

Heading for Healthy Congregations

Metaphors and Stories of Characteristics for Leadership and Churches

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Introduction

Two questions to start:

- How do I write an introduction to something that is not really a book but an online document about significant issues facing Christian congregations—members, pastors, boards, councils, leaders, and even broader assemblies?
- Who might turn up as readers of this virtual document that is fishing for browsers?

I hope the answer to the second question is that the readers will be more of the not insignificant number of people who have contacted me after reading individual articles of those now compiled in this virtual document featured among many on the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) website.

As for the first question, I will tell the story of this virtual booklet in hopes that once surfers bump into it—after a Web search for “healthy churches” or something similar—you will be drawn to reading the rest, maybe printing it, maybe even passing it on to friends or colleagues who are dealing with the issues described. (That leaves me with a *really* hard question: How would I sign an online document for autograph hounds?)

Seriously, though, this small project began in the summer of 2004 when Michael Bruinooge and Lis Van Harten of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) office of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) were looking for writers for a number of articles on church leadership. They asked me to write articles on four characteristics of leadership for publication in *The Christian Courier*—a *real* newspaper headquartered in St. Catharines, Ontario, where I live and am pastor of Covenant Christian Reformed Church. I considered that too daunting a project to start with and asked if I could write a lead article on healthy congregations, then evaluate and continue if that first article showed promise and usefulness.

I am pleased to say that the first article “Healthy Congregations Head Outwards” was well-accepted and provided the push for the rest of the series that appeared in *Christian Courier* over the next two years. Throughout the writing and revising, SPE and I have tried to focus on how leaders and leadership affect the growth—or sometimes the decline—of healthy congregations.

The individual articles, now reedited and compiled into unified chapters, attempt to do two things: First, all these pieces respond to the CRCNA’s synodically endorsed initiative to continue to develop healthy congregations. Second, the middle chapters strive to articulate four characteristics of leadership outlined in “Leadership: A Working Definition,” a paper produced by the CRCNA’s Leadership Development Team (which can be found beginning on page thirty-two of this document). As reflected in the titles of the following chapters, those traits are character, conviction, competence, and

convergence.

In writing the middle chapters, I drew on experiences from my own twenty years of pastoral work in addition to experiences of colleagues in Christian Reformed and other congregations. The resulting stories are confections, all factual, in the sense that all the events happened, but they happened in different places in different times in different congregations. They are not case histories; no one congregation or individual is described in them. Yet, because we are all in one way or other examples of Romans 3:23, names have been changed to protect the guilty.

The final chapter on resurrection concludes this effort by recognizing that in pastoral, church, and leadership living, there are deep and sinful holes into which we can fall. We suffer injury or vocational death, sadly even cause others great pain. Nevertheless, we as Christians, leaders, members, and congregations would not be here had not our Lord Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried [and] on the third day arose again from the dead” (Apostles’ Creed). We are cohesive not only in guilt but, miraculously, also in grace, forgiveness, and resurrection.

Thus, with deep thanks to Mike Bruinooge, Lis Van Harten, Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, and the *Christian Courier*, I offer these chapters as *stories* that I pray fit into the story of the church of Christ in a faithful, revealing, winsome, helpful, and hopeful fashion. May readers benefit from them and bless their communities. By the way, if you would ever like an autograph, virtual or actual, I would be delighted to give you one and happier still to correspond or speak with you.

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Chapter One

Healthy Congregations Head Outwards

After a lively debate in June 2005, the Christian Reformed Church Synod approved a denominational priority for the next years: *to maintain or develop healthy local congregations*. What's to debate? Isn't it a given that congregations be healthy? The issues are complex and crucial. At stake is not only the survival of local congregations but also the direction of the CRCNA in the twenty-first century.

Will we keep sliding into ever more loosely affiliated congregations but with a shrinking identity as a community of Reformed Christians? Will we ignore mission to the broader community and world? Or will we discover new forms of body life that witness to Christ's saving power in expanding rings of family, congregation, community, region, nation, and world? Will we try to do this on our own? Or, will we team up with compatible congregations by crossing denominational lines and forming new associations and networks?

Sources for Healthy Churches

Healthy congregations need not remain vague dreams for all but a few charismatic leaders. The first apostles were not super-preachers, yet the early church reached outward faithfully, creatively, and winsomely with the message of salvation. Those congregations struggled with a hostile culture. Today, healthy churches' longtime members will grow in the faith and knowledge of Christ by way of outreach and cultural engagement.

Many books discuss healthy congregational development. Three of the last decade's best are Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*; Waldo Werning, *Twelve Pillars of a Healthy Church*; and Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*. All three describe qualities to help leaders focus on specific areas of healthy church life. They also lean heavily on the book of Acts which is the best and basic source for healthy congregations to find principles and examples to adapt and apply to their situations and times.

Acts gives us several *musts* of church health: biblical preaching, diaconal outreach, God-centered leaders, and establishment of new congregations, among others. Yet, developing healthy congregations is never a mechanical, cookie-cutter exercise. Until Jesus returns, we can use Acts as an organic blueprint to build churches that fit people and respond to culture.

Healthy churches follow the outward spiraling map Jesus gives us in Acts 1:8: "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They never stay right where they are born physically, spiritually, or intellectually. They engage other

cultures and areas, never under their own steam but with the Holy Spirit leading. The first local church started with eleven scared men. As he promised, God did not leave them alone but sent the Spirit with power, sanctifying human abilities to speak, teach, and heal.

In the remainder of this chapter, I'll sketch two characteristics of healthy congregations that, though less obvious than those mentioned above, are nevertheless crucial both for keeping members healthy and strong and also for heading outward rather than becoming complacent and isolated.

Discipline

Along the way, healthy congregations face fear, uncertainty, and trouble from within. Ananias and Sapphira and Simon the Magician brought lying, deceit, and corruption to the early church. Even so, the pattern of accountability set by Peter (Acts 5:3-11 and 8:20-25) shows that sin can be challenged and accounted for—though not always with the fatal results that befell Ananias and Sapphira. Sadly, saints who are also forgiven sinners today will and do harm each other. Nevertheless, they must hold each other accountable, setting and maintaining ethical boundaries.

This is nothing other than church discipline, which the Heidelberg Catechism calls one of the *keys of the kingdom* (Q. & A. 83). Some have complained that Christian Reformed churches no longer practice discipline. Perhaps this is often true in the formal sense of three steps with forms read and people excommunicated who haven't shown up in years. That's not living discipline. That's traditionalist futility. For all that, people are forgiven and renewed, and a community grows if believers lay their sins deliberately at the foot of the cross.

Outside of discipline, serious, meaningful relationships among members will nurture mutual pastoral care and responsibility. Small groups can provide such a venue. So can more traditional settings. Sensitive and flexible deacon and elder teams can get to know people in their districts. They are not just names to be visited but God's people with whom to eat and play, worship and weep.

I have seen such relationships take shape movingly when a woman described her experience of salvation after suffering sexual abuse. Her honest story delivered in a safe public forum, encouraged several others to disclose privately their own sufferings and sins in order to seek reconciliation with God and others. Such hard steps contributed to the health of the individuals, the fellowship groups, and the congregation in which they took part. The church grew in spirit and number.

Justice

The last crucial characteristic of a healthy church that I will touch is that of promoting justice. This often ignored, even feared, trait of a healthy church also has roots in Scripture and the church.

Governing authorities opposed the early church because Christ's claim to *all authority* threatened their power (Matt. 28:18). In spite of that, Christians who stoutly viewed themselves as loyal, albeit sometimes critical, citizens found traction on the slippery roads of Roman society. Twice in Acts, Paul claims his birthright of Roman citizenship when unjustly arrested (16:35-40 and 22:25-29.).

Far from using selfish ploys, Paul acts as a loyal citizen who recognizes the duties of governments and officials to their subjects. As Paul himself later wrote in Romans 13, governments are responsible to provide citizens with a climate of safety and well-being. If Christian individuals and communities fail to hold governments accountable or to encourage them when they do good, they are not solid citizens of the lands where God places them. That is part of giving God and Caesar their due, as Jesus says in Matthew 22:21. Christians owe limited respect to governments—even totalitarian ones.

Even where Christians do *not* at first promote justice, health can bloom from sickness. For instance, take Onesimus, a runaway slave from Philemon, the host of a house church. Where is Philemon's sense of justice? Where is runaway Onesimus's respect for his master? Such is the ethical conflict in which Christians can become tangled because we are, willy-nilly, part of complex societal systems. Paul, however, does not uncritically accept Roman slavery. He urges Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother, not as economic property.

The congregation that was meeting in Philemon's home was doubtless healthier after Onesimus became a brother than when he was a slave. Possibly not everyone recognized or liked the new situation. Nevertheless, to stay healthy, the young church had to stretch with the new countercultural exercise of justice, or it would have died.

What about today? Many congregations have developed programs to host refugees or feed and sometimes house homeless people. Some have complained about the *undeserving poor* or even *those foreigners*. Such people forget that we are all sojourners; many of us were also refugees and immigrants two generations ago.

Often in the course of such programs, congregations must deal with unjust or inconsistently applied government policies. An example is the situation of Benjamin Osei, youth pastor with several churches in Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood. Before and after his deportation early in 2004, churches across Canada communicated

diligently with high immigration officials, finally gaining promises of cooperation.

Such principled and persistent work will not merely win a hearing from the greater society for churches working in the name of Christ. The congregations will also grow healthier, stretching to a society that needs to see them. In doing good to the least of Jesus' brothers, they mysteriously do good to Jesus himself (Matt. 25:40). Or, as Hebrews 13:2 reminds us, angels will find hospitality without our knowing it. What could be more delightful and healthy than serving food to angels?

For Further Reflection

In this chapter, Dekker points out several of the signs of a healthy church as given by Paul in the book of Acts. How does your church's scorecard compare with Paul's list?

- Biblical Preaching
- Diaconal Outreach
- God-centered Leaders
- Establishment of New Congregations

Dekker elaborates on two characteristics of healthy congregations: discipline and justice.

- How does your church practice discipline?
- How does this compare to the standard that Paul lays out?
- How does your church promote justice in today's world of need?
- Does your church respect the governing authorities of the country in which you live?

Chapter Two

Are We Looking for and Developing Leaders?

Recognizing the Need for Pastoral Leadership Development

Over the last two decades, books and magazine articles on leadership in- and outside of “churchland” have accounted for the deaths of many trees. The continuing popularity of *Leadership* magazine and the many articles in denominational periodicals and clergy journals testify to the boundless appetite in church circles for nourishment on the subject. At one point in my ministry, eight of the eleven pastors in a monthly book-discussion group subscribed to *Leadership*. Today, ten years later, recent graduates of Calvin Theological Seminary, among current colleagues, are witness to course assignments and discussions fed by articles from *Leadership* and such places as the Alban Institute.

Thus, the extended tilling and planting of the leadership soil has been complex and stimulating. It’s still difficult, however, to measure the harvest in either quality or quantity. In fact, if we pastors step outside our collegial groups, it is easy to find skeptics who are not convinced of the necessity, applicability, or even appropriateness of this conversation within Christian Reformed church (CRC) circles.

Doubters range from the stodgily cynical to the theologically thoughtful. On one extreme, I hear, “There’s no need to study leadership. We need pastors who stick to their knitting of leading worship, preaching, teaching, and visiting.” On the other end, more reflective but still dubious observers remark, “The world is complex, and leading churches is more difficult than ever. We certainly need good leaders in our churches; pastors are part of that mix. Yet, the leadership training and models we hear most about come from the corporate world, where profits, not people and certainly not God’s glory run the show.”

As a pastor-preacher-missionary working in churches and missions for twenty-six years, I see validity in both comments though leadership themes and actions are not exhausted within the narrow boundaries of those remarks. To that end, I will now describe related situations to make a case for developing a common perspective about leadership in Christian Reformed churches. That is the field I know best, but I believe these outlines apply to other bodies as well.

Symptoms of Need in Christian Reformed Pastorates

All pastors and elders I know consider it a privilege and honor to attend synods of the CRC. At synods and classis meetings, delegates, visitors, and advisers mix, meet, learn, study, pray, and praise. Although it seems odd to some, I fully agree with the pastor

who after six days of synod, still bounced up joyfully to proclaim, "Synods ought to be fun and this one really was. Most people worked seriously without taking themselves too seriously." Synods provide a public microcosm to see CRC leadership development in action. They are places where leaders are tested and informally evaluated for potential service in congregations and agency ministries. Most synods I have attended have shown humble servants at their God-pleasing best.

Yet, the low point for all synods occurs during the hours when delegates receive reports from our denomination's synodical deputies. Among other duties, those pastors attend classis meetings to adjudicate between pastors and congregations in crisis. Every year, the list of pastors leaving congregations under difficult circumstances grows. Some pastors leave a present ministry because of intolerable situations with council or congregation. Most eventually find pastorates elsewhere, even in other denominations. Others are deposed from office because of scandal or abuse. Delegates do not learn details, but personal reports often testify to intense, insoluble tensions resulting in friction and open conflict. All contribute to casualties among pastors and in congregations. Too frequently, former colleagues have found inappropriate escape in moral failures or addictions. When the reports of the deputies end, year after year, the same sad hand-wringing speeches and prayers lament the personal and communal agony behind these lists of names, begging members and God for solutions.

Thus, we see the acute need for pastoral leadership development and maintenance in these annual back-door exits to which those statistics testify. Sadly, our denomination is not alone. In a paper presented in 2001 at a forum to strengthen congregational leadership, Dr. Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Endowment, cited studies among North American denominations: "Thirty percent of the pastors . . . are engaged in their ministries in joyous, fruitful, happy ways.... A larger group, about 40%, are considerably more perplexed and at least somewhat unhappy.... Finally, about 30% are in despair about their work, their situations, their lives, their ministries. And the bottom third of these are actively on their way out." ("The Significance of Pastoral Ministry and the Idea of the Pastoral Imagination," p. 8).

