



## Leadership for Missions: *Interview* *with Ted Ward*<sup>1</sup>

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A major task for the nineties will be to help the church to get ready for the post-colonial century. We are still living in the aftermath of a destructive period of large-scale colonialism. To this day, much international activity, even in the name of Jesus Christ, is carried out with colonial assumptions and relationships at the center of things.

Preparation for a different, and potentially more godly relationship among Christians of many national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds requires drastic changes. Some will be uncomfortable because they require giving up initiatives and autonomy in order to join hands with Christians in other parts of the world who feel just as keenly as we do about the task of world evangelization.

Perhaps the greatest danger is a temptation to conclude that the mission responsibility of North America has been transferred to other nations. The temptation is already evident; some groups are convinced that since the early church is now planted in virtually every major sector of the world, we should stay home and get our own house in order, leaving the task of future world evangelization to others. Surely serious domestic burdens face the churches in North America, but it has never worked to ignore the rest of the world in order to focus resources exclusively on our own problems. More importantly God's redemptive purposes and our Lord's explicit commands are best represented through churches that not only deal with human needs close to home, but also fulfill their commission through long-range outreach.

No one should say that the era of international missions is over, simply because some modes of past missionary activity are out of touch with the realities of the present. The nineties could be a decade of discovery. In the strength of God's Holy Spirit we will seek the mind of God to find new roles and relationships through which the church will continue its task of going to all nations to make men and women disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **High-risk Inventiveness**

Making these discoveries will require a different sort of leadership. Future action will require a greater measure of risk-taking and inventiveness than ever before. We need young people in missions who will move beyond conventional wisdom to find new ways and means. Missions for the twentieth century will require a reaffirmation of the Apostle Paul's flexibility: we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. . . . I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:12-23).

Another characteristic of the leadership needed for missions in the nineties is a capacity to accept the cultural realities of others constructively. Among the world's major religions, Christianity is unusual

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for its acceptance of culture. That people can remain true to their national and cultural heritage, while coming to Christ, is one of Christianity's most attractive features. This fact is especially important in an era when so many of the emerging religions and cults require a sort of cultural conversion. We need not make people over again after our own cultural patterns to bring them into relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul described his awareness of this issue: I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law became like one under the law. . . . To the weak I became weak, to win the weak (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

### **Shared Leadership**

How is leadership to be defined in the changing world of missions? As with everything else in modern missions we have understood leadership through colonial lenses. In the common view, leadership is largely a right and responsibility of those who have brought people to an awareness of Christ. The missionary is assumed to have more wisdom and training along with more access to the funds.

In the colonial version of the Golden Rule, whoever has the gold makes the rules. Now that the international scene has been radically transformed by the emergence of post-colonial nations, primary leadership for expanding Gospel influence, especially for the established overseas churches, needs to be in the hands of national persons rather than of foreign missionaries.

It is not easy for an American to take orders from a national leader. In certain matters missionaries still tend to insist on their own way. Most notorious are decisions about how many missionaries of what sorts are to be put where doing what. Unless this authority is given up very soon, another missionary-go-home movement will be forced by national church leaders overloaded with the task of finding meaningful roles for excessive numbers of ill-prepared missionaries who are benignly sent to help. In many a situation leaders of the emerging national churches already have their hands full just trying to encourage, nurture, and deploy the many younger leaders of their own.

### **Leadership and Evangelizing**

For both missionaries and national persons, a model of leadership must emerge that reestablishes evangelizing as a leadership task. Leaders who are merely managers and string-pulling controllers are dangerous. The church is far more than a business or a social club. Thus leadership cannot be merely organizational and managerial. The purpose of the church is to pass on to others the good news of Jesus Christ; leadership must be integral with evangelizing. One cannot lead something that is outside of one's experience.

For the church of Jesus Christ, leadership should be defined in terms of outreach. But somewhere along the line the two ideas—leadership and evangelizing—have become separated. Much current discussion of leadership development for the church is embarrassingly similar to discussions in business, industry, government and the military. All sorts of church and parachurch enterprises set up their management procedures and organization charts just as if the major issue were making money or winning a campaign.

Although leadership for the church can learn some valuable lessons from management experiences in secular organizations, the church is not a corporation. For the church and for all responsible parachurch operations leadership must be defined in terms of the moral and ethical values of biblical

theology and in terms of the purposes of reconciliation.

