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## L. Roger Owens: Leading as an introvert

*After years of trying to force himself to be an extrovert, a pastor discovers that being a Christian leader begins with accepting who you are. Even if you are introverted, shy and out of touch with popular culture, you are God's beloved.*

by [L. Roger Owens](#)



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I'd been invited to preach to a group of ordinands. Before the worship service, the bishop described the kind of ministers the church needs.

I don't remember the exact words, but I recall the gist: visionary, entrepreneurial, get-it-done, people-oriented, outgoing, culturally savvy leaders, equipped to revitalize declining congregations and launch new ones.

And there I was in the front row, an introverted, shy pastor, hopelessly out of touch with popular culture, with a shade of social anxiety (I'm really good with people as long as there are 200 of them, and they are all 15 yards away).

I knew that if I saw a church member or visitor in the grocery store, I'd be just as likely to hide in the dairy section as I would be to start a conversation.

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GO

Just listening to his description exhausted me.

I leaned over to my wife, Ginger, and said, "If that's what we need, then we don't need me."

Listening to this description of the ideal pastor exhausted me because it reminded me of the many years I'd tried to become one -- the conferences I'd gone to, hosted by CEO-type, big-church pastors, the books I'd read by the most innovative entrepreneurial new-church pastors, the workshops I'd attended to learn how to cast a compelling vision.

The message I always took away was *You need to become someone else*.

So I spent the first years of my ministry feeling deficient and determined to fix myself. I tried to greet every visitor every Sunday morning. I gave inspiring, vision-casting talks at the beginning of every church meeting. I preached without a shred of notes, even though that doubled my Sunday morning anxiety. I visited the home of every first-time guest on Sunday afternoons. I tried to become an extrovert.

And I didn't want to get out of bed on Monday mornings.

But as I desperately tried to become someone else -- the kind of leader the church supposedly needs -- I also had alternative influences. Increasingly, I found myself in sacred spaces with pastors and guides who encouraged me to honor my truest self and claim what Parker Palmer calls our "birthright gifts."

I was beginning to see that though I might need to learn new skills, my *self* -- the complex of desires, gifts, personality traits, even anxieties that was *me* -- was not deficient and didn't need to be fixed.

For a tired pastor, working against the grain of his personality, this was nothing short of gospel.

What I began to learn, and now firmly believe and teach to my students, is that the church needs pastors who have the courage to discover who they are in God alone. Then they can lead out of that discovery and create the space for the members of their congregations to do the same.

This might not be a strategy recommended by the visionary, entrepreneurial, get-it-done, people-oriented, outgoing and culturally savvy, but it is a way that leads to life.

I've been at this work long enough -- both pastoring *against* the grain of who I am and learning to do it *with* the grain -- that I can offer a few pieces of advice, things I've learned along the way.

First, claim your gifts, especially the gift of your *self*. When the little voices in your head start to say, "You are inadequate, deficient, the wrong person at the wrong time for the church," gently ignore those voices and run to your favorite book by Henri Nouwen, letting him remind you (if no one else is around to do it) that you are, as you are, God's beloved. And that is enough. Full stop.

Second, revel in the fact that you belong to a community of gifts. Trust that God has endowed different people in your congregation with different gifts, since there's no way one person can have them all. Who in your church is visionary? Who can get things done? Who are the entrepreneurs, the catalysts, the natural-born leaders? As you use your unique gifts, let them put theirs to work as well, and enjoy watching them do it.

Finally, allow yourself to learn new leadership skills -- not to fix a deficient self, but in the same way that you would learn to get better at writing a sermon or to speak louder when leading the liturgy.

At one point, feeling quite inadequate, I bought a book called "How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends." For many years, books like this held the false promise that I might become someone other than myself.

Now they are not so freighted. It's useful to know, for example, to ask open-ended questions to keep a conversation going and not to stand with my arms crossed if I want people to talk to me.

Learning new skills allows you to get better at some things without succumbing to the myth that you need to change everything to be what the church needs.

Because there's a very real chance, if God has anything to do with it, that you are exactly what the church needs. Just as you are.

Faith &  
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