Year by year, a closely related need grows within our denomination at the front door as well. Calvin Theological Seminary is teaching more students than ever for more varied and broader ministry capacities. At the same time, the number of those graduating to enter pastoral ministry has shrunk for a number of years, thus increasing annually the number of churches without pastors. Currently, around 130 of 1,025 Christian Reformed congregations have no pastors. In Classis Niagara, where I serve, five of thirteen congregations are without a pastor. Such situations stretch congregational needs and add more stress to pastors serving as counselors and occasional preachers to pastorless

churches. Unless more persons answer God's call to parish ministry, some estimate that by 2020, one-quarter of Christian Reformed churches could be without pastors. (For related reflections, see Bruce Ballast, "Where Have All the Pastors Gone?" *The Banner* [December 2004], 44-47.)

Attempting a Diagnosis

Why are so many pastors leaving the parish, disillusioned with the ministry or abandoning what they believed was a life calling? Why are fewer candidates entering pastoral ministry? Why are so many congregations losing their pastors, some serially, to less casualty-prone ministries such as teaching or institutional chaplaincy?

One general answer, applicable to all three questions, is that if pastors expect to lead, they often face congregations and councils that supposedly ask them to lead but do not know how to support leadership or to model "followership". Conflict and separation often follow. No matter how strong God's call is personally to a given pastor, unless congregational lay leaders understand that leading requires a leader to encourage a ministry plan that the congregation is committed to implementing, wreckage will continue to mount in separated and deposed pastors and frustrated congregations with shrinking membership. Somehow, lay leaders, congregations, and pastors have to work harder at this part of the Charge to Elders in the CRC's form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons: "Be wise counselors who support and strengthen the pastor."

Looking for Communally Workable Remedies

While not pleasant, those scenarios are realistic and necessary to consider in order to engage the issue. Happily, within the CRCNA, several existing programs and processes give opportunities for pastoral and lay leadership development. To open the front door further, for seven years Calvin Seminary has offered *Facing Your Future* for high school students who are willing seriously to consider ministry. In order to help close the back door, *Sustaining Pastoral Excellence* offers grants to pastors to organize peer learning groups. I am pleased to belong to one such regional group that began meeting in January 2005 to read, study, and pray to maintain and further develop communal and personal spiritual disciplines and intellectual habits.

Finally, over the last year and a half an officially sponsored Leadership Development Team of the CRCNA has met often and produced a significant and far-reaching paper called, "Leadership: A Working Definition." In the chapters to follow, I propose to explore four distinct categories found in that paper and informed by a rich conversation among those lay and ordained leaders from the CRCNA and some denominational agencies who wrote it.

For Further Reflection

Dekker states that those who doubt the profitability of leadership range from the *stodgily cynical to the theological thoughtful*.

- Based on his description of each, do you see these attitudes in your church?
- Give an example.
- Where do you fall on the leadership continuum?

In this chapter, Dekker attempts to diagnose why there seems to be a swinging pastoral door in many churches.

- Do you agree?
- Discuss whether this affects your congregation and what you should do if it does.

Has your church taken advantage of the things that *Sustaining Pastoral Excellence* offers to pastors and churches? If not, why not?

Chapter Three

The Character of a Near Disaster

Birth of a Project

Psalm 19 exultingly reminds us: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” (NIV) In one of God’s blessed whimsies, a quiet setting next to a Michigan lake under those heavens helped frame a far-reaching conversation about Christian Reformed Church leadership.

A couple of summers ago, the Rev. Duane Kelderman sat on the deck of the family cottage, mulling over informal discussions about pastoral leadership and congregational life and strife. Brimming with anecdotes of church hopes, both realized and frustrated, the talks also rehearsed stories of sad pastoral crashes-and-burns, as well as of flourishing and faithful congregations. Kelderman’s lakeside deckchair became a staging area for the raw materials for a CRC leadership project.

Linking four leadership traits into a foursquare spiritual foundation, “*character, conviction, competence and convergence,*” Kelderman presented them to a group of seven CRCNA pastors and lay members who have dedicated their lives to building churches and organizations to proclaim the work of God’s hands. Over the next months this Leadership Development Team of the CRC, who perhaps never thought they were construction workers, shaped and hammered those buzzwords into a modest paper called “Leadership: A Working Definition.” (This paper can be found beginning on page 33 of this document.)

Blueprints or Bomb Craters?

For years, I have poked around my own church-life tool boxes, scrap piles, finished projects, and smouldering ruins, as well as those of unnamed and (mostly!) surviving colleagues. In this and following chapters, I will, like a building- or a fire inspector, reconstruct plausible congregational settings. One by one, I’ll look at how those four leadership traits, or their absence, affect church-building or re-modelling sites and histories.

Although none of these scenes is exactly identifiable, enough planks, walls, windows, or sometimes wreckage, are so common that certain people might suspect I raided a personal confidential trophy case or pain-filled junkyard. Don’t think you’re so special! God has given many servants the years, wounds, failures, forgivenesses, recoveries, and faith to have worked *there*, bent *that* nail badly, or fitted *this* board just right until we finally learned that the Lord builds the church or we all work in vain. So, no names are used to protect the guilty because no one’s innocent. Meanwhile, we can learn from our

mistakes so well that we repeat them faster the next time, as my wife's cousin says. Or better, we might learn to let God establish the work of our hands in building his church.

Definition

The Leadership Paper defines character as that which generates trust on the part of followers. Three dimensions of character are: moral excellence, the totality of life experience that forms leaders, and emotional intelligence (pp. 1, 12, 13). As you read, ask yourself: How does that definition of character affect the following building project and my own work?

Foundations

Hopeful CRC, located in a prosperous mid-sized city, was born from a large mother church with Dutch immigrant roots. Many of its new and grafted branches from outside the ethnic group were looking for a new place to grow after two morning services were stuffed. Several individuals and families with little or no organized spiritual life started attending the new church after charter members rented a building from a shrinking congregation whose members were eager for help to pay the bills.

The young congregation of second-generation professionals and business owners introduced new worship songs, developed fresh liturgies, and encouraged lay participation in worship, ministry, and governance. Its first pastor retired after seven years, the first of which were enjoyable, though the last several showed frustration and stagnation. Members fatuously dreamed, *When we get our own building and a new pastor, we'll draw twenty new families*. Hopeful Church called a ten-year missionary veteran as their next pastor. Six years showed steady growth, even after six families left for a traditionalist denomination.

Frameworks

Council approved the organization of a long-range planning committee, initiated by two men, not then on the council but with proven experience in business and local government. Operating at arms length from council, they assembled a committee of members ages eighteen to seventy—pastor included. They started talking about Hopeful's current ministries and how big a building to plan.

Twice-monthly meetings ate up almost a year, but with no plans for future ministry or building. The meetings gradually deteriorated into two-hours of largely cordial but aimless rambling, occasionally with unnamed but noisy flare-ups that ranged between some members' likes and dislikes about worship songs or instruments to others' passionate reactions that *we have to keep up with culture*.

The Fire

After about a year, the by-now uncertain and anxious co-leaders were finding it ever harder to speak to each other even about commonplaces, not to mention tense church planning. Many unidentified but deeply felt issues seethed beneath surface cordiality. Meetings became tense; attendance shrank, with members making excuses about busyness. Some took a private step back, suggesting to the pastor that he try to break the deadlock by confronting the co-leaders about lack of movement, flagging participation, and frustration. He did, and little bits of hell under the glory of God's heavens soon broke loose. Hopefulness turned to anger, members' defections, and congregational desperation that almost proved fatal to the pastor's vocation and the congregation's future.

Four months later, the pastor took a three-month medical leave, occasioned by exhaustion and depression. He recovered sufficiently to pastor the church for eight more fruitful months, even welcoming several new families and baptizing three adults and eight children. Then he accepted a call to one of several congregations that had been knocking for the past few years. Other casualties took years to heal. One co-leader quit the committee and transferred to the mother congregation. Three council members resigned. The other co-leader was not elected to council for seven years. Hopeful lost some fifty members before it started growing again.

The Inspection

It's easy to list superficial reasons why Hopeful Church suffered a near disaster. For example, craving a building without community analysis and ministry planning; allowing gifted, but untrained, unofficial leaders to run too long without giving substantial feedback to an attentive council; and more. Many congregations, however, have for almost 2,000 years surmounted such administrative mistakes. What was really at root?

Our Leadership Paper helps us discern shared *failure of character* as the spiritual core of the damaging church fire. Go through the checklist:

- *Moral excellence*: Happily, no scandalous sparks fed this church fire. All the leaders' marriages survived, and eventually thrived, beyond the two-years of smouldering, outbreak, and merciful extinguishing. God works in mysterious ways to reform our blunders.
- *Totality of life experience*: Some big boys were playing with matches; they should have been more careful. For his part, the missionary-pastor figured that what worked among non- or new Christians would work among too prosperous North Americans; sometimes it did; sometimes it didn't. For their part, the congregation put too much hope in the pastor as being a magic pill for growth. Those errors only

fuelled to the fire that had smouldered long.

- *Emotional intelligence*: One mark of emotional intelligence is persistence in the face of trouble. It was remarkable that council, pastor, and committee leaders soldiered on for almost two years in the face of anxiety and conflict. Maybe that was not so much persistence as the sheer mulishness afflicting our particular gene pool.
- *Broken trust*: During and after all the meetings, all leaders involved—council, pastor, and committee co-leaders—failed repeatedly “to manage their own and others’ emotions, to reach out for support in healthy ways” (p. 13). Talk buzzed among friends and cronies on all sides, but it was often accusatory, blame-seeking, and guilt-giving. Everyone practiced secrecy and deceit instead of transparency and candour. No one dared go outside the congregation for advice or even prayer. While over years God graciously brought individual healing to most involved, don’t we wonder what *might* have been?

I’ll leave that unanswerable question unanswered. Instead, in the next chapter, I’ll look at the same congregation in later years and see how leadership conviction played a decisive role in the years-long process of spiritual and physical reconstruction.

For Further Reflection

According to Dekker, the *Leadership Paper* defines the word *character* as that which generates trust on the part of followers. Is that all there is to character? Defend your answer.

How is character displayed in your church?

Has your church ever been in a situation similar to that in which Hopeful CRC found itself?

Has your church ever had to go through an *inspection* process similar to the one described here?

Chapter Four

The Conviction to Hope and Thrive--Again, or for the First Time

Looking Back

In the previous chapter on character, we looked at a past near-disaster in fictional Hopeful CRC. That conflicted congregation was a place where otherwise morally upright leaders lacked sufficient moral intelligence and maturity to face each other openly and honestly. Using the metaphor of a construction project, the first part of Hopeful's story showed that, even with the gospel of Christ as a foundation, weak leadership timber built a framework that could not withstand self-generated winds of bickering or penetrate a foggy purpose for the church's future.

From Building to Sailing—a New Metaphor

As we explore conviction, the second leadership trait that congregations can develop, we switch to a new image of a ship on a voyage. In brief, good ship *Hopeful* had foundered, was listing, and was in danger of sinking. Yet, strength and depth of historical *conviction and vision among leaders and congregation* imaginatively helped right it and send it on its way. Here's the story.

Early in *Hopeful's* long-range ministry voyage, the leaders—planning team and council—failed to recognize and to face disagreements. Over a year, disagreements deteriorated into ever more secret and damaging conflicts among leaders and *crew*. Crucial trust was lost. *Hopeful* was filling from the inside with its own bilge water. (That's impossible in physical ships, but the oddest things happen when spiritual, *metaphysical ships* run into trouble.)

When a vessel threatens to sink, even the best crew might panic; no one wants to lose her spiritual soul from self-inflicted scuttling. Some fearful officers and crew members donned life jackets and launched lifeboats in sadness, discouragement, and anger for nearby ships. Some were within, others outside the CRC fleet. *Hopeful's* long-range planning voyage stopped dead in the water as the remaining crew started bailing and pumping in emergency survival mode.

Using Available Emergency Gear

Where do a congregational crew and remaining leaders go when a voyage comes up short? What happens when all hands feel literally at sea, maybe sinking, like Peter who took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the waves instead? Here is where conviction and vision can not only lift sinking sailors one by one but also help plug leaks in our souls and start the ship's engines and pumps again.

"Leadership: A Working Definition" asserts that, "many CRC congregations are

struggling for direction and desperately need wise, strong leadership” (p. 14). Yet, to plug the leaks of weak and ineffective leaders is not a job for Lone Ranger rescuers who cruise in to weld on miracle patches and then scoot off to similar troubled craft. Rather, “effective Christian leaders are self-sacrificial and give their lives to turning their biblically shaped vision into reality” (p. 14). A corollary is this: Effective leaders do not work in a vacuum but draw on the strength and resilient tradition of Christian faith, history, and community.

In the case of foundering *Hopeful*, near sinking gradually gave way to a steady, effortful, if undramatic righting, that found its centre keel in the fact and power of Christ’s resurrection. Purposeful, patient, and courageous crew members who stayed with *Hopeful* dug out tested and tried gear from lockers they had forgotten existed since the heady days of *Hopeful*’s launch. Instead of becoming one of many late twentieth-century ecclesiastical *Titanics*, *Hopeful* steadied her sinking beam with leaders and followers who fixed their eyes and hearts on the Source of Life.

Despite the unexpected internal storm, *Hopeful*, a *good ship and true*, found within herself an unexpected *captain and crew, well-seasoned*, as Gordon Lightfoot referred to the doomed crew of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* thirty years ago. *Hopeful* was not, however, doomed. It was, as the Rankin Family—other Canadian folksters—crooned, destined to *rise again*—largely because of communal *conviction* based on Christian faith, history, and future vision.

