
TEACHING LEADERSHIP AT THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER (ITC)

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A Distinctive Legacy

The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) was chartered in 1958 and is one of the most unusual ventures ever designed in American theological education. ITC is a consortium of six seminaries—Morehouse School of Religion (Baptist), Gammon Theological Seminary (United Methodist), Turner Theological Seminary (African Methodist Episcopal), Phillips School of Theology (Christian Methodist Episcopal), Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary (Presbyterian Church (USA)), and Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary (Church of God in Christ). As ITC, these six schools share a common campus, faculty, degree programs, and curriculum and, thereby, strengthen the educational preparation of its students. Today a growing number of students from denominations beyond these six, as well as non-denominational congregations, enroll at ITC.

This great diversity of traditions creates rich opportunities for the teaching enterprise. For decades, the ITC motto has been, “*Students enter, leaders depart.*” So the subject of leadership has been assumed all along, at least tacitly. This assumption certainly applies to many other American theological seminaries as well, yet what gives ITC its distinction on the matter of leadership has been its service to African-American congregations. The history of church in African American society has been one of perseverance, courage, and hope in the face of the seemingly insurmountable oppressive structures of society, government, and religion. In the post-Civil Rights era, this perseverance, courage, and hope has taken on fresh confidence. While African American disparities in education, income, health, and political participation continue, ITC sees itself as uniquely positioned to empower students to lead as public theologians.

CURRICULUM AND THE THEME OF LEADERSHIP

It comes as no surprise that ITC's Master of Divinity program treats leadership about as broadly as any seminary does. Scattered throughout the curriculum are courses in seven of the faculty's fourteen departments that address leadership either explicitly or implicitly. Ethics, sociology of religion, and Christian education all have courses with the term "leadership" in their titles or catalog descriptions. These courses include: "*Seminar: Moral Strategies and African-American Leaders*," "*Religious Leadership and Community Organization*," and "*Christian Education Administration and Leadership Development*." Three other departments-theology, mission, and homiletics-offer courses on various aspects of public ministry that as a result deal with leadership issues. These include: "*Theology of Economic Development and Community Service*," "*Missiology and Change Dynamics*," "*Religion, Society, and Social Change*," and "*Preaching as Social Commentary*." The seventh department is Church Administration and Leadership, a field that one is hard pressed to find in many seminary catalogs, let alone as a full department. Ministry students at ITC, then, have plenty of opportunities for wrestling with what it means for a person of faith to lead.

At the same time, ITC's conventional curriculum arrangement follows familiar lines. There have been no structural revisions of import since the school's establishment and courses are added through a formal procedure initiated by particular instructor interest. ITC's faculty areas reflect a typical kind of division among disciplines, one that has the effect of working against an integrated approach to leadership. As do many seminaries, ITC requires a high percentage of degree hours through a set of core courses-61 of 89 (68%). These courses cover Bible, theology, ethics, history, pastoral care, missiology, sociology of religion, world religions, worship, Christian education, homiletics, and parish administration. Until recently, ITC also required M.Div. graduates to concentrate in one of the departments, which meant four more courses (12 hours) of the total of 89. Most of these courses focus on their respective disciplines, rather than as part of a broader, interdisciplinary conversation that resembles actual ministry prac-

tice. In some ways, the tight focus is almost inevitable. Yet, this leaves courses like the Foundations for Ministry series bearing the burden of helping the student to integrate learning from the various fields. It is no wonder that a topic such as leadership, one that denominational officials continue to emphasize, still seeks to find its voice at the table of formal theological education.

Administration and Leadership: A "Discipline"

The approach taken at ITC reflects curricular dilemmas that face many, if not most, seminaries. To ITC's credit, it established years ago a department of church administration and leadership. My predecessors in the single faculty position dedicated to this department shaped the concentration and the courses. Since 1999, I have modified them in minor ways. From the standpoint of a conventional curriculum design, church administration and leadership carries the responsibility of teaching students how to *lead* and to *manage*. This is a critical distinction, as Weems points out in his classic book on church leadership.¹ While *administration* is concerned with following structures and processes efficiently, *management* is one step removed, dealing with goals, priorities, and planning. Arching over both management and administration is *leadership*, which centers on vision, motivation, and cooperation. These are distinctions that I continue to find useful in teaching at ITC. The longer-term aims of leadership are more difficult to teach and inculcate in students, yet they must be addressed at every opportunity.