### **Short-cut Leadership**

The fascination with efficiency, so typical of the twentieth century's technologies has influenced Christians no less than others. We are all prone to find measurable outcomes, even if it means redefining our purposes in order to make them assessable in terms of efficiency. Church growth becomes largely a quantitative matter. Then it follows that spirituality is measured in terms of attendance and giving; evangelization is evaluated in terms of signatures on decision cards. Taken one by one within reasoned contexts, such criteria have some degree of validity. But the trends they produce are dangerous. People's attention is diverted from realities to symbols—making them satisfied with symbolic accomplishments. And worse, we are tempted to substitute simple goals for more worthy complex goals, thus deceiving ourselves about what is being accomplished.

As images of leadership in church and mission have become increasingly preoccupied with managerial functions and organizational categories, there is a drift away from the major purpose of missions. While institutions are built and maintained, the basic unit of importance, the person who needs Christ, gets less attention than the maintenance operations.

The Great Commission—to bring people into a walk of discipleship—is neglected. For example, mission organizations are now emphasizing the need for leadership development in the emerging churches. American mission boards are deputizing more and more young missionaries to go overseas with assignments to teach leadership. Yet the regions to which they go predominantly venerate age, not youth. By cultural tradition, leaders are elders who gain their rights to lead through experience and demonstrated wisdom.

Thus many new missionaries find themselves being asked to do the impossible by those who do not adequately comprehend the situation. We need missionaries who lead by evangelizing. Leadership must be extensively shared with national persons. After all, effectiveness in leadership will always depend on the cultural context and the specific expectations that people hold in a given situation.

### **Leading Through Evangelizing**

Amidst zeal to get the job done by A.D. 2000, even evangelizing is in danger of being redefined as simply informing people of the major Christian claims. Of course, telling people about Christ is an important activity for Christians. Telling is sometimes very difficult, especially for class-conscious, self-centered, and excessively private persons. Perhaps because of this difficulty, telling tends to emphasize contemporary formulas for evangelizing. But as a part of the total demands of bringing people to Christ, telling is relatively easy. Telling can be done even to an unwilling audience if one has the nerve to take advantage of the life-space, the agenda, and the patience of others. Telling can be accomplished within one's own agenda and vocabulary, with relatively little sensitivity to the hearer. In fact telling the Good News can be accomplished on a large scale through mass media, much like mass marketing through advertising. But such a process is essentially cold; it serves its own ends. How different was the example of Jesus, the "Word made flesh," who came to live among the people and share completely in their life situations!

Leadership is a concrete action. Talk as much as we may about criteria for leadership and about qualities of leadership, in the final analysis we know it when we see it. I am not suggesting that some are born to be leaders and others are not—only that leading is always evidenced by its consequences.

In Christian terms, to lead is to follow God in such a way as to bring others to God and further into a life of Christ-likeness.

My favorite example of the leadership that really counts in missions is the woman of Sychar (John 4). She impresses me with her response to Jesus and her influence with the people of Sychar. This woman who met Jesus at the well is usually remembered for the wrong reason: her sinfulness. We should focus on the fact that she brought many to Jesus. The message which attracted the Sychar community had two elements, an invitation and a question: “Come see a person who has shown great interest in me. Could this be the Christ?” In other words, “Come to an experience with Jesus and make up your own mind whether his claims are true.” There is a valuable lesson here: we should be less concerned about forcing the right answers onto people. Often it is enough to pose the right questions. Through her simple testimony, and building on whatever credibility she had among her fellow-citizens of Sychar, she led them to Jesus.

The following characteristics of this evangelizing leader are recorded in Scripture:

*Concern for others.* As soon as the person of Christ attracted her she wanted others to know him too.

*Credibility of witness.* The relationship she had with her neighbors, blighted though it was by sin, was close and genuine enough that they took her seriously.

*Eagerness to testify to her experience with Jesus.* The importance of the message was overwhelming. She ran toward her friends inspired by the compassion she had experienced in Jesus.

*Willingness to be vulnerable to the judgments of others.* She took the risk of ridicule, of being ignored or rejected. As Jesus had become vulnerable to her at the well, she became vulnerable to those who knew her best. This “woman at the well” was an evangelizing leader. Her leadership had consequences; she brought her whole community to Christ. The line between leadership and evangelizing was insignificant.

For the nineties, God has a task for such persons in missions.