Finding the Leaks in Our Souls

When a church is in trouble, denominational protocols provide for a counsellor from its own classis. That pastor cooperates with council and the search committee to look for a new ship’s captain. In *Hopeful*’s case, the chair of the calling committee herself had almost lost her conviction and vision. When approached by the counsellor and council to head the calling committee, she hesitated for several months, taking rest, a personal spiritual inventory, and calling on council to intercede for her and the church while she made her decision.

Later, asked what persuaded her to risk the spiritual stability, she said, “I looked back at the history of the church and both back and ahead to Christ. Then I realized *I wasn’t* taking a risk; Christ was offering himself—not to die again but to lift our congregation and me from waves of hopelessness to live up to our *Hopeful* name.” Evidently Galatians 2:20 played a huge role in convicting her and sealing *Hopeful*’s internal leaks: Christ had died; the congregation had died about as much as humanly possible with Christ. Now it was no longer they who lived, but Christ who lived in them.

Crew and temporary captain headed to the pumps, donned protective suits of prayer, studied Christian gospel resurrection, and brushed off the dusty need for discipline and accountability in their own meetings and planning. They were not set to abandon ship but to steady *Hopeful* and follow again the charts that the congregation had determined years before were really God's routes for their voyage.

Recognizing that much of the congregational crew was seasick and demoralized, a new emergency crew took charge. Previously untested replacements urged tired and battered council members to rest. With renewing trust among once suspicious crew and officers, most members slowly turned *Hopeful* not to just any safe harbour but to seas where powerful, steady Holy Spirit winds were surely blowing. *Hopeful* slowly, faithfully caught that by now unfamiliar breeze.

Hopeful's crew reviewed their formerly adopted vision:

- plan a building according to ministry needs;
- become a regional church by not recruiting crew from other churches but by developing its own crew from growing young families;
- nurse back to health older, weaker members tossed about by the winds of internal conflict;
- provide a safe but moving community haven of worship, Bible reflection, and sanctified earthiness in worship to incorporate creeds and confessions in songs, readings, and messages;
- restructure the second service to meet in members' homes for study and fellowship but still gather once a month as a full congregation for a potluck and worship.

A New Captain as a Bonus

All of this occurred over a six-year period. A new building waited four more years. What about a new captain/pastor? Aren't we pastors needed to steer congregational ships through waters known and new, calm or rough? The resident crew and officers decided to reset direction *before* calling. Most importantly was the congregation's effort to raise tired, blurry eyes to Jesus who was marching on before, across the waves, calming seas of discouragement and interpersonal conflict.

In a denomination that already ten years ago was starting to feel the crunch of pastoral shortages, *Hopeful* deliberately sought a pastor with good sea legs, years of experience, sufficient energy to recognize exhaustion in crew members, and deep trust in Jesus' power to make weary people dream of flying like graceful, tireless pelicans rather than scavenging eagles or squawking gulls. *Together* the pastor/captain and congregational crew now look at the surrounding seas that have calmed after years of choppiness and, to this day, navigate eagerly through the seas where the Holy Spirit blows them where it will.

For Further Reflection

Have the leaders in your church ever been in the situation that is described regarding Hopeful CRC?

- What happened when there were disagreements?
- Were they faced or ignored?
- Relate your own story of weathering near shipwreck.

Has your church seemingly ever had to go backward in order to eventually move forward with conviction?

If your church has ever had to regroup after a spiritual near disaster, describe how it was done.

Do you keep such history in the forefront of the congregation's memory?

- How do you accomplish this?
- If you don't convict the congregation with its history, should you? Why or why not?

Chapter Five

Competency for Communal Leadership

In a provocative discussion on competencies, the CRCNA's Leadership Development Team claims that we "should not overstate the distinction between character and competence" ("Leadership: A Working Definition," pp. 15-16). While it then goes on to list some learnable skills—listening and understanding group and system dynamics within congregations—the echo of competency rooted in character sounds often.

Character-Compromising Competency

The film *The Apostle* shows church leadership in which *lack* of character compromised competence. Writer-director Robert Duvall plays gifted, but volatile "Apostle E.F.," preacher of a large Pentecostal congregation. After discovering his wife's adultery with the youth pastor, he drinks himself full of bravado at his son's little league game, then confronts and fatally bats his young colleague in the head. After faking his own death and baptizing himself, the wayward apostle starts a new church that builds a daring ministry of racial reconciliation—though he always steals some of Jesus' limelight. E.F.'s sins find him out when his wife recognizes his voice on a radio broadcast and calls police, who arrest E.F. as evening worship ends.

Apostle E.F. was surely saved by grace and hugely competent, but did his violent character change? Or merely his behaviour? God works wonders with mounds of clay. Yet, competence must be built on character, or crackpot leaders will give Jesus and his church a bad name. What's more, effective church leadership must multiply—itsself a crucial competency—and not be pastor centric, as both of E.F.'s congregations were. Not only movies, but real church stories are full of talented and flawed Lone Ranger leaders—pastors and laypersons—who hit a breaking point, collapse in exhaustion or, worse, in moral failure, sully much of their past accomplishments. Do the names Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart ring any bells? Let it not be so among us.

Character—Complementing Competency

Exodus 18 presents a hopeful report of community leadership development from the young nation of Israel. (Thanks to Ben Vandezande of Christian Reformed Home Missions for first teaching me and many others this *Jethro Principle*.) In the Sinai desert, Israel has begun building the nation after fleeing Egypt. Moses—himself a flawed, but forgiven and proven leader—oozes competence and confidence, bragging to father-in-law Jethro all the splendid things he and Israel have accomplished. "Terrific," says, Jethro, "let's praise Yahweh and celebrate with sacrifices and a meal."

The next day, though, Moses spends all day *judging* people's complaints and problems. His work makes a difference and requires varied competencies; Moses seems to be up to

the job. Old hand Jethro, though, sees a trap that Moses misses as he steams by with youthful (he's only eighty at this time) adrenaline flowing.

Jethro: "Why are you alone judging?"

Moses: "Because the people come to me."

Jethro: "Not good. You work like this, you burn out. You're the people's representative before God. Build a team of representatives."

Leaders, listen up! Moses is a *representative*—not the main feature. Jethro's words sound a fair warning for all church leaders—pastors, home-grown deacons, elders, small-group leaders, and teachers. Leadership must be expansive, not the turf of one person or group, no matter how gifted. If leaders monopolize tasks and programs, doing what they should to train others to do, they stifle potential leaders and exhaust themselves to boot. How many churches have lost potential leaders, who then developed their gifts more (use)fully—though not always in other churches?

Highview CRC's Eager Competence

In previous chapters, we conflated stories from several churches into a fictitious congregation to exemplify one leadership trait. Today we look at fictional Highview CRC. Its first pastor moved after eight fruitful years in the young congregation. This pastor, with a decade of mission experience, led the congregation in growth from two hundred to three hundred members, urging them to develop personal and communal identity as hospitable evangelists. Highview called its next pastor precisely to *take our congregation to the next step*—to deliberately reaching out in a neighbourhood virtually untouched by churches.

An enthusiastic council began working with the new pastor to implement the congregation's vision and mission as articulated in a seventy-five-page binder. The pastor warned that this vision looked like a deceptively beautiful mountain in the distance. If the congregation truly wanted to climb that mountain, they had to negotiate unseen but risky rocks and crevasses of old habits and attitudes. Such hazards could trip the best-intentioned climbers. Yet, key lay leaders emphasized again and again, "We don't want this binder gathering dust. We believe God wants us to follow this route."

Some goals seemed bound to create friction: "Focus on community outreach". "Develop internal unity using historic creeds." Despite the friction, the pastor believed that using Reformed creeds would help, not hinder, evangelism. An engaging preacher and competent teacher, he developed with council approval a plan for both afternoon worship and monthly council devotions. Thus, for five years, congregation and leaders worked systematically through the *Heidelberg Catechism*, *Canons of Dort* (mercifully in just five lessons), and *Belgic Confession*.

Congregational response was enthusiastic. In the first year of the pastor's tenure—and with no work by the pastor—Highview bought an old school, outfitting it for worship and education. Within two years, the congregation rented rooms and offices at bargain rates to such community organizations as neighbourhood police, a family resource centre, a youth orchestra, and a counselling service. After three years, council authorized a review and update of their vision and mission. An intergenerational committee presented the revision four months later. Highview kept growing with several adult baptisms and fifteen to twenty professions of faith annually, in addition to newcomers who transferred in.

The pastor's competencies were meshing energetically with the official leadership and congregational goals. Better yet, Highview was developing "bench strength," with retiring council and committee member helping replacements assume tasks and leadership but without butting in after leaving.

Highview's Character Limited Its Competencies

Then, after seven years, two seemingly unrelated issues converged, and Highview plateaued. First, two key council members moved for work reasons within two years of each other. These trusted leaders left a vacuum not immediately noticeable. As home-grown leaders who kept dust off the binder, they regularly mustered unity and courage to change among members who would not readily follow the imported pastor. These people understood and managed community dynamics with great conviction and principle. Even after they left, Highview continued vigorous outreach—as long as the rest of the close-knit community remained stable.

Second, the bane of Christ's church attacked the Reformed community. The mother congregation suffered a split. Highview had never fully established identity apart from the mother church. Thus, after the split, a sizeable number of Highview members wanted to stop mountain climbing. They lost the courage needed to continue their moderate worship and outreach innovations, fearing painful, if unfair, criticism from family and community members in *both* mother and separated congregations.

Here again, character and competence in leadership converged—distinguishable but inseparable. The fragile, mysterious right stuff needed to steer a fearful congregation past rocks and crevasses of community pressure vanished after two key families moved. Other influential council members embraced the new fear that helped Highview stop part way up the beautiful, risky mountain.

Where will Highview and similar churches go after losing leaders or succumbing to real, if illegitimate community pressures? No vision and mission statement and no competent individual leader can keep the climb going. For that to happen, churches need a

providential confluence of leaders, congregation, time, and opportunity. We will consider that next.

For Further Reflection

Dekker paints a pretty good picture of Highview CRC's competencies.

- Does your church measure up to this standard?
- Should your church (or any church) try to measure up to these competencies? Why or why not?

Have you ever been a member of a church that suffered a leadership vacuum? Describe your experience.

In your Christian experience, have you ever experienced a church split?

- How was it handled?
- Did the church survive?

How has the Holy Spirit overcome a lack of competence if that has been the case in your church?

Chapter Six

The Confluence of Congregational Leadership

In “Leadership: A Working Definition,” the Christian Reformed Church’s Leadership Development Team calls its fourth leadership principle confluence (pp. 16-17). One of the Bible’s most evocative biblical images is the river running through God’s city in the new heavens and earth of Revelation 22, providing life and “healing for the nations.” A healthy river is complex and lovely, bearing water, food, trade, and commerce in churning currents to settlements and people downstream, finally emptying into a distant sea—only to start a new cycle over with ocean evaporation, wind carrying moisture, and clouds dropping rain or snow on distant plains or mountain ranges.

Though necessary for life, rivers can also threaten; recall Hurricane Katrina bursting levees in New Orleans, turning the Mississippi River into a boiling, poison-reeking death swamp. Both ideas of the river metaphor are useful as we explore confluence.

One can never step into the same river twice because new water moves, and currents keep shifting. Thus, confluence is an unrepeatable, “coming together of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry, opportunity, and resources that is a gift of God’s Spirit to enable a leader and congregation to move forward together in realizing God’s purposes” (p. 16). Although neither search committee nor pastor can manipulate such convergence, we can train our minds and hearts to recognize factors likely to combine and flourish without getting lost in soul- and energy-wasting eddies.

Confluence Developing Upstream

In the always stimulating Seventh Day Adventist magazine *Ministry*, Stanley E. Patterson notes the indispensable need for the “fruit of the Spirit [from Galatians 5] . . . for all who participate in the leadership process. . . . Loving behaviour, as demonstrated through the fruit of the Spirit, is not an option for the spiritual leader. *It is an expectation [sic]*” (“Pastoral Ministry: Management or Spiritual Leadership” [July-August 2005], p. 10). Clearly, Patterson recognizes what the Leadership Team of the CRC and earlier articles here also emphasized: Leadership does not exist in a vacuum but is relational and must be built on the sound character of both pastor and congregational leaders: staff, volunteers, and governance bodies.

Duane Kelderman illustrates this principle poignantly: “[A certain] pastor and his wife have been effective leaders because they have never asked the congregation to do something they themselves haven’t done. He gives the example of a pastor who adopts two Down’s Syndrome children, opens his home to strangers, weeps with the weak . . . has the credibility to call the congregation to dream dreams and see visions beyond the status quo” (Calvin Theological Seminary, *Forum* [Fall 2003], p. 7). Thus, no search

committee should even consider a candidate for pastor if he or she has not given public or private testimony of Christlikeness in personal and professional life.

Again, the exemplary character of leadership is a necessary condition prior to the hope of a flourishing confluence of pastor and congregation. Confluence begins to develop in potential pastor and congregation far upstream of the actual time and place where they swirl together.

Patience to See Confluence Develop

Canal Street CRC is a large and growing city congregation born thirty years ago from a first-generation immigrant mother. Large at birth and blessed with capable, compassionate, and often courageous pastors, Canal Street enjoyed several overlapping pastorates for almost all that time. Although neighbouring churches suffered some of the CRCNA's most bruising schismatic battles during the 1990s, Canal Street, with sober, long-suffering leadership from both pastors and congregational governing bodies, managed to steer clear of the vicious rocks and cataracts of schism. Crippling quarrels and resulting distrust were not allowed to take root in the congregation. This happened through rigorous preaching, reflection, and plain hard work on personal and spiritual relationships among members.