Anyone who has taken on such a task will realize how overwhelming this responsibility is. *Leadership* is not a well-defined discipline, especially when compared with biblical studies, history, theology, and even Christian education. Very few graduate academic programs in leadership exist, and those that do are in their infancy. So I have been finding my own way, aiming to identify a way of teaching leadership that has integrity. For me, such integrity has several dimensions. One, it must have theoretical and conceptual depth and not be based on anecdotal or popular trends. Two, it must be compatible with critical biblical and theological reflection.

¹ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press): 1993, 34-35.

Three, it must ring true to the current practices of ministry and be use-able, applied, and seen to work. And four, in my teaching context, it must work within the complex contexts of African American church and society.

The Core Course

These four criteria were in the back of my mind as I began my teaching at ITC. The starting point for me was the M.Div. core course, Parish Administration. Although I have tested and changed most of the course's required textbooks over five years, my purpose has remained the same. It is to lay a conceptual and experiential foundation for pastoral ministry in such a way that students can discern what leadership is, and what it is not. The opening text is *The Shape of Zion*,² a recent publication by Michael Dash and Christine Chapman of ITC, based on comprehensive research about African-American congregations and pastors today. We then read Wilkes' *Excellent Protestant Congregations*,³ for a smorgasbord look at nine varied churches around the U.S.A. that demonstrate effective ministry and mission. These two books allow students to think of parish ministry both in terms of their ethnic tradition and also in relation to other traditions that are doing things well.

Early in the semester, students fill out the style inventory out of the very useful *PACE Profile*.⁴ PACE shifts thinking to self-insight and to specific behavior skills that strengthen the student's ability to manage his or herself. We intend students to use PACE as a tool for self-learning, one of the tasks that I believe is necessary for leading.⁵ Short written assignments early in the semester call for students to think about their specific ministry experience and then to reflect on it using learning from PACE.

The heart of the content for this core course is covered as students read and discuss *How to Get Along with Your*

² Michael I.N. Dash and Christine Chapman, *The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press): 2003.

³ Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press): 2001.

⁴ George D. Parsons, *PACE Profile*, (Eugene, OR): 1992.

⁵ As we will see below, many of the insights about leadership that I emphasize are supported by Edgar Schein, especially from his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass): 1992.

Church.⁶ This book considers pastoral tenure for any given pastor and parish, reframing the challenges and opportunities in terms of a clearly-defined theory of culture and *cultural capital*. For this theory, I drew from Edgar Schein and Ichak Adizes,⁷ as well as a culture theory that I developed to supplement these two authors' theories.⁸ Students discuss what it takes for the congregation to adopt the pastor, how daily details lead to effective ministry, how to approach two kinds of congregational struggle, what leadership looks like in cultural terms, and how pastoral leave-taking can either strengthen or weaken the congregation. Although leadership is treated directly in one of the chapters, all the chapters deal with the kind of pastoral initiative that can result in leading.

In preparation for their two-part case study term papers, students read a condensed version of Edgar Schein's theory and application of organizational culture.⁹ Schein's schema of the dimensions of culture gives ministry students a direct application to congregations. It helps them realize the complexity of church dynamics and how leadership has to adjust, depending on the relationship between the church's observable objects and behaviors ("artifacts") on the one hand and the strength of its deeply-held, unspoken beliefs ("shared tacit assumptions") on the other hand.¹⁰ The first part of the term paper calls for a careful and clear analysis of their case church, using explicit concepts from the culture models. Then the strategy in part two builds upon the analysis. That strategy becomes an action plan for leading, for it is based upon cultural learning that the student/pastor must undertake in order to be effective.

⁶ George B. Thompson, Jr., *How to Get Along with Your Church: Creating Cultural Capital for Doing Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press): 2001.

