

Adaptive Church Leadership in the 21st Century

There was a time, not all that long ago when you think about the grand narrative of God's story, when the church was the center of a community – physically in the middle of town – socially and culturally too. Evangelism looked like posting a sign on the corner that said “Worship, 9:00 Sunday.” Truthfully it was a time when we were *born* into our particular brand of religion. We believed, because it was just the way of our family. It was part of our identity – we didn't question it, at least when we were young. We were rarely, if ever, confronted by someone who didn't believe, or who was something other than Christian. And of course over time what began as religion because of the culture of our families turned into a faith grounded in relationship with Christ our risen savior.

But somewhere along the way, for society as a whole, faith in what we couldn't see became questions that needed to be answered by one's ability to apply *reason* to all that is. “Faith” was relegated to the dark corners of questions that couldn't be explained by science and reason. Religion turned into the institution that upheld the moral standards of the community, focusing less on what it truly meant to be saved by the cross and reconciled to God. Somewhere along the way, Christ became some sort of moral example to live by and maybe not a whole lot more.

MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM

Today, congregations are struggling to make ends meet. More churches are in decline than are growing. The number of people attending worship is continually declining. We are a society that claims to be spiritual but not religious; a society whose dominant religion seems to be

moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD). MTD is the belief in several moralistic statutes with which most religions would likely agree¹:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist-Denton, sociologists who first coined the phrase Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, says that MTD might be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer, capitalist society. There's no denying that this so called religion – or belief system – is common among young people today. But here's more: Smith and Denton purport that teenagers don't subscribe to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism because they have misunderstood their churches teachings. Rather, they practice it because this is what we have taught them in church and at home, albeit unintentionally.² Maybe because understanding the core of our Christian theology is hard; maybe because it's hard to swallow, Smith and Lundquist-Denton tell us that we've taught a watered-down form of Christianity that doesn't convict us against sin, or the need for reconciliation with God through Christ's saving act of the cross.

¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2010), 14.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

Our teens today have been exposed to so many religions. Without convicted teaching on our part, they've been able to pick and choose what they like from those religions to which they've been exposed, because we haven't connected the Gospel to their lives in a way that speaks to them or makes a difference in their lives.

CHURCH ON THE MARGINS

But what if God has the church exactly where God wants the church to be? Maybe God sees the recent heyday of Christianity as complacency; as the eroding of what it means to truly live life as Jesus calls us. After all, this erosion is what has led to MTD, and a religion like that doesn't require Jesus at all. I'm quite sure God doesn't want that. Doesn't God want God's people to understand the sacrifice Christ made for us on the cross as well as our desperate need for it, in order to experience the deep grace and mercy that God provides? There was nothing complacent about Jesus' ministry. Why would there be anything complacent about ours?

And, might God be doing God's good work, even now, when it appears as though God has turned God's face away from us? What if... the church is exactly where God wants it to be? What then does this mean for the church?

In truth, the Christianity that many of us remember from our youth was the anomaly in the grand narrative of our Christian story. It was only during a small window of time that Christianity was at the center of society. And perhaps it's exactly that reason why the church has gone irrelevant. We didn't need to worry about carrying on the faith. It was right where we thought it should be and we had no reason to believe it would ever change. We got lazy. And

here we are today. Lamenting our beloved church having gone irrelevant, in a so-called spiritual but not religious society.

HOPE

Well then, what are we to do? Rather than lament a church gone irrelevant, I believe God calls Christian leaders to breathe a prophetic word of hope into our communities that reassures us that God's Will WILL be done, and God's plan will be carried out. After all, God's plan always has been. God calls us to wonder with our congregations, what might God be up to here, today, in our communities, and as such, what is our Christian identity and role in God's mission? And rather than worshipping church, we need to get down to the business of worshipping God in whatever ways deliver the Good News today. That might mean change for us and our beloved church.

As Isaiah 43 (:18-21) tells us, God always does a new thing:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”

Isaiah reminds us, God does not turn God's face away and God can perform miracles everywhere. I'd like to share with you an example of how God performs miracles in the most dire of circumstances – a river in the desert. When we choose hope, anything's possible. And a church leader's job is to breathe a prophetic word of hope into our communities.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Like prophets speaking against the grain of society, being church on the margins of society calls us to a style of leadership that can be quite uncomfortable, risky, and in some ways, dangerous. This style of leadership is called Adaptive Leadership. The phrase was coined by a couple of Harvard researchers named Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. What is adaptive leadership? It's leadership that doesn't accept status quo. It recognizes that important change doesn't happen without risk – risk the adaptive leader is willing to take. The leader also recognizes that these changes aren't easy, and often not popular. They require people to change, give things up, and sometimes experience loss.

