



Wilderness Leadership

A few years ago, I was talking with a pastor friend of mine about how difficult it is to exercise missional leadership in the North American church today. His people were going through a lot of changes. Their small town has become much more multi-ethnic. The church membership had become older and smaller. He, as their pastor, was not as warm and fuzzy as their previous pastor. A former member left the church some money in her will. It turned out to be \$1 million dollars! But, the money had to be used to construct a new church building. So, they embarked on a building campaign, raised some more money, took out a loan, and prepared to move into their new building. And guess what? Suddenly, all kinds of criticism began to surface about the pastor and his leadership. Some of the issues had been addressed before, but now they were back with a vengeance. Some were even calling for his resignation. What was going on here?

Our context in North America is similar to the Israelites in the Exodus story. We have people who don't understand why we can't go back to Egypt. Why can't we do church the way we did it before, when everything worked so well? We have some people who are excited about entering a new land, and want us to move quicker. So, some are longing for the past, some want to forge ahead into the future, and some are caught in the middle (the Neutral Zone) not sure what to do. What happens to a church that feels stuck? They begin to attack Moses, Aaron, Miriam, the pastors/staff, and the elders. This was part of what my friend was experiencing. It was the normal reaction of scared, anxious people, who didn't feel like their church was functioning the way it should, but didn't know what to do.

There is an important leadership question here. The question is what does leadership look like in the wilderness? If God is calling some of us to be like Moses, and provide leadership while a generation dies off in the desert, what does that look like? It doesn't sound very appealing to me! I would rather be Joshua than Moses. I would rather lead the people into the new land, than help a generation get 400 years of Egypt out of their system. This does not sound particularly rewarding to me. And yet, it is essential to the missional transformation of God's people. Someone has to do this, and I'm guessing a lot of church leaders will be called by God to do this very thing in the next 20 years.

In this context, what is success? How do we know if we've done a good job? What do our people need? In this scenario, people need someone to give them language for their grief and loss and hurt that they feel for the past that is no more. We need to help people understand the pain that comes from losing something precious, and not ramrod our personal goals over people who need help processing their pain. We don't have to devalue the past to get people to embrace the future. In fact, just the opposite is true. The more we belittle the past, the more people will resist our attempts to move forward.

Church leaders need to communicate that we want to carry the best of the past with us into the future. We are building on the past, not throwing it away. At the same time, we are making decisions about what will not serve us well in the future. We need to help people say good-bye to some cherished old programs, before they will embrace the new.

People don't need to get their way, they need to get their way heard. If leaders will intently listen to their people, really hear their fears and anxieties, and respond in ways that let them know they love them and understand them, many people will not demand their own way. They will follow their leaders, knowing that they have been heard.

This kind of missional leadership is slow. It is not fast. Missional leaders are not one minute managers. We are lifetime managers. We don't lead people with the fast food drive thru rush mentality. We lead with calendars, seasons, and years. Missional leaders know that any real significant change, can't happen quickly. It needs time to ferment. It simmers slowly. It won't happen overnight. It will happen in a generation.

At first glance, wilderness leadership doesn't sound very easy. But truth be told, I don't want to give my life to easy, or fast, or superficial. I want to give my life to what is significant, life-changing, and eternally important. The wilderness does not offer itself to quick fixes. It's a place to clear the cobwebs out of our heads and see life from a new perspective. The wilderness may not be comfortable. But, it can be the most rewarding place to live.



Respond to: ClarkCowden@PresbyterySD.org