Some years after Canal Street bypassed those dangerous rapids, Canal Street found itself without a pastor for the first time in its history. The congregation used the opportunity to refresh an almost ten-year old ministry plan. As happens in basically healthy organizations, that process did not require a complete remodelling but rather honest checking and inspection to insure that Canal Street was ready to keep sailing on God's river. An ad hoc committee from council and congregation reviewed the goals and results of individual ministries, reworked staff job descriptions, and tabled a report and strategy for future direction and staffing.

Despite much serious planning by some committees and council, Canal Street was run occasionally by a traditional buddy network rather than by deliberate, task-oriented, God-trusting commitments and procedures. One outside observer described its default mode of leadership as a benevolent dictatorship. In such a scenario, closet leadership would exercise power patronizingly over council and pastor when touchy issues surfaced, such as capital expenditures, new staff hiring, or relationships with local Christian schools. Ironically, that kind of leadership had steered Canal Street past rocks of schism a decade earlier. Nevertheless, such powerful closet leaders did not always practice healthy relationship disciplines among themselves; thus, unspoken, unresolved trust issues spurted up at awkward, sensitive times, occasioning mistrust and reluctance among members.

Such dangerous side currents are all too familiar and potentially damaging in many congregations. They must not be allowed to continue in a church like weird but harmless old Uncle Fred who lives benignly in an extended family. The best way to start learning how to run such hazardous currents is for courageous, official leadership to name them and then embrace and use the trust and authority given them by the congregation to steer a different course. To its credit, Canal Street's search committee did not gloss over such issues but was ready to discuss them in conversations with pastoral candidates.

Learning Future Confluence by Holy Spirit's Hindsight

Using tools of analysis and planning adopted officially by the congregation and council, the committee met more than one hundred times over a three-year period and was twice frustrated after interviews and visits resulted in declines by two pastor candidates. As confluence is a mysterious, not totally predictable characteristic of leadership, with the Holy Spirit's wind "blowing where it will," look at what surprises God had in store for Canal Street.

The search committee returned to a candidate it had followed earlier. Before, that candidate could not consider moving, but with changing currents where he was working, relocation became feasible. Still, eventual confluence was not easily discernible; both candidate and search committee had to work through serious questions about compatibility and competence. Several times for both pastor and committee, it looked like nothing would come of the interviews and visits. Finally, the pastor accepted the call—more on faith, hope, and commitment than because of a sure-fire prior evidence of a "fit." Spiritual confluence, however, goes beyond and deeper than human fit.

At the time of accepting the call to Canal Street, the pastor was leading a church half the size. He had never worked with a sizeable staff. Furthermore, in two churches, the pastor and congregation had flowed fruitfully together for nearly a decade, then hit stubborn crosscurrents and eddies that resulted in amicable but perhaps premature crew changes.

Many pastors and congregations want to bail out after—or worse, during—a trip down the first rapids, dodging problems with the claim that it's time for fresh leadership. Such desperate substitutions disguise a fear to see a normal problem as a Spirit-given opportunity to learn needed lessons for growth and maturity and thus aim for confluence. As a result, churches and pastors learn instead to develop bad habits early, and they repeat the same mistakes with greater disaster in the future. Possible confluence turns to a whirlpool, and the Holy Spirit's wind is shifted. Developing church-growth research says that a congregation and pastor need perhaps twenty years

of patient commitment to run serious white-water together, getting soaked, perhaps even dumping, then learning to mix and match strokes to negotiate the rocks and swifts better as bigger, more threatening challenges develop further downstream—all the while developing crucial trusting relationships.

Where are Canal Street and pastor now? Somewhere downstream after a long, exciting push-off, having run some rapids of staff changes and development well, pulling a growing number of lone and sinking swimmers into the boat, bumping painfully but constructively into some of the rocks of bad habits—and so far successfully dislodging them. Many of the crew—members, pastor, council—have begun trustingly and openly to discuss disagreements about courses to follow downstream by scouting ahead; anticipating dangers; looking for safe, fast water—praying much before shooting rapids; celebrating more when swimmers are rescued; and hanging on to Jesus tighter than ever before.

For Further Reflection

Confluence is defined as the “coming together of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry, opportunity and resources that is a gift of God’s Spirit to enable a leader and congregation to move forward together in realizing God’s purposes.”

- Do you agree?
- Why or why not?

Have you ever experienced a “buddy network” of church government?

- How did that affect the morale of the church?
- How did it affect the spiritual lives of the members of the congregation?

Has a church you have attended ever struggled with finding a new pastor?

- Give examples of the steps you took in finding one.
- How did confluence play a part?

Chapter Seven

The Rest of the Story

Limitations of Leadership

In the previous chapters, we have explored character, competence, conviction, and confluence as crucial traits for church leaders and leadership. These were articulated by the Christian Reformed Church's Leadership Development Team in its stimulating paper "Leadership: A Working Definition." All these traits are found to some degree not just in individual leaders but, importantly for communities of saints, in a congregation's collective leadership. If leadership—leaders and the remaining majority members of Christ's body—develop those Spirit-nourished traits, Christ's church will faithfully blossom and produce other leaders. Better still, individual leaders will not have to carry the worldly burden of being the hero, the role model whom all are expected to follow. Sadly, the map of church history is littered with tragedies of heroic leaders who not only fell but often took ministries down with them, always tarnishing Christ's name and often abusing the spirits and lives of naïvely trusting followers.

Perplexingly, though, leaders who fall often possess, in startlingly high degrees, all four leadership traits. Maybe every leader ought to know and repeat daily Jeremiah's warning about our deceitful human hearts in prayers of confession (17:9). The trouble is, no matter how much training or reading we do, no matter how many accountability groups or spiritual retreats we attend—sin, the Devil and all the Devil's minions lie in ambush.

Thus, a frightfully realistic, hence necessary, corollary to all axioms of leadership is this: *Church leaders will trip, stumble, and fall.* (Do you doubt? Check out Romans 3:23.) Not all will do irreparable damage to themselves or others as they fall; sometimes no one but God notices—so good we are at cover-ups. Regardless, the result is always disheartening, whether the fall is public or private in congregations or denominations large or small.

Living with the Limits

We could quit right here with this hard-nosed warning and soldier bravely on, mourning losses, modestly celebrating victories, and praying withal for protection and forgiveness. So doing would leave unredeemed that sad but true corollary that unbalances all church, congregational, or personal scorecards. Thus, this bad-news warning must not be the final piece in the church leadership puzzle.

Here is the rest of the story of church leadership: *Every leader's fall—big or little—is a death of sorts, damaging churches, leaders, and followers. Yet, Christ's death and resurrection can breathe new life into our earthly projects that, with blessing, grow into eternity.* These two

sentences fittingly form a cross—with human failure and Christ’s work, respectively, the horizontal and vertical pieces.

This cruciform framework provides the model for every Christian and church, never excusing failure, never supplanting the place of leadership traits, yet giving transcendent meaning and hope to all church leaders from youth workers to deacons and elders to pastors and administrative committees.

In earlier chapters, we’ve illustrated each leadership trait by tracing conflated episodes from several persons and congregations. Regrettably, we need no imagination to describe damaging failures that are so common as to be banal. All we have to do is tell the stories. As my wife’s cousin’s sardonically says of his own frailties, “I learn from my mistakes; the next time I foul up quicker than before.” Leaders should take that to heart in whatever task we undertake—not to repeat, but with Christ’s and our own spiritual work to avoid or change dangerous patterns by establishing mechanisms of accountability and mutual discipline with colleagues and boards or councils.

Falls as Minideaths

As recently as twenty-five years ago, marital problems among church leaders were unheard of, though by no means were all pastors’ marriages or family lives happy. In today’s candid, if not always healthy public life, suffering spouses and damaged children tell of desperate marriages held together for the sake of appearance, legalistic commitment, and to avoid open trouble in the church. Retrospectively these people bore years of unresolved violence, abuse, affairs, and adulteries and more that few suspected and no one knew.

All such histories record minideaths, the results of sin ignored or partially hidden. Such unconfessed and unforgiven secret lives surely harm congregations but rarely in ways we can measure. They are usually felt as a foggy vagueness hanging over a community. In order to avoid lasting damage, leaders and congregations must and can develop mechanisms of spiritual and vocational restoration, where possible, that is both legal and prudent. We must run the risks of restoration while also looking for less-risky futures for fallen leaders if restoration is not feasible.

Falling Hard and Publicly: Risking Resurrection

In the late 1970s, a pastor of a large mid-Western congregation worked through a shameful, painful, but eventually blessed series of experiences revealing one fruit of Christ’s resurrection. Late one night, the pastor was arrested after soliciting an undercover police officer for sex. The story played out on the front pages of the local newspaper over the next week. The council chair soon reported to the press that the popular pastor had confessed fully. In the light of his confession, the council decided to

forgive the pastor and restore him to pulpit and pastoral duties after a month's leave. Astonishingly, the congregation strongly supported this decision.

Soon, the classis and denomination supervising ordained ministry reversed the hasty decision. The newspaper reporter unleashed an ignorant public debate with all the depth of TV talk shows: The denomination was cruel, abused its power, lacked a forgiving spirit, and other slothful nonsense. What the reporter did not write or understand was that in their mutually agreed denominational covenant, classis and denomination fittingly overruled council and congregation. They prescribed a minimum six-month leave for the pastor and instituted steps for pastor, council, and congregation to aim at full confession, forgiveness, and potential—but not certain—restoration. Not without tension and heightened emotions, the pastor, council, and congregation agreed to the larger bodies' wisdom.

After three months, during which the pastor and his wife engaged in individual and couple counseling, the denomination's "pastor of pastors" met several times with the council. The erred pastor was invited midway through the process. Six months after the arrest and following several more meetings, pastor and council agreed it was too soon for restoration. Discussions and counseling had unearthed deeper related issues and similar past events needing more confession, more prayer, and more deliberate actions before restoration could be considered.

Six months stretched to a year. All the while, ever more cordial, spiritually maturing meetings and counseling sessions took place to deal with years of hidden falls and minideaths. Finally, after that year's rigorous spiritual discipline for pastor, council, and congregation, the church held a sober, profoundly thankful worship service to restore the pastor within the congregation. He worked there another five years, experiencing more testing, forgiveness, and restoration, then he moved to another church for fifteen years of fruitful work and died before retirement.

It could have turned out differently and badly. Had the pastor returned to work a month after his arrest, his confession would have been superficial, the council's forgiveness premature, and the congregation's life spiritually shallow and relationally lazy. Resurrection would have been cheap and restoration short.

Resurrections without Restorations

In all such sad cases of falls, we pray that Christ's resurrection works as effectively. We must recognize, however, that in situations of abuse or predation, it is not prudent and should not be legal to pursue vocational restoration; not that anyone doubts the fact or the continuing power of Christ's resurrection. Rather, such fallen leaders can experience forgiveness, but they should find other work that will bless them and God's world in

safer ways—removed from places of earlier temptations and failures. That does not deny a calling; it sets the calling within limits that can keep leaders from giving Christ and his church a bad name and harming God’s flock.

In closing we need only say that no leaders can work long or faithfully for Christ, no church can develop spiritual health unless we all kneel together at the cross of the only One who did not fall but did die so we can live from now into eternity. It took the work of Christ so that we can work for Christ and his church.

For Further Reflection

Have you ever experienced a leader’s fall and seen in as a death in the church family?

Is James Dekker correct in his assessment the “every leader’s fall—big or little—is a death of sorts, damaging churches, leaders, and followers”?

How does Christ’s death and resurrection encourage us to move beyond the minideaths of fallen church leadership?

Has anyone you have known suffered a minideath?

- How was it handled?
- Do you feel that God was honored in how the church handled the situation?

Leadership: A Working Definition

Leadership Development Team
of the CRCNA

Approved by Ministry Council July 13, 2004

Table of Contents - (page numbers at top of page)

I. Executive summary	34
II. Introduction	35
III. Biblical and theological themes	36
<i>A. The mission of the church.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>B. The church as the body of Christ.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>C. Servant leadership.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>D. Reconciliation and leadership.....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>E. Suffering and leadership.....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>F. Ecclesiological principles</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>G. Leadership in the church vs. leadership in society at large.....</i>	<i>41</i>
IV. Reflections on leadership.....	42
<i>A. Leadership defined</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>B. Leadership and contextualization</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>C. Factors of effective leadership</i>	<i>44</i>
1. Character	45
2. Conviction	46
3. Competencies.....	49
4. Confluence.....	50
<i>D. Leadership challenges for the CRC.....</i>	<i>51</i>
V. Summary	54
Appendix A: Conclusions from Synod 1973.....	56
Appendix B: Guidelines from Synod 2001	59
Appendix C: Memo to MAC re Leadership Development.....	62

I. Executive summary

This paper first sets forth several biblical themes and theological principles in which any discussion of leadership must be grounded.

The biblical themes include (1) a statement of the church's mission, which is to be the means by which God accomplishes his purpose in Christ to reconcile all things to himself; (2) an identification of the church as the body of Christ, a living organism in which Christ is the source of the church's life, and the Spirit is the source of the church's gifts for ministry; (3) the nature of servant leadership, which is modeled by Christ himself in his incarnation; and (4) reconciliation as foundational to the church's identity and mission. To be in Christ is to be reconciled with one another as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people of God.

The theological principles include some of the Christian Reformed Church's official teachings regarding the church's ministry in general, and the nature of ecclesiastical office and ordination in particular.

First, the paper offers and explains the following definition of leadership:

Effective Christian leadership is the process of helping a group embody in its corporate life the practices that shape vital Christian life, community, and witness in ways that are faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel and that are appropriate to the particular group's setting, resources, and purpose.

Second, the paper articulates a reciprocal concept of leadership in which the primary focus is not on certain traits in a leader but on the leader-follower relationship.