⁷ Ichak Adizes, *Corporate Lifecycles: How Corporations Grow and Die and What To Do About It* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall): 1988.

⁸ The most recent version of my theory of "cultural confluence" can be found in George B. Thompson, Jr., *Alligators in the Swamp: Power, Leadership and Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, forthcoming), chapter 3, "Maps and Compass: Swamp Culture and Power."

⁹ Edgar Schein, *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide: Sense and Nonsense about Culture Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass): 1999.

¹⁰ See Schein, *Survival Guide*, chapter 4, "So How Can You Assess Your Corporate Culture?"

The Elective Course On Leadership

Besides the core course, ITC's department of church administration and leadership includes an elective that centers on leadership. In this course, my intention is to build upon the basic learning framework from the core course, giving more attention to concepts and insights that go beyond anecdotal wisdom. This course is offered every other year, and the reading list has changed as I have sought to find the most effective combination of titles. The temptation in selecting texts for the administration and leadership department is to suppose that pastors who have written a book about their "successful" church know what will help the rest of us. Trying to avoid such tools narrows the available options even as students quote the popular authors.

Instead, three authors who have been helpful for the leadership course are Gary Gunderson, John Kotter, and Eric Law. Gunderson's recent book, *Boundary Leaders: Leadership Skills for People of Faith*,¹¹ grows out of the author's experience with developing public health projects among interfaith religious communities. What makes the book compelling is Gunderson's primary thesis that the needs of today's world call for persons who are willing to enter and labor in the spaces between established structures, in "the boundary zone."¹² To ground the book's wisdom, Gunderson includes vignettes on persons around the world who are doing boundary leading. Half of them are women and people of color. Kotter, formerly a Harvard Business School professor, published a small but very useful book, *Leading Change*.¹³ He spells out eight steps that are involved in organizational transformation. These eight steps are not technique-based but comprehensive in process, culminating in attention to what change does to the organization's culture. Kotter's process in this book has been adapted for a church context in the book, *Redeveloping the Congregation*.¹⁴

Eric Law's work includes five publications related to a host of subjects usually not integrated or integrated well: multicul-

¹¹ Gary Gunderson, *Boundary Leaders: Leadership Skills for People of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹³ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press): 1996.

¹⁴ Sellon, Mary K., Daniel P. Smith and Gail F. Grossman, *Redeveloping the Congregation: A How to For Lasting Change* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute): 2002.

tural church, power, liturgy, community Bible study, anthropology, group dynamics, change, and theology.¹⁵ As an Asian American, Law writes carefully and sensitively about the human dynamics that resist all kinds of change. He creatively blends descriptive insights with biblical and theological claims to offer practical tools that churches can use in a variety of ways. Neither Law, nor Gunderson or Kotter, dwell on the finer conceptual points of leadership definitions. At the same time, their frameworks, insights and action strategies all point to what I view as leading.

The Rest of the Department

Besides these two courses, ITC's church administration and leadership department offers a few other courses. The Changing Parish explores the use of demographic tools to understand differences and similarities between three primary community settings: urban, suburban and rural. This statistically-based method is augmented by the softer approach of socio-cultural analysis. Students learn how to see what is going on in any particular setting of ministry, beyond facile theological descriptions or superficial popular categories. The Seminar moves more deeply into theories of culture and church as organization, exploring what Schein and Adizes have to say about leadership. For the past few years, the Advanced Seminar has been a joint course between Georgia State University (Andrew Young School of Policy Studies) and Columbia Theological Seminary. Its creative focus is suggested by its title, Power, Faith and Civic Leadership. The seminary students in this course are challenged to see the public arena of society as a place for ministry. Power and leadership are explored using categories more familiar to the policy studies students, who get a dose of how seminary training operates.

¹⁵ See, for instance, his first book, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), and his *Sacred Acts, Holy Change: Faithful Diversity and Practical Transformation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press): 2002.

