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Leading the follower

Being a good Christian disciple does not mean doing what you're told. Because Christian leadership is rooted in community, followers need to be active and engaged.

by [Bob Wells](#)



March 17, 2009

One day about 20 years ago, Cal Turner Jr. was reviewing the performance of several new stores the Dollar General Corp. had opened in Miami.

One store was doing great business while every other store was a disaster. Turner, then-CEO of the far-flung discount chain, called the standout store seeking an explanation for its success.

"Mr. Turner," the manager said, "when we get instructions from the home office that make sense, we do them. And when we get instructions that don't make sense, we don't."

"It was pure genius," said Turner, an active United Methodist layperson and co-author of the book, "Led to Follow."

The Miami manager confirmed what Turner had long known: Followers matter. However carefully

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Turner and other executives prepared their strategic plans, however thoroughly they researched their product mix and set sales targets and promotions, it would be clerks and cashiers, assistant managers and managers in thousands of stores who made those plans work or not.

Questions to consider:

- Jesus invites his disciples to “Follow me,” not to “Come lead in my name.” In a world preoccupied with leadership, what do we make of Jesus’ invitation?
- How can leaders grow in their capacity to lead in a way that represents the values and ideals of the community?
- Leadership expert Ronald A. Heifetz writes about those who lead without formal organizational power. Are the best “followers” leaders without authority?

Today, when unprecedented attention is being focused on the subject of leadership, Turner and others are advocating for a greater focus on followership. For churches and church-related institutions -- organizations premised on one who said “Follow me” -- this is a call to remember that, for Christians, leadership is rooted in community and that Christian leaders must embody the values of those whom they lead.

Though the lines between leadership and followership are often blurred, those in authority need to cultivate and nurture good followers through listening, encouraging and empowering them.

“Followers are important, every bit as important as leaders,” said Barbara Kellerman, author of the book, “Followership: How Followers are Creating Change and Changing Leaders.” “Just as we have overestimated the importance of leaders, so too have we underestimated the importance of followers.”

Expecting and demanding more from those who lead, followers are increasingly influential and able to exert their own power in often surprising ways -- a development that those in positions of authority ignore at their own peril, said Kellerman, the James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Public Leadership at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government.

In her book, Kellerman cites examples of such ousted leaders as Harvard University ex-President Lawrence H. Summers and World Bank ex-President Paul Wolfowitz. Examples abound in the church world, too. Catholic archdioceses in Boston, New Orleans and other cities have found their plans to close local parishes disrupted by parishioners who simply refused to leave, changing locks on the doors and keeping around-the-clock vigils. Want extreme examples of church folk using modern technology to do an end run around traditional authority? Consider the [online confessional](#) and even [online Eucharist](#).

Leadership, followership and the church

Although Kellerman’s work is aimed primarily at a secular audience, it should resonate with those in churches and church-related institutions, which have long struggled with the relationship between leaders and followers, said Jack Carroll, Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society at Duke Divinity School.

“There is no one way of leading and following,” Carroll said. “It is situational and depends on whether people are acting out of faith rather than their own self-interest. But given that caveat, you don’t want people who see the pastor as a hired hand. You want pastors who exercise authority and leadership and a strong laity who are able to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ and who are knowledgeable enough about faith to engage in the conversation.”

The reasons for the growing importance of followers are many, Kellerman said. The long arc of history, from the late 18th century onward, has been about the devolution of power downward. As a result of cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s, people today are more willing to question authority. Authority is no longer granted simply because someone holds a particular position or office, but must instead be earned.

In fact, the lines between leader and follower are not as distinct as they used to be and are becoming blurred. Before any of us are leaders, all of us are followers, Kellerman wrote. Every leader is a follower, but not all followers are leaders.

“People move in and out of those roles with any given organization,” she said. “They can be a follower in one role and a leader in another.”

Carroll said this blurred and shifting relationship between leaders and followers -- the push and pull between clergy and laity -- has been at the core of the church in America from the moment the first colonists stepped ashore. A sociologist of religion, Carroll spent most of his academic career studying congregational life, ministry and religious trends in the United States. In 1991, Carroll explored the role of pastoral authority in the book, "As One with Authority."

For much of the last half of the 20th century, from the 1970s onward, many church observers bemoaned a "crisis of authority" in pastoral ministry. Citing many of the same trends noted by Kellerman, they feared that clergy no longer possessed the same authority and leadership that they once had.

From that crisis came a growing awareness of the relational aspects of ministry, Carroll said, a deeper understanding that pastor and laity have complementary roles to play.

Looking for pastoral leadership

"Unfortunately, as churches began to talk more of mutual ministry, a lot of people, both clergy and laity, took that to mean that clergy didn't need to exercise leadership," Carroll said. "But the fact is lay people were and still are looking to pastors for leadership. They want somebody to help them understand Scripture. They want someone to set a vision of where the congregation needs to go and to interpret that vision to the congregation, and that is the pastor."