Third, the paper identifies four factors present in situations where effective leadership is taking place. Notice how both leaders and followers are described in each factor:

1. *Character* in the leader (which generates trust on the part of followers). Three dimensions of character are elaborated on: moral excellence, the totality of life experiences that form leaders, and emotional intelligence.
2. *Conviction* in the leader (which helps the congregation discern its purpose and vision). The word *conviction* is used instead of the word *vision* to avoid misunderstandings that often come with the word *vision*. Leaders must be invigorated by a vision of the kingdom that God is establishing in the world as well as being self-sacrificial and courageous in their leadership.

3. *Competencies* in the leader (which help a congregation deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways). The focus here is on specific leadership skills that virtually any leader can develop, that are essential to effective leadership, and that help a congregation function in healthy ways.
4. *Confluence* of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry opportunity, and resources (which is a gift of God's Spirit and that enables a leader and congregation to work joyfully together in realizing God's purposes). Christian leaders humbly acknowledge that God's blessing on the situation in which they lead is not merely the result of their skilled leadership but of the Spirit's work in creating a unique confluence of factors that come together in that particular leader-follower relationship and ministry setting.

Finally, the paper then identifies some of the particular challenges the CRC faces as it thinks about leadership development and concludes with a summary list of leader qualities (in distinction from traits) that can guide the church as it identifies potential leaders and evaluates current leaders.

II. Introduction

Synod 2001 of the Christian Reformed Church adopted a Denominational Ministries Plan (DMP) that included several strategic priorities for CRC agencies and institutions. The Leadership Development Team (LDT), convened by Calvin Theological Seminary but consisting of team members from a cross section of agencies and institutions, is one of four teams charged with developing recommendations whereby the strategic priorities of the DMP can be achieved.

This paper is submitted in response to one of the assignments given to the Leadership Development Team; namely, "to articulate a working definition of leadership that is biblically and theologically grounded, organizationally relevant, culturally responsive, and community sensitive."

At the outset it is important to clarify four things.

1. This paper is very CRC context-specific. That is, this paper addresses questions, issues, misunderstandings, and challenges regarding leadership with which the CRC in particular is struggling. While many other churches may be having similar struggles, our goal is to deepen and enlighten the CRC conversation on this important issue.
2. This paper considers leadership primarily in the *congregational* setting. Certainly there are many other settings in which leadership takes place. The focus on the *congregation* is not because these other settings are less important but rather because (1) the struggle at this time in the CRC over the

nature of leadership, which gave rise to this paper, is a struggle taking place primarily in *congregations*; and (2) congregations as biblically and theologically described below raise peculiar issues and present peculiar challenges with respect to leadership. The leadership principles discussed below clearly have applications beyond the local congregation. Sometimes those applications will be left to the reader; at other times the paper will make specific applications to broader leadership situations.

3. This paper obviously is not exhaustive on this subject. Each of the sections below has received book-length treatments by any number of authors on the subject. The purpose of this paper is to concisely identify some of the theological, missiological, ecclesiological, and organizational truths that inform a biblical understanding of leadership and apply those truths to the current CRC conversation about leadership. The goal is that CRC agencies and institutions will understand more clearly the nature of leadership, embody and model the leadership principles espoused here, work together more effectively in our leadership development efforts, and communicate to those we serve a consistent message regarding the CRC's understanding of leadership and strategy of leadership development.
4. This paper is not the final word on the subject of leadership. The goal is for this paper to stimulate ongoing dialogue and learning at every level of the CRC. This paper already has been enriched and strengthened by helpful feedback from many individuals and groups. Such enrichment and strengthening will continue in our ongoing discussion about Christian leadership.

III. Biblical and theological themes

This section of the report identifies various biblical and theological themes that must guide any discussion of leadership. A fuller exposition of many of these themes can be found in a synodical study committee report entitled "Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 635-716), and in synodical guidelines for understanding leadership, office, and ordination (*Acts of Synod 2001*, pp. 503-4). The latter guidelines can be found in an appendix to this report.

A. *The mission of the church*

Leadership in any organization immediately raises questions about that organization's mission—its reason for being. In the case of the church, the Bible raises and answers two very important questions:

First, whose mission is it? It is God's, not ours. The church does not come up with its own mission. The Bible sets forth the work of Christ, in which God's

mission for the church is embedded.

Second, what is the church's mission? The Bible states the church's mission in many different contexts. Consider for example, Colossians 1:15-20, Matthew 28:18-20, John 17:20-23, 1 Peter 2:9-11, and Ephesians 4:11-13. It is difficult to absolutize one of these statements over the others. Thus, it is more helpful to see these various statements of the church's mission as different facets of a single diamond, each enriching the other.

Perhaps God's mission in the world can be summarized this way: God's purpose in Christ is to reconcile all things to himself. The church is the body of Christ in the world, the means by which the world will know that Jesus Christ is Lord and by which all believers will reach maturity in Christ and unity in the faith and knowledge of Christ. To fulfill this mission of God to reconcile all things to himself, God *sends* the church into the world to spread the gospel, to evangelize, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, and to embody in its corporate life the message of reconciliation.

(*Mission* and *vision* are used in different ways today. *Mission* usually refers to one's deepest purpose or belief, while *vision* usually refers to how one will live out that mission in the future. The discussion about which one comes first—mission or vision—is ongoing. By these definitions of *mission* and *vision*, the passages above no doubt reflect both the church's mission and vision. For what it's worth, the Denominational Ministry Plan did not distinguish between *mission* and *vision*.)

B. The church as the body of Christ

To understand leadership in the church, it is important to understand a peculiar and mysterious fact about the church: the church is the body of Christ. The Bible does not say that the church *resembles* or *is like* a body. The church *is* the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), the way in which Christ is present, in the world. Four features of the church as the body of Christ are critical in understanding leadership.

1. Christ is the head of the body. The New Testament is clear that Christ is the head of the church. Christ's headship is a reference not to power and the right to control but to the source of the church's life. Christ sustains the whole body and supplies what the body needs for life (Eph. 1:22-23, 4:15-16; Col. 1:18).
2. The church is a living organism. In its essential nature, the church is not merely an organization, it is a living organism. Christians are members of a living body, not an inanimate institution (Eph. 4:12-16). The source of the church's life is Christ himself. Two important implications flow from this: First,

the church as a living organism is constantly growing, changing, and adapting to changing realities around it. This is what it means to be alive. The word used for an organism that has quit growing and changing is *dead*. Second, the church is not a self-sufficient, closed system, answerable only to itself. It is contingent, dependent. Like the vine to the branch, the church is organically connected to and dependent upon Christ for its very life. As a living organism, the church's big concern is not, What do we want to do? The questions are, What is Christ doing in and through us? How is the life of Christ being tangibly expressed in our life together as a church?

3. The body of Christ is one, with many parts that organically work together (1 Cor. 12:12-31). 1 Corinthians 12 makes it clear that each part of the body is indispensable to the healthy functioning of the whole body. The focus is upon the mutual interdependence of all the parts of the body with the goal being a healthy functioning of the whole body. A clear counterpart to the interdependence of the parts of the body is a mutual accountability that all members of the body of Christ, including leaders, have to Christ and to one another.
4. God gives to the church the gifts of his Spirit (Ro. 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12:7-11, Eph. 4:11-13). These so-called gift passages make it clear that God gives spiritual gifts to all the members of the body—not just a few select leaders. Moreover, God gives particular gifts to particular believers. In focusing upon these particular gifts to particular believers, one must be careful to avoid an overly mechanical or individualistic understanding of spiritual gifts: “Of the twelve gifts, I have numbers four, six, and seven; what about you?” Emphasis upon particular *gifts* to particular individuals in the body must be balanced with emphasis upon the *giftedness* that the body as a whole possesses by virtue of Christ's indwelling Spirit. Paul says that spiritual gifts are given for the common good. The church must take seriously the particular gifts God gives to individual believers. It must take with equal seriousness the giftedness of the body as a whole as the body lives in love and service. Indeed, as various members of the body of Christ realize that they are able to serve one another and others beyond the church, gifts emerge and are affirmed by, and strengthened in, the body. The balance between particular gifts and giftedness of the body is an important one.

C. *Servant leadership*

One can learn many things about the nature and quality of Christian leadership from the Bible. Perhaps the most profound insight comes from the life of Christ himself and Christ's clear teaching regarding servant leadership.

1. Christ is the model of servant leadership. In his incarnation, Christ embodied the message of servant love. The Cross is the ultimate message of self-

giving love (Phil. 2:1-11, John 13:12-17).

2. Authority in the New Testament entails both power *and* servanthood. Jesus Christ himself embodies both. He rules with power “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion . . .” (Ephesians 1:21), but he also stoops down to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13). One can see the same embodiment of both power and servanthood in the role of parenting. In their relationship with children, good parents have authority that includes the right and power to do things in their relationship with their children. Good parents also love their children with a servant love. Authority, power, and servant love, all properly understood, are not set over against each other in the New Testament and should not be set over against each other in discussions of leadership (Matt. 20:25-28).

The New Testament emphasis on servant leadership reminds leaders to be careful in their exercise of power and authority. Leaders must realize the ways in which positions of leadership can create a power imbalance in the relationship between the leader and others in the group, and they must take seriously their responsibility to exercise power as servants of the one who has all power and authority.

3. The practice of servant leadership is one of the ways in which Christians put on Jesus Christ. In John 13:14 (NIV), Jesus makes it clear that those who follow him must practice his servant love. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.” In Ephesians 5:1-2 (NIV), Paul calls believers to imitate God in his self-giving actions: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Leadership in Christ’s church must be qualitatively different from the Gentiles’ lording-it-over approach to leadership. The goal of servant-leaders is to love and serve those they lead by helping them find and productively use their gifts in the ministry of the body. Leadership in the church is essentially and radically a matter of servanthood, love, forgiveness, redemption, sacrifice, justice, and obedience.

(See Lawrence Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980] for a more extended discussion of these and other biblical themes related to church leadership.)

D. Reconciliation and leadership

God’s mission has been summarized above in terms of *reconciliation*: God’s purpose in Christ is to reconcile all things to himself. The church is called to embody in its corporate life the message of reconciliation. One of the greatest

needs in North American society today is the need for racial reconciliation. Additionally, racial reconciliation is one of the greatest testimonies to the power of the gospel that the church can give. For decades, the denomination has been passionate about the importance of racial reconciliation and the development of diverse leadership. This situation in society and this commitment of the CRCNA to racial reconciliation must inform our thinking about leadership and shape our leadership practices.

E. Suffering and leadership

The New Testament is clear in its teaching that Christians suffer, not just because they still live in a broken world but also because obedience to Christ and the gospel generates both resistance and hostility as well as engages the power of darkness (1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19; Rom. 5:1-5; 2 Tim. 1:8-12).

Christian leaders should expect to suffer. In fact, a person who aspires to church or kingdom leadership but has a strong aversion to suffering should look elsewhere for work. It is interesting that individuals we often associate with strong leadership in the Bible, i.e., Moses, Joshua, David, Esther, Deborah, and other “heroes of faith” (Hebrews 11), often suffered. Sometimes their suffering was self-imposed. Indeed, all leaders struggle with temptations, and many leaders commit colossal sins that throw themselves and the community around them into deep pain and suffering. Often, however, suffering is the result of doing good, the natural or supernatural resistance and hostility to the gospel that creates pain and injury in the leader and others.

The good news is that virtually every passage in the New Testament that speaks of suffering for the Christian is laced with hope—hope because of the positive character-building, community-building impact of suffering when it is embraced with faith; and hope because of the forward-looking, not-yet perspective that is brought into clearer focus through suffering. Christian leaders know that Christ will prevail and his mission will be accomplished. Suffering is the seed that only increases that hope.

One important implication of the reality of suffering for the Christian leader and community is that success and failure are never as clear-cut as one might be tempted to believe. Sometimes the chapter of a church’s history that involved the most suffering ends up being the chapter that was most used by God to form, shape, and lead that church into its most vital and vibrant chapter of ministry. To use Jesus’ and Paul’s language, churches are continually dying and rising again. Churches and leaders must be willing to endure pain and suffering, to be the seed that is put into the ground and dies, if they are to rise again and produce many seeds. Every Christian leader (and congregation) must continually take to heart Jesus’ words when he faced his own suffering and death:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.
(John 12:24-26 NRSV)

F. Ecclesiological principles

Reformed church polity seeks to reflect the biblical teaching above in its understanding of the church's ministry in general and office and ordination in particular. The most concise summary of the CRC's official positions on these matters can be found in the conclusions of the synodical report of 1973 on ecclesiastical office and ordination (Appendix A), and the guidelines of the synodical report of 2001 on ordination and official acts of ministry (Appendix B).

In summary, these official church positions affirm (1) the church's role in the mission of the Lord, namely, to be the body of Christ manifesting his presence, proclaiming the gospel, and evangelizing and seeking the lost; (2) a definition of leadership in the church, namely, a relationship of trust and responsibility in which certain people are entrusted by Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, to take pastoral responsibility for a part of his flock; (3) the purpose of ordination, namely, to set apart certain individuals for special ministries or services; (4) the comprehensive ministry of the church shared by all believers; (5) the distinction between those who serve in official offices and those who serve more generally as one of function, not essence; and (6) the authority of office as defined primarily by service, which includes the responsible stewardship of God-given natural and spiritual gifts, rather than by status, dominance, or privilege.

G. Leadership in the church vs. leadership in society at large

Is there a difference between leadership in the church and leadership in any other organization? We judge that there is continuity and discontinuity between these two realms.

There is continuity in terms of laws of human behavior, social laws, psychological laws, and organizational laws that are rooted in creation and apply to all organizations, including the church. The best of Christian wisdom discerns these deep and universal patterns to human life and community. God's common grace makes it possible for a person who may not even be a Christian to be an effective leader in an organization that is not Christian per se.

