on Myron Liebermann’s landmark studies of professions and professionalism), the following concerns need to be addressed:

Sharing a Common Purpose. As in many another profession, leadership of Christian education involves thousands of tasks. Somewhere there must be a central core or the scattered efforts don’t add up to anything important. For Christian education the common purposes are two: facilitating spiritual development (“spiritual formation,” as it is sometimes called) and encouragement of the gifts of the Spirit in such ways that the people of God become effective in ministry. These concerns are deeply interwoven. The first deals with the person’s relationship to God; the second focuses on the person’s contributions of influence, leadership, and witness within the church, the community of Christ, and to the needy world. The mandates for this common concern are throughout Scripture, but are illustrated well in Matthew 28:19-20, “make disciples (who) obey everything I have commanded you,” and in Ephesians 4:11-13, to prepare God’s people for works of service.

Based on a Special Body of Knowledge. A high view of Scripture holds that the most important body of knowledge available to humankind is the Word of God. The Scriptures provide a specific basis in truth for the ministry of Christian education. A continuing task for the field as it moves toward its fulfillment as a profession is the persistent and diligent probing of the Word in order to discover more and more of the heart of God and the critical values which give substance to matters of Christian nurture and servanthood.

Further, the fact that we deal with whole people, not disembodied spirits, places an additional demand on our knowledge base to understand broadly defined human development. Christian educators, no less than any other responsible persons with training in matters related to human growth and development, must stay current. The Christian presuppositions hold that spiritual development is at the core of the person, but the avenues of communication and interaction with the person will necessarily involve the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral aspects of development as

well. The leader of Christian education who stays aloof from the literature and knowledge base that informs about the interconnected aspects of human life and experience is attempting to do the job blindfolded and with one arm tied behind the back.

Utilizing Skills for Which There Has Been Special Training. The skills of Christian education have never been well defined. Clearly there are pastoral responsibilities, management tasks, educational planning, communication skills, and leadership functions. The list of specific applications of these matters could be written quite long. But what of the more basic matters of being the spiritually developing person whose walk and story are worth sharing? When considering occupational skills, only certain matters get attention; for the leader in Christian education the manifestations of the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit must be seen as a sort of underlying body of competencies. In other words, all the skills in the world will not suffice if they are not clearly built as a kind of superstructure on a solid foundation of continuing spiritual development.

These matters have not been sorted out very well. *Part of the trouble is that our preparation programs in the formal education institutions can deal fairly well with the superstructure but less effectively with the foundation.* Reliance on the approaches to curriculum and to competency which formal education represents will prove to be inadequate. If leadership of Christian education is truly to become a profession, direct involvement of all the constituencies will be needed to spell out the basic skills and their foundations in spiritual maturation.

Quality Control Exercised from Within. We have a long way to go on this matter. Only in the formal approaches to church discipline has the matter of self-evaluation and organizational control been well manifested within the church. Although one would assume that because of adherence to a common body of belief and definition of virtue it should be relatively easy for Christians to arrive at processes of mutual accountability, we seem to prefer leaving it at an informal level.

Maybe there hasn't been enough effort put into it. Or maybe the cultural virtues of independence and self-determination have interfered. In any case, there must someday come a sort of mutual compact expressing willingness to stand in accountability to one another in the community of faith, as specialists in the same body of knowledge and skills. When this level of community consciousness can be achieved, the Gospel can much more effectively serve as a source for shared standards of excellence in the leadership of ministries of education.

Subscribing to a Code of Ethics. Common agreement on the right ways to do things, especially in reference to matters of propriety, respect, confidentiality, and inter-gender counseling and supervision, are basic to professionalism. They are basic to the conduct of Christian relationships, too; but among Christians and even for employees of the church who have counseling responsibilities, ethical standards are rarely well defined. It's as if the church is just one big happy family, so we don't feel the need to formalize ethical matters; just being a good Christian is enough. Unfortunately, the church of Jesus Christ in our time and place is taking all sorts of serious blows because of its too-casual approaches to standards of ethics. Employment in Christian ministry is one of the few major occupational areas dealing with people on matters of life and death with little guidance from formal ethical guidelines. (Even undertakers have a formal code of ethics?) Thus there is little to fall back on when one might be accused of impropriety. Not only is there little to guide the practitioner's behavior, but there are no standard grounds to reassure a critic that what was done was in accord with standard practice. This situation can be remedied as the associations of directors of Christian education, regionally and ultimately nationally, develop and publish codes of ethics.

A brighter future for the profession could emerge from presently intensifying efforts to develop a strong ministry of service. Three elements must be encouraged and nurtured if leadership of Christian education is to move forward in ways that glorify Christ:

1. The Bible must be at the center of the motivations and modes of Christian education.
2. The knowledge base for understandings and skills in Christian education must be broadened and strengthened, reflecting the fact that responsible stewardship requires understanding.
3. The interconnections among those who serve in the ministry of education should be nurtured into a community of sharing and mutual support.

We can do more together than we can ever do in lonely individualism. The ministry of education is a high calling. Its leadership carries profound responsibilities. Christ is honored as we seek higher standards, accepting the excellent disciplines of the Word and of the communities of faith in which we serve.