If a crisis in pastoral authority exists today, it is in the reluctance of some pastors to understand and exercise the authority they have, Carroll said.

Though not an everyday occurrence, the dynamic Carroll describes is a familiar one, said the Rev. G. Wilson Gunn, Jr., general presbyter for the National Capital Presbytery, which serves the Washington, D.C., region. In some churches, it can get very confusing trying to figure out who is leading and who is following.

"I've worked with churches before that had pastors who were very egalitarian, perhaps too much so," Gunn said. "What many of those congregations really wanted was a benevolent autocrat against whom they could push. Once, we had a consultant who said, 'We don't know if anybody can lead this church because followership is such an issue.'"

While such congregations don't necessarily want to lead, Gunn said, they often want to "follow somebody who is going where they want to go."

As Gunn's story illustrates -- and Kellerman and Carroll readily confirm -- the leader-follower relationship, the pastor-laity relationship, is always contextual. Some congregations may be so weak and demoralized that they need a strong pastor to tell them exactly what they need to do, Carroll said. But other congregations may be strong and vital, with knowledgeable laity who can play a collaborative role in the church's ministry.

"You can't have an account of leadership without naming the character of the community that produces that leadership," said Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert Rowe Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke Divinity School. "Crucial to the very notion of what it means to be in authority is the question of what kind of community makes that leadership possible."

Of rabbits and leadership

In his 1981 book, "A Community of Character," Hauerwas explored the relationship between leaders and followers by drawing on the novel, "Watership Down." Though nominally a story about a band of rabbits, it is really a story about leadership and community, Hauerwas said.

"It's about how Hazel, the leader of a band of rabbits, gets his authority by leading in such a way that he represents the fundamental story of what it means to be 'rabbit,'" Hauerwas said. "His leadership depends upon the canonical stories through which the community remembers what they are called to be and what it means to lead and to be led."

Or as Kellerman put it in slightly different fashion in "Followership," quoting a 2001 journal article, the leader's capacity to lead -- that is, the leader's ability to motivate followers or, alternatively, the follower's willingness to be led or motivated -- depends on the leader's ability to "behave in a way that

exemplifies the values and ideals that are shared by the groups they lead.”

For the rabbits in “Watership Down” -- and for Christians -- that means that any account of leadership and followership begins with the recognition that leaders, like everyone, are fallible and make mistakes, Hauerwas said. As Turner describes in “Led to Follow,” leadership that recognizes the inevitability of human failure requires grace. It entails such practices as confession, repentance and forgiveness. All of which means in turn that Christian leadership requires and draws upon the diverse skills of an entire community.

“If you’re a leader who tries to lead in a way that you are the hero, that always kills community,” Hauerwas said. “Because heroic leaders try to lead in a way that they don’t need the community’s skills.”

In other words, as Kellerman wrote in “Followership:” Leaders and followers are both responsible for what happens.

“One of the reasons we’re so attracted to leaders and leadership is because it lets the rest of us off the hook,” she said. “But the fantasy that one person, one leader, is responsible for our collective good is just that, a fantasy.”

Followership, good and bad

Our individual willingness to be on or off “the hook” -- our willingness to be engaged or disengaged -- lies at the heart of what makes for good and bad followership, Kellerman said. While Kellerman can’t guarantee that good followers create good leaders (though they certainly help), she is convinced that bad leadership cannot happen without bad followership.

In “Followership,” Kellerman divides followers into five categories according to their level of engagement, from detached “isolates” and neutral “bystanders,” to active “participants,” full-blown “activists” and committed “diehards.”

The very people who give sheep a bad name, isolates and bystanders go largely ignored but they are the ones who make bad leadership possible, Kellerman said. Through their passivity and indifference, they implicitly support those in positions of power and influence. They make it possible for bad leaders to stay in power.

On the other hand, depending on the ends they pursue, participants, activists and diehards tend to be “good” followers. While their specific traits vary by context, good followers generally “are willing to put their money where their mouth is,” Kellerman said.

“Good followers are in some way involved in the groups and organizations of which they are members,” Kellerman wrote. “They do something, as opposed to doing nothing. Good followers also support good leaders, those who are effective and ethical. And they oppose, insofar as they reasonably can, bad leaders, those who are ineffective, or unethical, or both.”

Bishop William P. DeVeaux of the Sixth Episcopal District (Georgia) of the AME Church said Kellerman’s description of good followership makes sense. In the AME’s ordination ceremony, a pastor vows to follow the “godly judgment” of a bishop, DeVeaux said. Consequently, the first task of followership, at least in the AME Church, is to follow the leadership of a leader who is legitimate, who is exercising “godly judgment.” When a follower finds that is not the case, he or she needs the confidence and courage to speak up.

Though many in positions of authority want followers who simply do what they’re told, DeVeaux said, good followers understand the leader’s program but are willing to hold their leaders accountable by pointing out imperfections -- both in the program and in the leader.

“For me the ideal model of a good follower would be Nathan, who served as prophet to King David,” DeVeaux said. “He would tell David when he was off the mark.”