There is also discontinuity. The church is a unique *organism* in which Christ and the Spirit dwell. The church has a unique source of life; is directed toward particular ends and goals; and is governed by particular commitments and practices, such as prayer, worship, study, witness, and service that give peculiar

shape to the church's life and ministry. The church is more than an organization that can be explained in organizational terms alone. The church must guard against approaches to leadership that merely accommodate to the broader culture. (See William Willimon, *Pastor: A Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2002], p. 70.)

IV. Reflections on leadership

A. Leadership defined

After considering many definitions, the Leadership Development Team offers this definition of leadership in the congregational setting:

Effective Christian leadership is the process of helping a congregation embody in its corporate life the practices that shape vital Christian life, community, and witness in ways that are faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel and that are appropriate to the particular congregation's setting, resources, and purpose.

Beyond the congregational setting, the Leadership Development Team offers this more general definition of Christian leadership:

Effective Christian leadership is the process of helping a group embody in its corporate life the practices that shape vital Christian life, community, and witness in ways that are faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel and that are appropriate to the particular group's setting, resources, and purpose.

It is important to clarify that these definitions do not limit the function of leadership to particular individuals or offices. This is in keeping with the New Testament teaching and church's affirmation that

DIAKONIA, meaning "service" or "ministry," . . . embraces the total ministry of the church. This comprehensive ministry (office) is universal, committed to the whole church, not a select group of individuals within the church. . . . The task of ministry is shared by all and is not limited to a special, professional class. The ministry of the church is Christ's ministry, shared by all who are in Christ.
(*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 714)

This point bears repeating, given that there is a strong, historically conditioned tendency on the part of many to associate leadership with only the activity of pastors and other officially designated individuals.

It is also important to clarify that the definitions of leadership above address the *essence* of leadership and not the various *styles* in which leadership are expressed. In *essence*, Christian leadership is the same at all times and in all

places. It embodies unchanging principles and values such as servanthood, morality, respect for all people as divine image-bearers, and so forth. The *style* of leadership, however, varies greatly depending on the individual leader and the situation in which leadership is exercised. A well-developed and mature leader has the capacity to exercise different styles in different situations. A crisis situation may call for a more authoritarian style, a decision-making process among peers may call for a more consensus-building style, and a learning situation may call for a more prophetic style. Leadership styles are neither linear nor hierarchical. Styles are best understood as options in a repertoire circle where the situation determines which style will best serve the needs of the situation.

Finally, it is important to clarify the meaning of the word *help* in the definition. To label a leader as someone who helps another person can be misunderstood as an overly weak concept of leadership. That, however, is a misunderstanding of the word *help*. It is interesting that in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word most frequently translated as *help* usually refers to God.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth. (Ps. 121:1-2)

When leaders help people live the Christian life, they are far from weak. They are servants, albeit humble servants, of the triune God; indeed, they are acting like God.

B. Leadership and contextualization

Effective leadership takes into account the critical role of the *ministry context* in which leadership is exercised. Every ministry context is unique. It has its own particular history, setting, relationships, and culture.

Culture here refers to the common ideas, feelings, and values that guide community and personal behavior, that organize and regulate what a particular group thinks, feels, and does about God, the world, and humanity. Culture is that invisible vault where worldviews, presuppositions, and values are generated and stored.

Effective leaders understand that culture operates most powerfully when it is least visible. Consider these two images: First, culture is like the ocean. The power of the ocean is not in the three-to-six foot waves on top of the water; it is in the massive movement of water underneath the wave, a movement that cannot even be seen. Second, as one wag has put it, “culture is like bad breath: you smell it on everyone else before you smell it on yourself.” Just as people do not

smell their own breath, they often do not see their own cultural values at work. For example, Dutch people perhaps do not realize that their thriftiness or cleanliness or deferral of gratification is cultural, but rather assume that is the way all people are, or should be.

Effective leaders understand the power of culture and the way in which virtually all ministry is *cross-cultural*. The cross-cultural nature of ministry and the corresponding need for cultural sensitivity in leadership is most obvious when it involves the meeting of meanings among different races, ethnic groups, nations, regions, and socioeconomic classes. However, ministry in a highly secular, post-Christian culture makes virtually all North American ministry cross-cultural *and* countercultural. That is, engaged in the meeting of meanings between cultures where there are fundamentally different and opposing worldviews, assumptions, and values regarding the nature of reality. For example, exercising leadership in the church in a racially broken society and a racially diverse community will require a keen understanding of racial dynamics (*cross-cultural*) and a radical commitment to the unity and diversity of the body of Jesus (*countercultural*).

Effective leaders understand how leadership must be contextualized, i.e., morphed in its expression, in each ministry setting—how it must be incarnated differently in one or another ethnic community; how it must be exercised differently in one social structure or another; and even how it must be changed from one life-cycle stage to another in the development of a given organization or church. Knowing the times and the culture of a given people and knowing how to respond appropriately might be called cultural intelligence or contextual intelligence and is an important distinguishing mark of an effective leader.

C. *Factors of effective leadership*

The title of this section is significant, and it underscores a critical assumption about leadership; namely, effective leadership is best understood not by focusing on leadership characteristics in isolation (Peter Drucker has argued that a single, universal leadership personality and set of leadership traits simply do not exist) but always in relationship to those being led. Focusing upon *the situation* in which leadership is being exercised shifts the question *from*, What are the marks of good leaders? *to*, What factors are present in situations where effective leadership is taking place?

Below are four factors that seem to be ever present in situations of effective leadership:

1. *Character* in the leader (which generates trust on the part of followers);
2. *Conviction* in the leader (which helps the congregation discern its purpose and vision);

3. *Competencies* in the leader (which help a congregation deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways); and
4. *Confluence* of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry opportunity, and resources (which is a gift of God's Spirit and that enables a leader and congregation to work joyfully together in realizing God's purposes).

Two important clarifications must be made before expanding upon each of these factors.

First, notice how all four of these factors involve *both leader and congregation as well as the relationship between them*. Leaders cannot lead all by themselves. In an extended definition of leadership, Jerry Zandstra points out that leaders both motivate and are motivated by followers ("What Is Leadership?" Unpublished paper, 2002). Leadership is reciprocal.

Second, these four factors can be applied to diverse cultural situations. Each cultural situation will define these factors according to norms appropriate to that culture. These four factors, however, reflect certain realities of human behavior and community that are present and must be reckoned with across all cultural differences.

1. Character

Effective leaders are people of sound *character* who generate trust in their followers. For Christian leaders and for all Christians, *the foundation of Christian character* is the believer's union with Jesus Christ. In their death with Christ, believers die to the old self, are raised to a new life with Christ (Col. 3:1-17), and are clothed with the excellencies of Christ. As the branch receives its life from the vine, so Christians receive their spiritual life from Christ (John 15:1-17). Christ, by his Holy Spirit, produces in the believer the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The foundation of character for all Christians is their new life in Jesus Christ and Christ's life in them.

The character of Christ in the Christian leader should clearly produce certain moral excellencies that are crucial to the leader's effectiveness—honesty, integrity, fairness, compassion, service to others, a life of prayer, and total dependence on God for strength and guidance. One of the key evidences of such character in leaders is that people *trust* such leaders, and such leaders *trust* the people they lead.

Another dimension of character is *the totality of life experiences* that form leaders. These experiences can be construed in more spiritual terms as

in Robert Clinton's sovereign foundations, inner-life growth, ministry maturing, life maturing, convergence (Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* [Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988]) or in developmental terms as in Gardner's genetics and early socialization, education, experiences in risk taking, and learning from failure (Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds* [New York: Basic Books, 1995]). In either case, the important point here is that *who people are* is crucial to *how they lead*; and who people are is a function, in part, of the life experiences that form them.

Another dimension of character is an *emotional intelligence* that is consistent with effective leadership. Included in emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's own emotions, motivate one's own self, reach out for emotional support in healthy and appropriate ways, recognize emotions in others and respond appropriately, handle relationships, control impulses, demonstrate empathy, listen actively, deal constructively and creatively with conflict, assess one's world in optimistic and hopeful terms, take appropriate risks, patiently persist in the face of anxiety and conflict, and respect differences among people. A key element of emotional intelligence as practiced by leaders is the ability to seek input from people at all levels on how they are performing as a leader, to be nondefensive in response to such input, and to appropriately adapt in light of such input. (See also an inspiring and illuminating paper by Craig Dykstra entitled "The Significance of Pastoral Ministry and the Idea of the Pastoral Imagination" in which he develops the concept of pastoral intelligence and pastoral imagination. This paper is unpublished but is available upon request to the committee.)

2. Conviction

Effective leaders operate out of strong *conviction*, which in turn helps a congregation discern its purpose and vision. Effective leaders believe certain things deeply and commit themselves selflessly to realizing certain ends. Some call this one's vision or a preferred future. For Christian leaders, these convictions must be shaped by the biblical vision of the kingdom of God. Effective Christian leaders must be invigorated by a vision of the kingdom that God is establishing in the world. These convictions arise out of the leader's relationship with God in Christ and the Holy Spirit and with God's call to follow him in faith and obedience.

For Christian leaders, such conviction has the greatest potential for long-term good when it arises out of a strong vision of the church's mission and a thorough grasp of the biblical, pastoral, and theological contours of the Christian faith and church. Leaders must also have the ability to communicate these contours in meaningful, relevant, and integrative ways through, in the case of pastors, sound preaching and teaching and imaginative pastoral leadership.

The capacity for *reflexive leadership* (Jackson W. Carroll, *As One with Authority: Reflexive Leadership in Ministry* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991]) is an important dimension of leading with conviction. Reflexive leadership involves not just articulating single overarching convictions but also setting into creative tension competing convictions. Reflexive leadership involves, for example, holding in creative tension the goods of the tradition and the challenges of the present situation. Effective leaders are capable of informing and guiding an ongoing argument between the tradition and the present challenge, or among other competing convictions. At such points, conviction requires a deep grounding in and understanding of the faith tradition, as well as a lively imagination and capacity for thinking creatively. Effective Christian leaders think deeply, theologically, integratively, and creatively.

Conviction is used in this section instead of *vision* not because vision is unimportant but because the word *vision* is too easily misunderstood at this particular point in the denomination's conversation about leadership. For many, "the leader's vision" conjures up images of (1) fumbled attempts by a lone-ranger to introduce major changes in a congregation, (2) painful polarization, and (3) destructive conflict often ending in separation from the pastor and a mass exodus of members.

Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline* [New York: Doubleday, 1994], pp. 205-32) prefers *visioning* over *vision* to avoid some of these pitfalls. *Vision*, a noun, connotes an answer, a solution to the problem. Congregations usually want *and resist* pastors who gladly offer their vision for the church. By contrast, *visioning* refers to "a structured conversation of God's people about what they believe God has called them to be and to do." Effective leaders do not impose their vision but enable a congregational process whereby the congregation develops its vision.

The opposite concern is that pastors with no strong convictions and corresponding vision are weak and ineffective leaders in congregations that desperately need leadership. It is difficult to overstate this concern. Many CRC congregations are struggling for direction and desperately need wise, strong leadership. This is where it is crucially important to see *the large overlap* between *conviction* and *vision* when both are properly understood. Effective Christian leaders have strong, biblically shaped convictions that issue forth in a biblically shaped vision. They believe certain things deeply. They have dreams and are passionate about what God's church and kingdom ought to look like. They are bold and courageous. Their strength is the strength of their convictions and their passion to do the right thing. They are self-sacrificial and give their lives to turning their biblically shaped vision into reality. They are risk takers.

However, the difference between an effective leader and a martyr is that effective leaders foster processes whereby *the congregation as a whole* can discern and own where God is leading the congregation.

There is at least one test of whether a leader is imposing his or her vision or leading with conviction: Is the leader truly open to where a congregational process of discernment might lead, or does the leader already have a predetermined outcome in mind? If the leader's mind is made up as to the preferred outcome of a congregational vision-setting process (we will have a building program, or a new staff position, or an alternative worship service, or a different church janitor), then any congregational vision-setting process is really only manipulation on the part of the leader to get the congregation to agree to what the leader wants.

It would be incorrect to conclude from this test that leaders should never have convictions and a vision that propel them in a certain direction. While effective leaders understand the reciprocal nature of leadership, i.e., the influence of leaders and followers upon one another, they also have biblically shaped convictions regarding the church that Christ is building—a church that is called to be engaging in its worship, faithful in its teaching, strong and deep in its fellowship, and self-sacrificial in its outreach and service. These biblical convictions rightly propel leaders and the community they lead in a certain direction. Effective leaders make good judgments about the best way to set forth those convictions, set direction, and engage the community in achieving its biblical purpose.

What if the convictions of the leader and the values of the congregation are at such odds with each other that the leader cannot express his or her most basic convictions without confronting and judging the congregation? In most situations, the leader who thinks this way has already guaranteed conflict and failure. By the very question, the leader has set up a win-lose outcome. What if the leader took a different approach: Every Christian Reformed pastor and congregation is on record as believing what the Scriptures and the confessions teach. The convictions and values all members of the CRC share in common are unfathomably great in number. The effective leader accentuates and holds up the best in the congregation's beliefs and values, and then, in a loving and safe environment of mutual trust, helps the congregation confront the gap between its own values and current realities. Effective leaders help people come to the point where they judge themselves. Effective leaders are transparent in confronting the gap between their own values and their own lives! Effective leaders stand *with* a congregation in learning, not *over* a congregation in judgment.

A central issue in this discussion is *trust*. Stephen R. Covey says, "Trust

is the highest form of human motivation” (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989], p. 178).

Congregations that do not trust those in leadership are severely limited in what they can accomplish. Congregations have an uncanny ability to sniff out leaders who are manipulating the congregation to the leader’s desires. By contrast, when the leader has strong convictions but also is truly open to how those convictions, together with the best of a particular congregation’s values, will unfold into a particular vision of the future, then trust abounds and the possibilities for moving forward together as leader and congregation are almost limitless.