There are two types of challenges we face: technical and adaptive. Technical challenges have known fixes and can be delegated or an expert can be called in. Like computer problems. Adaptive challenges have no known solutions, so no experts can help. They also typically require that people give something up or change their value system in order to fix them. Table 1 shows the difference between technical and adaptive challenges.

Technical Challenges	Adaptive Challenges
Known solutions	Unknown solutions
Mostly low risk	Involves risk
Maintains status quo	Disrupts status quo
Within skillset	Unknown skillset
Within culture	Must change hearts/minds
Call or delegate the fix	Unpredictable
Visible outcome	Unknown outcome(s)
	Often involves loss
	Induces resistance
	Emotional

Tackling these challenges requires a different style of leadership – adaptive leadership. Here are some of the practices that adaptive leaders make their norm:

- Get on the balcony – remove oneself mentally from the situation to listen, observe, and discern what is going on from every angle
- Examine yourself – what part do you play? What is your investment in the problem? In maintaining status quo? Where is it emotional for you and why?
- Discover investment in status quo – not only yours but everyone involved.
- Determine what’s essential to keep, what is expendable (to make room for new things) to make room for what’s emerging.
- Keep the heat turned up – a bit of pressure is needed in any complex and risky situation in order to affect deep change. Otherwise the “system” will naturally want to preserve the status quo.
- Connect to purpose – vision and hope are the things that will keep people involved in a change process
- Step into the land of incompetence – because there will be new skillsets involved, leaders must be comfortable to stepping into unknown territory. Leaders must be willing to make mistakes.
- Design experiments – rather than making big expensive changes when you don’t know if they will fix the problem, design little tests that will help you determine if you’re on the right track.

The prophet Jeremiah was an adaptive leader. He found himself called into a time in Judah when the people were very idolatrous. King Josiah had died after unsuccessfully turning the nation back to God. Jeremiah was called to reveal the sin of the nation and to prophesy the coming consequences. He took risks. He told truths that were hard to hear. He was persecuted. I’m not saying that adaptive leadership automatically incites persecution, but adaptive leadership definitely isn’t mainstream and run of the mill! It, by its very nature, goes against the grain – against status quo.

Jeremiah spoke God's word – God's truth. We have God's word today in the words of the Bible, and it is a key part of the process of adaptive leadership in the church. Discernment begins by dwelling on the Word of God.

What does adaptive leadership look like for us, the church leaders? What does it mean to get on the balcony so that we can observe what's happening, and so that we can identify our own investment in the status quo? Because the truth is, each of us is invested in status quo. For each of us it looks different. For one person it looks like wanting the beloved Christmas and Easter traditions to remain exactly as is. For another it looks like keeping the sanctuary as it has existed for 150 years. Even changing the banners can be adaptive change for some people.

Getting on the balcony isn't just about discovering our own investment in the status quo, but also tries to analyze the situation from all viewpoints. Who's involved? What might be at stake for them? What are the core issues? What's hidden beneath the surface? And perhaps most importantly, what might God be up to here? What might God want?

Then it's listening deeply to others to help discover not only where else status quo exists, but also what might be emerging. Where are the messages of hope? Where is the passion in your community? These are message about where God might be doing a new thing. Finally, it's putting it all together to suppose what God might be up to in your particular context.

Adaptive leaders create space to hear something new. You can practice that by dwelling in the word. You can also practice it through listening to what breaks others hearts, and what brings them joy. You also create that space by refraining to find answers too quickly. You create space by making observations and then leaving time and space for interpretation of what might

be behind that observation. Only after there has been plenty of time for interpretation would you then jump to intervention, and only through experimentation at first.

As we create a space for observation we gather a lot of possible ideas about what's going on, and possible solutions. In order to validate a potential solution, adaptive leaders create and try experiments. Rather than making big sweeping change based on a hunch, adaptive leaders design tests. So for example, if I had a hunch that the late worship service wasn't well-attended because the style of worship fell flat on this group, then rather than making a wholesale change in style of worship, I might experiment with a different style for a special occasion. I would then get feedback from the worshipers, and decide on next steps according to that feedback. Most people could handle an experiment like that without worrying about their worship service changing forever. And church leadership gets valuable data on which to design more experiments or make decisions.

God calls us to step up and be adaptive leaders in a world that is broken and hurting. In a world that operates on the instant gratification attitude of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, where throwing technical change at adaptive problems is the norm, because it's the easy thing to do. But I think God wants us leaders to step into the mess and boldly risk change for God's mission. God calls the church to adaptive leadership in order to move God's plan forward.

Book Resources:

The Practices of Adaptive Leadership, Ron Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linsky

Leadership on The Line, Ron Heifetz, Marty Linsky

