

GREEN LEADERSHIP

Cultivating Organic Churches

Church: Machine or People?

For decades the Western world has treated the church more like a machine than a living organism. The tendency has been to baptize the latest business models and import them into our ecclesiastical setting. Our default vocabulary exposes our mechanistic orientation. The church has been something leaders fix, drive, market and sell. Well-organized programs have been cranked out in mass production, assembly line fashion. Pastors have resorted to “command and control”, “pry and push” approaches to leadership.

*Organic (or-gan'ik), having the characteristics of living organisms.
Pure, natural, essential, without artificial additives.*

In recent years, spiritual leaders are rediscovering the organic nature of the church. Jesus and New Testament writers used organic terms to describe spiritual leadership: tending a flock, guiding a family, nurturing a body, cultivating a vineyard, cherishing a bride. A fundamental principle we need to embrace anew is that *living organisms are led differently than machines*.

As children, our Sunday school teachers told us to clasp our hands together with intertwined fingers and recite these words: **“Here’s the church. Here’s the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people”**. Embedded in this simple teaching exercise lies a profound theological truth—at its core, the church is people! Peter never lost sight of this essential reality:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Though we affirm this doctrinal truism, we still speak of “going to church”, as though church were a place, a building. Of course, we must always remind ourselves that we can never “go” to church because we “are” the church. Too often the mental picture our congregants have of church is a service which takes place in a sacred space on Sunday mornings once a week. Though we acknowledge the fallacy of this kind of thinking, consider how much time, money and energy we invest in our weekly services and programs. Without realizing it we are communicating non-verbally that the weekend service is the “main thing”. Success is measured by how many people fill our ecclesiastical buildings and participate in centralized programs. By emphasizing the church gathered on Sundays, we unintentionally devalue the church scattered, Monday through Saturday. The health of the church hinges on our ability to foster a renewed focus on the organic nature of the people of God, 24/7.

Spiritual Gardening

How do we lead organically? What does “green” leadership look like? How do we go about guiding the church in ways that are more consistent with its essence as a living organism? Effective pastors in the third millennium will need to unlearn mechanic approaches and embrace a less familiar role as a spiritual gardener. Robert Dale, in his book, ***Seeds for the Future: Growing Organic Leaders for Living Churches***, outlines some of the transitions in thinking this will entail:

FROM MACHINE MIND-SET TO ORGANIC MIND-SETS
Levers/Gears to Bodies/Plants

Assembly Lines to Seedbeds
Compartmentalized to Interconnected
Science to Art
Monuments to Mysteries
Independence to Interdependence
Ends/Goals to Means/Pathways
Pyramids to Networks
Programs to Processes
Scientific to Systemic
Uniformity to Diversity
Lines/Angles to Spirals/Cycles
Analysis to Intuition
Reductionism to Holism
Inanimate to Living

ELEMENTS OF ECOLOGICAL LEADERSHIP

1. Roots and Fruit

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of draught and never fails to bear fruit.” Jeremiah 17:7-8

Good fruit always flows from healthy roots. The depth of a leader’s roots will determine the breath of his/her ministry.

Robert Dale talks about the need for organic leaders to cultivate “aquifers.”

“Aquifers, those underground reservoirs or water storage areas providing water supply, are deep and hidden sources of life. They remain unseen and taken for granted . . . until they run dry. At that point, wellsprings, literally the watery resources for wells and springs, evaporate. Although the earth’s surface is about 70% water, only about 1% of that amount is drinkable fresh water. Without these imperceptible aquifers, humans would go thirsty . . . and even die. That metaphor is telling for leaders. We’re called to invest in the deeper, less visible sources of life or die.”

Eco-leaders remember that what is down in the well will come up in the bucket. Spiritual fruitfulness hinges on a healthy, sustainable root system.