3. Competencies

Effective leaders have *competencies* that help a congregation deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways.

Beyond the debate as to whether leadership is a matter of natural talent or learned skills, there are clearly competencies that leaders can learn through training. One should not overstate the distinction between character and competence, or a corresponding distinction between natural talent and learned skills. Most of the attributes listed under character (#1 above) tend to be more deeply embedded in who one is as a person by virtue of the totality of his or her natural endowments and life experiences, whereas the competencies listed below tend to be skills that can more easily be learned by a wide range of people. These skills include:

- Listening and encouraging;
- Communication;
- Understanding authority, including the differences between formal and informal authority;
- Understanding the importance of clear structures and practices of accountability;
- Understanding dynamics and processes of change;
- Understanding issues involved in cross-cultural ministry;
- Understanding the dynamics of conflict and how to lead through conflict;
- Motivating people to perform at their full potential;
- Building support for and ownership of a process of change;
- Using win-win problem solving techniques;
- Understanding the congregation as a system;
- Understanding the critical nature of *pace* when it comes to change;
- Understanding the difference between courage and the temptation to martyrdom;
- Understanding the pitfalls of charisma;
- Knowing the difference between solving problems and creating

opportunities for learning.

Congregations with leaders who possess these specific leadership skills are more likely to deal with the normal anxieties and conflicts of communal life in healthy and productive ways than congregations with leaders who do not possess these skills.

A related challenge in leadership development is helping congregations be healthier and more effective in their working relationship with congregational leaders. Perhaps a resource can be developed that helps congregations in this regard. Some of the features of healthy congregations that could be highlighted and developed might include the following:

- Strong commitment to the church's purpose;
- Healthy practices of communication within the congregation and among congregation and leaders (communication that, among other things, keeps truth and love and accountability and support together in creative tension);
- Deep congregational practices of prayer for leaders and the congregation as a whole;
- Leadership decisions guided first of all by the church's purpose, not by a desire to keep peace at all costs.

4. Confluence

Situations in which there is effective leadership will be marked by a *confluence* (a convergence, a coming together) of leader, congregation, time, place, ministry opportunity, and resources that is a gift of God's Spirit and that enables a leader and congregation to move forward together in realizing God's purposes

Leadership is not exercised in a vacuum. Leadership is exercised in a particular time and place, with a particular group of people who have a particular history, as well as by pastors and other leaders at particular points in their life journeys, with a particular cultural and social situation. The best leaders humbly acknowledge that they were in the right place at the right time—that a multitude of factors, some of them beyond their direct control, came together to produce relationships and events that resulted in great good. The best leaders will not claim that they could go to the next town and produce the same success story all over again. Principles govern leadership, but one of those principles is a unique and unrepeatable confluence of factors that come together in the leader-follower relationship and in the broader ministry situation. *Synergy*, *convergence*, and *luck* are words that leadership theorists use to describe this flourishing phenomenon. *Providence*, *gift of God's Spirit*, and *answers to prayer* are words and

phrases that Christians use.

Understanding the role of confluence in congregational and institutional life is critical for several reasons. First, it keeps every leader humble. Beware of leaders who think the flourishing of their organization is all their own doing. Second, it keeps leaders flexible. Different circumstances dictate different leadership emphases and strategies. Ecclesiastes 3 (There is a time for . . .) also applies to leadership. The effective leader never “arrives” and “gets it all figured out.” The effective leader is constantly adapting to new challenges and opportunities. Third, it explains why the same person is not equally effective in all situations. The fact is that some leaders are fabulously successful in one setting and anything but successful in the next setting. All leaders and followers need to recognize that confluence is not a matter of easy formulas and steps but of gift, grace, and surprise.

This reality of confluence cannot be used by leaders as an excuse for passivity: “Oh well, things don’t seem to be coming together this year. We’ll see what happens next year.” Effective leaders trust that as they take responsibility for matters of character, convictions, and competence that are within their control, God will work in and through their faithfulness to create this confluence of factors that constitute shalom and blessing.

For Christians, all four of these factors underscore the constant need for fervent prayer and openness to God. However, the need for confluence especially underscores how totally dependent the church is for God’s blessing upon the labors of leaders and congregations.

D. Leadership challenges for the CRC

The CRC faces many challenges as it thinks about leadership development, particularly in the context of the local congregation.

One challenge is to come to some agreement denominationally about the nature of pastoral leadership in the church. The debate is often polarized, with one extreme maintaining that if pastors just preach the word and care for the flock, leadership will take care of itself; the other extreme puts too much stress on the role of the charismatic leader in casting the vision and in directing the group.

Those who represent the first extreme, i.e., those who minimize the role of the pastor in congregational leadership, must come to grips with the shift that has taken place *from* what Jackson Carroll calls a *pastor-centered* or *clerical orientation* of leadership, where the emphasis is upon what the pastor does to and for the laity as if the pastor is the central actor in the church’s life and the laity are essentially passive recipients, *to a congregational orientation*, where the

emphasis is upon shared congregational leadership and congregational initiative in the creation and development of ministry. In this new orientation, pastors do more than perform certain pastoral functions (preaching, teaching, sacraments, visitation). They work collaboratively with the other members of the body to stimulate the discovery and use of the spiritual gifts of all members, thus enabling the body as a whole to engage in ministry. What is crucial in this regard is the realization that such body-focused ministry does not just happen by accident but must be envisioned and developed by those who lead.

Those who minimize the role of the pastor in congregational leadership not only must come to grips with the breakdown in the North American church of a consensus about exactly what the church is and should be but also with the critical role of pastors in helping congregations understand their calling and mission. In a prior era, the cultural and ecclesiastical consensus about what a church was and what a pastor did was so strong that leadership in the church in some ways appeared to be unnecessary. The church appeared to move along on autopilot. Today that consensus has dissolved. Today, individual Christians and churches negotiate their own experience and piece together their own religious identity with little regard for the way things have been done in the past. Such situations require leadership that is theologically grounded, culturally responsive, and interpersonally sensitive. It requires leaders with character, conviction, and competence who serve selflessly and creatively in the full expectation of the *confluence* of God's blessing.

On the other side, those who put too much stress on the role of the charismatic leader in casting the vision and directing the group must realize the ways in which such overemphasis is biblically and theologically defective and organizationally destructive. The biblical and theological themes that judge such an overemphasis have been reviewed above. More surprising to some is the extent to which North American students of leadership, quite apart from any biblical teaching, are abandoning a view of leadership that puts too much emphasis upon the charismatic leader. Ronald A. Heifetz, in his authoritative work on leadership entitled *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, speaks of "the myth of leadership. . . the solitary individual whose heroism and brilliance enable him to lead the way." The problem is that such overemphasis upon the person of the leader proves to be counterproductive, the successes and failures of an organization are too closely tied to its leader, and the organization itself escapes responsibility. (Ronald Heifetz has two very important books on leadership: *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* [Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002], and *Leadership Without Easy Answers* [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1994].)

In his book *Good to Great* (HarperCollins, 2001), James Collins analyzes America's great corporate success stories and comes to the startling conclusion that the leaders of America's truly "good to great" companies are not big

personalities who seek to build the success of the organization upon their own charisma and celebrity. Collins' conclusion is that leaders who focus too much upon their personal role and not upon the mission itself, at best, limit their effectiveness and, at worst, sabotage the mission. (Collins emphasizes two characteristics of a leader that are consistent with great organizations: humility [does not take credit when things go right; assumes blame when things go wrong], and determination [a total focus on achieving the organization's goals and willingness to do what is required, even at great personal sacrifice].)

Peter Steinke humorously points out the hazard of overemphasizing the role of the visionary leader when he says, "Any job description that uses the phrase 'dynamic leader' more than six times is fly paper for narcissists." The point that modern leadership theorists are making, and that the New Testament understood long ago, is that leadership is not first of all about the personality of the leader; it is about the mission to which the group is called.

This description and analysis of our denominational polarization on matters of leadership is no doubt incomplete. Hopefully it is a beginning of a conversation to help clarify some of the issues to be addressed.

A related but equally serious challenge that the CRC faces in its leadership development is that so many leadership models in the CRC are one of these two extremes, and those who aspire to leadership today do not have positive, balanced models of leadership to emulate. This only underscores the urgency of breaking through the polarity delineated above and finding a positive third way with respect to congregational leadership.

A new model of leadership that transcends the polarity of both passive pastor and visionary leader is what some are calling adaptive leadership. Adaptive leaders do not first of all cast visions; they clarify values. They lead not first of all by saying, "Follow me!" but by asking, "Who are we?" Here the role of a leader is to try to help the congregation understand its values and to wrestle with how those values and current realities do not quite match up. For instance, the adaptive leader's first response is not, "We need to be more outreaching." The adaptive leader's first response are questions, "What do we believe about being an outreaching church? From Scripture? From our own confessions? Now, how do we measure up with what we believe? And what are we going to do about it?"

The adaptive leader helps people clarify the conflict between their own values and current reality and creates the conditions for the congregation to work through a process of change. Adaptive leaders do not see their roles as first of all to solve a church's problems. They see their roles as helping a church wrestle with its own problems and make the appropriate adaptations. Adaptive leaders do not talk about solutions as much as they talk about learning: What can we learn together? What have we learned through this?

This model of leadership is usually associated with a systems approach to leadership and lies behind much leadership training in North America today. Approaches to and theories of leadership come and go. Our goal is not to endorse a particular theory of leadership but rather to find ways to talk about leadership that are faithful to biblical and theological principles, that transcend past polarities, and that give us positive models of leadership. Various agencies, offices, educational institutions, churches, and programs within the CRCNA are already involved in leadership development. See Appendix C for an outline of leadership development and key future directions in the areas of mentoring, assessment, youth, and communications and connections.

V. Summary

One of the main points of this paper is that leadership is not first of all a set of traits in one or more people designated as leaders but is a reciprocal relationship between leaders and the larger community. Even so, the church must identify and affirm potential leaders, and people must assess their own leadership capacity. The qualities listed below summarize many of the different points made in this paper. No leader has all of these qualities in equal measure. Nevertheless, this summary list can serve as a tool for evaluating potential leaders.

Effective Christian leaders

- Are godly in character, manifesting the life of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit;
- Pray fervently;
- Are emotionally healthy and able to function effectively in a variety of relationships;
- See the world in optimistic and hopeful terms;
- Listen carefully;
- Are trustworthy;
- Are self-sacrificial;
- Create ownership of ministry vision;
- Utilize the giftedness of others;
- Acknowledge that resistance to effective leadership is normal and unavoidable;
- Are not afraid of conflict;
- Are persistent in the face of conflict;
- Are resilient in the face of setbacks;
- Are respected by all members of a group even if not always liked or agreed with;
- Bring people together, building consensus across lines of competing viewpoints;

- Get people talking about their differences in ways that promote learning, listening, and insight;
- Understand the importance of clear structures and practices of accountability;
- Stay in close contact with those who are resisting their leadership;
- Absorb the normal tensions and anxieties present in any community of people without overreacting and thereby escalating tensions;
- Understand and manage the process of change;
- Are humble and take little credit for the good things that happen around them.

As was said at the beginning, this paper is not the final word on the subject of leadership. The goal is for this paper to stimulate ongoing dialogue and learning at every level of the CRC. This paper already has been enriched and strengthened by the helpful feedback of many individuals and groups. Let the conversation and learning continue.

The Leadership Development Team that produced this paper includes:

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The team also received broad input at each step of this paper's development from pastors, seminary professors, persons from various ethnic minority groups, the senior leadership teams of denominational agencies, and laypersons throughout the denomination. Although the present document has been approved by Ministry Council (MC), the senior administrative leadership team of the denomination, it continues to be a work in progress. Feel free to send any comments and suggestions to Duane Kelderman, the chair of the Leadership Development Team, at leadership@calvinseminary.edu.

Appendix A

Conclusions from Synod 1973

Synod 1973 received a report on Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 635-716). Synod received the report and recommended the following:

C. That synod adopt the following observations as the framework within which the “guidelines for understanding the nature of ecclesiastical office and ordination” are to be understood:

1. Although in the New Testament the organization of the church is not as clear as has sometimes been assumed, nevertheless there is insistence that the church shall have organizational structure, and that this organizational structure shall include designated leaders to whom respect and submission is due.
2. Nowhere in the New Testament is there a conflict between authority and service, or between ruling and love. Christian authority involves service in the name of the authoritative Christ, and Christian service involves authority in the name of the serving Christ. Both before and after his ascension as our victorious Lord, Jesus is the authoritative Son of God who serves the Father and those whom the Father has given him.
3. Christ only is Lord of the church, and no one may presume to rule in his place. Service and authority exercised in the church are in his Name and according to his Word.
4. Because God is a God of order, and because the people of God are subject to many weaknesses and errors and in need of spiritual leadership in the face of a hostile world, Christ grants, by his Holy Spirit, gifts of ruling service and serving authority (service and authority) to particular people whom the church must recognize, in order that their gifts may be officially exercised for the benefit of all.
5. The office bearers, i.e., certain people appointed to particular tasks, are not appointed without the call and approbation of the church. When so appointed, however, they are recognized by the church to be representatives of Christ in the special functions for which they have been appointed. As such they serve both Christ and the church, and are worthy of honor, especially if they serve and rule well.
6. These guidelines are intended to offer helpful direction to the churches as they continue to seek practical solutions to the questions pertaining to the status and functions of “layworkers in evangelism” and related questions. These guidelines do not re-define the basic types of service currently assigned to deacons, elders and minister; nor do the guidelines now authorize anyone other than ministers to administer the sacraments along with the preaching of the Word. *In keeping with our church polity, such changes may be introduced only by way of revision of the Church Order as decided by synod.*

E. That synod adopt the following statements as GUIDELINES FOR

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF ECCLESIASTICAL OFFICE AND ORDINATION:

(Comprehensive Ministry: "Office of all believers")

1. The general term for "office" in the Greek New Testament is DIAKONIA, meaning "service" or "ministry." In this basic sense ecclesiastical office is one and indivisible, for it embraces the total ministry of the church, a ministry that is rooted in Christ.
2. This comprehensive ministry (office) is universal, committed to all members of the church, and the task of ministry is shared by all. The ministry of the church is Christ's ministry, and as Christ's ministry it functions with the power and authority of Christ the Lord. This ministry of the church is shared by all who are in Christ.