A useful supplement to the church administration and leadership department is a hands-on course provided annually by the Institute for Church Administration and Management. The Institute's primary task is providing training for African-American pastors around the United States on administrative processes and issues facing churches in today's very complex bureaucratic and legal world. For ITC students, the course introduces a variety of tools. It is assumed that students are prepared by the department's core course with the ability to discern when and how such tools work most effectively.

Foundations and Perspectives: Summary

The previous section, outlining courses in ITC's department of church administration and leadership, already has intimated the basic theoretical perspectives that are emphasized. I have been very deliberate in centering the learning on a *secular theory*. They are secular in the sense that they derive from the social sciences, primarily cultural anthropology, but including sociology and the more recent field of organizational studies. This is a deliberate choice on my part for two reasons. One, the theories work; they explain more of the kind of phenomena that occur in churches than any other theories that I have seen. When we observe religious groups as human communities, we see patterns of behavior for which social-scientific theory was designed to explain. In other words, churches have much more in common with other human groups than churches often realize or admit. Those similarities often become veiled by religious language—which leads to my second reason for using secular theories. Two, these theories provide a counterbalance to the kind of traditional theological education that most seminary graduates receive. As wonderful, articulate, inspiring, and motivating as religious discourse can be (and needs to be!), pastors need also to speak other forms of language. Organizational culture models give pastors one way to “be wise as serpents” and not just “harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

What this theoretical approach means for leadership is not inconsequential. Rather, to lead means to be able to manage the cultural dynamics of the organization or other setting in question. Weems is correct in arguing that vision is central to

leading,¹⁶ and Kotter is right in claiming that all change eventually will affect the culture.¹⁷ To use such a theoretical model surely means to shift the paradigm of what leading looks like. It also means that leadership itself as a field of inquiry becomes moored to broader disciplines that explain the complexities of human experience. Leadership does not merely consider individuals and their gifts and interests; it also centrally concerns people in community, their analyzable conditions as well as their ideal hopes and purposes. For me, then, the secular theories meet theological discourse at its best. The two support each other in the task of leading.

More on Resources

Most of the print resources that I use in the department have already been mentioned. Some readers might be surprised that I do not include in the primary texts the more commonly-quoted references: Ronald A. Heifetz (*Leadership Without Easy Answers*); Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee, and Richard E. Boyatzis (*Primal Leadership*); Robert K. Greenleaf (*Servant as Leader*); Warren Bennis (various titles), Margaret J. Wheatley (*Leadership and the New Science*), James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner (*The Leadership Challenge*), Rosabeth Moss Kanter (various), Steven Covey (*Seven Habits, Principle-Centered Leadership*), and John Maxwell (various titles). Each one of these authors makes notable contributions to our understanding of leadership, but they seem to me to offer parts of a picture that is much bigger than any one of their writings suggest. By contrast, I have chosen to err on the side of models that seek to be as comprehensive as possible. These models, as I interpret them, are based in awareness of what could be termed loosely as “social context.” In theology’s treatment over the centuries of ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), social context seems to be quite relevant. God seeks not simply to *save* individuals, but to create a community in whom “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Leading, then, is deeply tied to community, so that models of community can help the Church develop leadership more usefully.

¹⁶ Weems, *Church Leadership*, chapter two.

¹⁷ Kotter, *Leading Change*, chapter 10.

ITC's Challenge in Teaching Leadership

Still, the ITC faculty has not taken full advantage of its own communal character to address the ways that we teach leadership. I do not suppose that we are any more or less guilty than any other seminary that now must respond to Association of Theological School's (ATS) requirement for "teaching ministerial and public leadership" in the Master of Divinity curriculum. In my tenure, we have not yet held the conversation. It seems like it would be helpful to ask ourselves questions such as: "What are we trying to accomplish when we speak of leadership?" and "What assumptions do we bring to our views of leadership?"

Hopefully, these will be questions that can be treated in the coming year by the Curriculum Review and Revision Task Force. As one of the members of that Task Force, I have an opportunity to raise the issue. It provides a test case, as the faculty member who teaches leadership, for my practicing what I preach. If I believe, as I do, with Edgar Schein that there is no one single way to lead, then perhaps the *kairos* moment for a new day of teaching leadership at ITC has arrived.