2. Soil Sensitivity

Jesus told a story about four different types of soils, each yielding a distinctive kind of harvest—hard, shallow, weed-infested and high-yield. Wise gardeners know that certain plants grow better in some regions than others. A variety of factors impact the productiveness of plants—bodies of water, valleys, hills, shade, exposure to sunlight, temperature ranges, direction (north, south, east, west), etc. To be effective, a farmer needs to study the climate and composition of the soil in his/her area and plant those crops which thrive in that particular environment. Horticulturalists pay attention to “growing

zones” (also referred to as “hardiness zones” or “climate zones”), which enable them to customize plantings which best suit their unique climate and soil conditions.

Eco-leaders resist randomly importing programs which may not match their ministry context. Wise spiritual gardeners employ approaches to ministry which are indigenous to their distinctive setting. Rather than transplanting pre-packaged programs, organic leaders allow ministries to unfold naturally. They ask questions like:

- Where is God most powerfully at work in our congregation? In our community?
- What is resulting in greatest spiritual fruitfulness?
- What will a Jesus-centered faith community look like among this group of people?
- Where are the “growth edges” in our context?
- What type of ministry approaches will yield maximized effectiveness here in this place?
- Where are our “zones” of health and energy?

3. Seasonal Savvy

“See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains” (James 5:7). Green leaders seek to stay in synch with God’s timing, seizing the *kairos* moments of life. Organic pastors have rhythm. They heighten their awareness of spiritual cycles in the life of their family of faith.

What season of life is your congregation currently experiencing—spring, summer, fall or winter?

SPRING – Germinate New Ministry Ventures

- Prepare deep, rich seedbeds
- Choose lots of healthy seeds and hearty plantings
- Sow seeds at optimum times
- Give extra nurture to new seedlings
- Take advantage of the sun

SUMMER – Maximize Growth-Productive Opportunities

- Feed and fertilize
- Water and weed
- Prune and thin out

FALL – Cultivate Maturity and Optimize the Harvest

- Harvest crops as they ripen
- Disturb the seedbed as little as possible
- Save the best seeds for planting next year
- Leave organic compost matter on seedbeds to enrich the soil

WINTER – Allow the Soil to Rest and Rejuvenate

- Run soil tests and plan to correct growth deficits
- Repair and sharpen tools
- Phase out crops that have served their purpose
- Decide which fields need to be left fallow next year

4. Holistic Orientation

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body” (1 Corinthians 12:12). A mechanistic approach to leadership tends to emphasize disconnected parts while an organic perspective focuses on the interconnectedness of the whole system. The challenge for pastors trained in a mechanistic environment is to shift from an individualistic “me” orientation to a collective “we” mindset.

This will call for a more participatory approach to decision making. Rather than leaders climbing the mountain and then casting the vision in a top-down manner, organic leaders will learn to discern God’s direction in a grassroots-up manner through community interaction. In their book, ***The Shape of Things to Come***, David Frost and Allan Hirsh describe this process of collective visionizing like this:

“It is a disturbing trait of the more gung-ho Christian leader today to believe that he (usually male) is the sole visionary and the people are mere receivers of the vision. They simply superimpose their vision on a community without first listening very deeply to the longings and dreams of a local people in that community.

“A much more wholesome view of vision and visionary leadership is contained in the idea of the management of meaning. All that a great visionary does is awaken and harness the dreams and visions of a given community and give them deeper coherence by means of a grand vision that ties together all the ‘little visions’ of the members of the group. My task as a leader is to so articulate the vision that others are willing to embed their sense of purpose within the common vision of the community.”

Trading our Wrench for a Hoe

What one step could you take to shift more toward an organic approach to leadership in your church? In your ministry area of responsibility? Here are some resources you might want to check out for additional gardening tips:

Organic Community by Joseph R. Myers

Signs of Emergence by Kester Brewin

The Great Giveaway by David Fitch

Seeds of the Future by Robert dale

The Shape of Things to Come by Michael frost and Alan Hirsh

The Forgotten Ways by Alan Hirsh

Exiles by Michael Frost

Intuitive Leadership by Tim Keel