

PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES »

- Thriving Communities
- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

ARCHIVES »

- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

STAFF & SERVICES »

- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

BROWSE FEATURES

- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

Call &
Response
blog 
READ. DISCUSS. IMAGINE. »

-  EMAIL |  PRINT |  SHARE

Reflection: [Christian Leadership](#)



Gretchen E. Ziegenhals: Up against the wall

Deconstructing a house on a mission trip to Honduras teaches a lesson in how Christian leaders should respond when God overhauls their plans.

by [Gretchen E. Ziegenhals](#)



iStock/Joel Carillet

January 29, 2013

Last summer I hummed the old spiritual “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumblin’ down!” during our congregation’s youth mission trip to Honduras. Many mission groups build houses, but our task was to knock down the pastor’s house so he could construct a larger one.

With our troop of mostly middle-school boys, we felt equipped for this deconstruction. We spent the week swinging sledgehammers and filling wheelbarrows with concrete rubble. Not glamorous work, but we found deep satisfaction watching the house and its walls disappear.

On the second day of our labors, we all stood back as Pastor Juan, a large and imposing figure, prepared to take the final swings to demolish one of the last exterior walls. It was a key moment, the result of hours of problem solving and cooperation with local villagers; it symbolized new hope for Pastor Juan’s family.

More On This Topic

Article

[Series: Mainline Protestants and disruptive innovation »](#)

Q&A

[Tony Campolo: It was time to stop »](#)

Article

[Disruption and leadership development in mainline Protestantism »](#)

Q&A

[Emilie M. Townes: The church is being transformed »](#)

Sermon

[Luke Powery: Unless the Lord »](#)

SUBSCRIBE

Enjoy our content?

Follow our content on your choice of a variety of formats, including [e-newsletters](#), [RSS](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [iTunes](#).



GO

As he delivered the last mighty blow, however, the wall that we had orchestrated to fall backward instead fell forward. The group watched in horror as the concrete-and-rebar wall toppled toward Pastor Juan. He leapt back just in time. He stood in shock, not speaking for several minutes, his arms and eyes raised up to God, in wordless thanksgiving and surrender for his spared life.

Christian leaders have a lot to learn from deconstruction -- not necessarily from the postmodern type, but from leaders such as Pastor Juan, who allow room for God to overhaul their plans.

In Joshua chapters 5 and 6, Joshua is ready to do an all-out battle with the walls of Jericho, so sturdy that they “shut up” its inhabitants “from within and from without” (Joshua 6:1 RSV). But instead, Joshua’s experience with the walls of Jericho teaches him about conceding his future, and indeed his very leadership, to God.

As he contemplates his own battle plan, he encounters a man with a sword who describes himself as “commander of the army of the Lord” (Joshua 5:14). Realizing he is in the presence of God, Joshua falls on his face before God, worshipping him. He asks, “What does my lord bid his servant?”

Like the Honduran Pastor Juan, who stopped abruptly to concede his own leadership, arms reaching up to God, so too Joshua completely changes his plans, surrendering to God at a time when he thought he would be calling on the enemy to surrender.

In obedience, Joshua now solemnly parades “all the men of war” around the walls of Jericho once a day for six days. Joshua also circles the city with the ark of the covenant and with “seven priests bearing ... seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the Lord.” He bids his men not to “shout or let your voice be heard” until the seventh day.

On the seventh day, the blasts from the trumpets and the shouts of the warriors send the walls “a-tumblin’ down!”

In our family, tending to tumblin’ walls is a favorite summer tradition. Each August we walk the boundaries of the land in the New Hampshire woods surrounding our family cabin. As a kid, I loved meeting our neighbors at one corner of the old rock wall and then spending an hour or so tramping through the leaves along the granite structure dividing our land from their land. Each family replaced the boulders that had fallen on their side during the winter.

Our social tradition of walking the wall with our neighbors taught me why the poet Robert Frost said that “good fences make good neighbors.” But I think those boulders also symbolize the unseen forces and “[wicked problems](#)” that obstruct our plans and inhabit the acres we intend to plow. We can’t avoid these problems, but we can assume postures better suited to meeting them.

What are the postures -- prostrate, like Joshua, or upstretched, like Pastor Juan -- from which we should do our work? Perhaps we should do our most difficult work on our knees.

Bearing the symbols of faith, praising God, listening more than speaking, remaining open to a change in plans -- these activities are all ways in which Joshua brings God into the heart of his work.

Might not these be our activities as well? What other activities could Christian leaders bring to their work in order to hear the ways that God wants to transform their plans?

