

Take One Step at a Time

This past spring, Scott Cormode wrote an article for the Fuller Seminary News & Notes where he talked about how most people want the wrong things from a leader. He says that most people are looking for two things in their leaders. One, is that they want vision (this is where we are going), and two, they want a plan (here's how we are going to get there). In short, they want a leader who can tell them the next seven steps to help them reach their goal.

I understand why we long for such leaders, but there is a problem with that. It doesn't work – at least it doesn't help us get the things that matter the most. The lay-out-the-steps leadership model works great if you are putting together a bicycle on Christmas Eve. It works great on a predictable system where you know in advance exactly which parts are there and how they fit together.

But, it doesn't work when your daughter is trying to grow some plants. Once she has planted and watered them on the first day, what is the next step? Here's where the flaw comes out in the lay-out-the-steps leadership model. The next step depends on what happens. If it is really hot outside, your daughter needs to water the plants a lot. If it is rainy, she has to move them under the awning so they don't drown. And so on. Her goal is not just to plant the seeds. Her goal is to help them grow. So she can't determine the next step because the next step depends on what happens after the previous step.

Her goal is to help them grow. Our goal as Christian leaders is not to put together a ministry like a pre-packaged bicycle. Our goal is to help God's people grow. Helping God's people grow does not follow a lay-out-the-steps model of leadership. So, what can we do? The goal of the Christian leader is to help people take one step at a time. Once a person or a missional community takes a step, then we can help them take the next step. We can't predict in advance what steps will be necessary. You can't predict for sure where your congregation is going. You can't predict for sure where your denomination is going. What you can do is take one faithful, Biblical step at a time.

Think about a congregation that wants to do a relatively straightforward project like building a fellowship hall on the church property. (Those of you who have been through this are already laughing.) They expected to form a committee, draw up plans, collect the funds, hire a contractor, and build the hall. But at each step along the way, they discovered things about themselves that made the next step anything but straight forward. Even forming the initial committee proved a challenge. It brought up latent controversies between the church staff and the board about control and who was in charge. It brought up buried resentments between wealthy nominal families and poor active members. And they ran into construction delays that created a whole domino effect of unanticipated changes. A lay-out-the-steps leadership model would have forced the original schedule without paying attention to the emerging issues. But, to help God's people grow, the leaders had to listen, pay attention, and have conversations with others, to determine the next steps that would help God's people grow. What they thought was going to be a

straight line from point A to point B turned out to be more like a sailing ship tacking back and forth and back and forth as it crossed the lake.

Now, don't get me wrong. I do believe that church leaders need to have a general outline of how a process will go. But, we have to hold that process loosely enough to be able to adjust to the needs of each step. Otherwise, we will miss the most important issues that emerge along the way that God wants us to pay attention to. Sometimes, this can be difficult. Sometimes, it can be painful. Usually, it takes more time than we think. But, if we want to help people grow to become more like Christ, it is necessary.

We often look for the wrong things in our leaders. We look for people who will tell us where to go and what to do. But, what we need are leaders who will help us grow in Christlikeness. We need leaders who will help us take one faithful, Biblical step at a time.