(Particular Ministries)

3. It is not inconsistent with this universal office-sharing and is in keeping with apostolic practice that some individuals, in whom the church has discerned the required gifts, be appointed to special tasks. The Scriptures report a setting apart to particular ministries or services. Both in the Old and New Testaments God calls certain people for particular tasks.
4. From the beginning these particular ministries were functional in character, arising under the guidance of the Spirit in the interests of good order and efficiency in the church, to enable the church to carry out Christ's work in the world most effectively.
5. The particular ministries are characterized by service, rather than by status, dominance or privilege. These ministries function with Christ's power and authority, a power and authority rooted in obedience to his word and expressed in loving service. In turn, those who are served are to respond with obedience and respect.
6. The particular ministries are to be distinguished in function, not in essence, from the comprehensive ministry shared by all believers, and distinctions among the particular ministries themselves also are functional. Since all members are commissioned to serve, there is only a difference in the kinds of service of deacons, elders, ministers, and all other members.

(The Word and The Sacraments)

7. The tasks of the preaching of the Word and of the administration of the sacraments have been given by Christ to the church. Although in the Scriptures these tasks are not explicitly limited to special officeholders, historically they have been assigned to and carried out by those whom the church has appointed on Christ's authority.
8. There is no valid biblical or doctrinal reason why a person whom the church has appointed to bring the Word may not also be appointed to administer the sacrament.

(Appointment to Particular Ministries)

9. "Ordination" should be understood as the appointment or setting apart of certain members of the church for particular ministries that are strategic for the accomplishment of the church's total ministry. In this sense of appointment or setting apart, ordination has biblical precedent, and is valuable for the good order and well-being of the church.

10. The ceremony of the laying on of hands is not a sacrament but a symbolic act by which the church may publicly confirm its call and appointment to particular ministries. As such it is useful but not essential.

11. To invite only ministers, and not elders also, to participate in the laying on of hands is a departure from biblical example. Furthermore, there is no biblical warrant for limiting the laying on of hands to the occasion of setting apart for the particular ministry of the Word and the sacraments.

12. Because the Scriptures do not present a definitive, exhaustive description of the particular ministries of the church, and because these particular ministries as described in Scripture are functional in character, the Bible leaves room for the church to adapt or modify its particular ministries in order to carry out effectively its service to Christ and for Christ in all circumstances.

(Acts of Synod 1973, pp. 62-64)

Appendix B

Guidelines from Synod 2001

Synod 2001 received a study report from the Committee to Study Ordination and “Official Acts of Ministry.” Synod adopted the four guidelines (below) “for understanding the nature of, and relationships among, the concepts and practices of ordination, the ‘official acts of ministry,’ and church office” (*Acts of Synod 2001*, p. 503-4). While the leadership paper to which this is appended addresses leadership in a broader context than just the four official offices of the church, nevertheless these guidelines are helpful in addressing the relationships among the Reformed concepts of mission, leadership, office, and ordination.

Guidelines

a. Re mission

- 1) As the church of Jesus Christ, we have been called together to serve the mission of the Lord. We believe with the apostle Paul that this mission is above all

. . . from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

(2 Cor. 5:18-20)

- 2) The role of the church in this mission is to be the body of Jesus Christ, manifesting his presence as we together and separately offer “our bodies [our whole lives] as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom. 12:1). This is our public work, our *liturgy*, our great calling.
- 3) We are called to be a sacrificial presence in the world, giving of ourselves as Christ gave himself for the sake of others. We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9).
- 4) For our role in the mission of Jesus Christ, every Christian has been anointed (2 Cor. 1:21; Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 32) and called to serve the Lord. This is the office of believer.

b. Re leadership

- 1) For the purposes of this redemptive mission, the Lord also calls some to serve as leaders. Leadership is centrally a relationship of trust and responsibility. Leaders are entrusted by Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, to take pastoral responsibility for a part of his flock. With this responsibility comes the authority of Christ for the purposes to which the leader has been called.

- 2) Leaders must at the same time be recognized and trusted by the people of God as those who come with authority and blessings from the Lord. This dual relationship of leader to Christ and leader to the people is what above all defines leadership in the church. Leaders are those who have both the call of Christ and the call of the people.

c. Re the “official acts of ministry”

- 1) Certain acts of ministry—among them the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the pronouncement of blessings for the people, the laying of hands on new leaders, and the reception and formal dismissal of members—are part of the ministry of Christ to his followers and are entrusted to the church and, within the church, to its ordained leaders, not to a specific office.
- 2) Therefore, no long-standing, organized congregation of Christians should be deprived of these liturgical acts simply because it cannot provide for the presence of an ordained minister or evangelist.
- 3) These acts of ministry symbolize and strengthen the relationships among the Lord, leaders, and the people of God. Their use is a sacred trust given to leaders by the Lord for the purpose of strengthening the flock. Therefore the administration of these acts should continue to be regulated by the church.

d. Re ordination

- 1) Ordination is the church’s way to recognize and enact the relationships of leadership. In ordination, the church recognizes that a person has
 - The appropriate excellencies for ministry
 - The callings of Christ and the people of God
 - A call to a role of pastoral responsibility
- 2) The laying on of hands is the ceremony by which the church symbolizes and enacts the relationships of ordination. By this ceremony, the leader on whose head hands are laid is symbolically offered to Christ, included in the succession of leaders of the church stretching back to the apostles, and given the power of the Spirit. Since by the laying on of hands the church recognizes pastoral leadership as such and not a specific office or role, this ceremony is appropriate for all church offices.
- 3) Ordination is appropriate when, and only when, a person is called to pastoral leadership within the church. “Pastoral” is here understood to embrace the functions of all the offices, including deacons, elders, evangelists, and ministers of the Word. Ordination is not a way of recognizing a person’s academic credentials, elevating the prestige of religious professionals, or granting of tenure in the church. It is a recognition and enactment of a pastoral relationship between Christ and the church, mediated in a certain

leader. As such it should not be entered into lightly. Therefore ordination ought to be regulated by the church according to the nature of the office.

(Acts of Synod 2001, p. 503-4)

Appendix C

Memo to MAC re Leadership Development

December 10, 2003

To: MAC

From: Leadership Development Team

I. Good things already happening

In its review of leadership development efforts in the denomination, the Leadership Development Team is impressed with the quality and quantity of effort being exerted in many places in the denomination. The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program with its mentoring, continuing-education, and peer-learning group initiatives is one example. The vocation programs at Calvin College and Dordt College are another. Efforts toward increased mentoring are expanding—in Pastor-Church Relations (PCR); in Leadership Development Networks (LDN); and in youth programs such as Youth Unlimited (YU), Encounters, and Facing Your Future (FYF). Local churches are designing mentoring programs for profession-of-faith candidates and for elders and deacons. Training for officebearers is growing with more Day of Encouragement-type events. Another growing idea is that of assessment, which includes assessment of ministers and church leaders as well as of congregations.

II. An odd ambivalence in our culture

When we look at the CRC, we see tremendous leadership by CRC members from many walks of life. Our Reformed view has served us well in raising up leaders for many different jobs and professions, yet we seem to have leadership struggles in the church. There is confusion about what leadership in the church even is, and many congregations are beset by tensions and conflict related to congregational leadership.

Many factors probably play into this leadership struggle in the church. North American culture as a whole is a leveling one that does not encourage leaders to be *too* strong. Our Reformed church polity also discourages too strong of a leadership role for any one person or group in the congregation or denomination. We also have a strain of resistance to strong leaders that may go back to our northern-European heritage. Thus, we debate about ecclesiastical offices as forms of service as well as about servant leadership and the priesthood of all believers. However, our debates about who may lead and who may not lead often may be more about control and power than about service. The tension in our church order between local and denominational control is a tension borne out in other discussions of leadership. We also find that pastors and other church

leaders struggle with many issues, especially loneliness and isolation. Pastors go from a colleague-rich environment in the classroom to a colleague-poor one in the parish where many have difficulty. Another significant problem seems to be an inability to receive feedback well.

III. How to move forward

As a Leadership Development Team, we have discussed at length various ways we can stimulate progress in our denomination's leadership development efforts. A key concept that we have focused on is how to foster a healthy leadership development culture in the denomination. The basic approach we are considering, and want to test with MAC, is to capitalize on and build on positive things that are already happening in four areas.

The Leadership Development Team identified four areas under the umbrella of "creating a culture of leadership development" that seem to have particular energy and momentum at this time. These are areas where we believe we can do even more. We know that work in these four areas can not even begin to cover what could be done to develop a culture of leadership. We propose that identification and augmentation of these areas can be very helpful and will generate other activity by agencies and institutions that go beyond these four areas of mentoring, assessment, youth, and communication.

A. Mentoring

The mentoring of pastors, officebearers, emerging leaders, and young people should be by way of relational learning.

Note: The key concept here is to develop a culture marked by intentional relationships that are focused on spiritual growth, character development, and leadership development.

1. Present mentoring activities include
 - a. Encounters – a cooperative effort between Youth Unlimited, Home Missions, Calvin Seminary, and others.
 - b. Calvin College – many mentoring activities including the Lilly programs for spiritual mentoring; worship apprenticeships; mentor-internship programs for business, engineering, and academic departments as well as youth ministry; and volunteer opportunities.
 - c. Calvin Seminary – Facing Your Future for high school students; internships and summer assignments (in cooperation with Home Missions, World Missions, and World Relief); and the Readiness for

Ministry program.

- d. Leadership Development Networks – mentoring in biblical knowledge, ministry skills, and spiritual formation over a three-year training period.
- e. Pastor-Church Relations – a five-year mentoring relationship for newly ordained pastors, new work in the area of mentoring for church staff people, and training for regional pastors.

2. Key future directions

The mentoring activities above are listed in chronological order—junior high through employment. A future need is to track and coordinate people as they move through the "system" so that interests, talents, and passions can be funneled in the right directions. We need to help young people find their place of kingdom service.

CSI and other Christian Schools have much to offer that is not being taken into account, e.g., the influence that teachers and coaches have on younger-aged children. CSI also has other leadership development initiatives that we have not tapped into. Thus, CSI can be a key institution in future directives.

Mentoring for other church leaders—unordained staff members and officebearers—needs to be developed and/or expanded. However, because mentor training is a large need in all the above, how do we train (and coach) the mentors? Thus, mentoring is also a key factor for future directives.

B. Assessment

Assessment involves many people and many practices. It is necessary for all types of pastors, leaders, and gifts. It is also a positive, helpful, regular practice that picks up pathologies, though it is not solely problem-driven. In addition, assessment is a comprehensive process that has relational involvement as well as tests and interviews, which congregations need very much. However, congregational assessment should not be from good to bad. It should be more like a Myers Briggs process that evaluates types of congregations.

Note: The key concept here is to develop a culture in which assessment tools and processes that help people identify, develop, and use their gifts for leadership are regularly used at all levels of the church's life.

1. Present assessment activities include

- a. Facing Your Future – this Calvin Theological Seminary program

provides exposure to theological education and ministry that is designed to identify and encourage future Christian leaders vocationally.

- b. Vocational testing – this program is available at Calvin College’s Broene Center and is comparable to programs in other Christian colleges.
- c. CTS Readiness for Ministry – this is a Calvin Theological Seminary concurrent program that encourages self-analysis as well as peer analysis and feedback.
- d. Leadership Development Network – this program has been developed by Home Missions, and it identifies and trains leaders within congregations. Assessment is a part of qualifying for EDN and the ongoing process of LDN.
- e. Encounters (formerly SWIM) – is an intensive ministry experience in which individuals gain insight into their “call” to a particular vocation as part of their response to Christ.
- f. Assessments (CTS) – this program, conducted in the fall of the first year, is primarily geared toward the students’ development during their seminary involvement.
- g. Directions – Home Missions conducts three-day intensive assessments to discern suitability for church planting. These are done regularly and in various locations throughout North America. (It should be noted that, while this process is geared toward identifying potential church planters, participants may also receive feedback encouraging them into other types of ministry.)
- h. Pastor-Church Relations – this is a contracted program with two local psychologists to conduct assessments of pastors whose fitness for duty may be questioned either by others or by the pastor.

2. Key future directions

All of the current practices mentioned above provide a good value in this area. Ongoing adjustments to these programs with an eye to encouragement and assessment should be supported. Programs that identify, celebrate, and encourage the gifts and potential of junior high and high school students would be very helpful. These can come in the form of educational events, mission projects, or mentoring relationships. The same can be said of the post-high school population. An expanded and encouraging track of spiritual direction and vocational discernment would be strategic.

Through a variety of encouragements, existing leaders could be coached to look for young people and adults with gifts and abilities that might qualify them for full-time vocational ministry. Additionally, the assessment centers sponsored by Home Missions could be expanded to include sensitivities not only to church planters but also to parish pastors, chaplains, campus ministers, and so forth. Cooperative efforts with other denominations could be valuable. Finally, the fitness for ministry assessment strategy could be further strengthened and offered as a routine and positive approach for assisting pastors and other leaders to discern an appropriate ministry fit.

C. Youth

We must identify young people with leadership gifts and interests in ministry. We must see that we develop them in leadership roles by providing training, and we must continually track the progress of young people involved in leadership development efforts.

Note: The key concept here is to develop a culture that intentionally identifies young leaders and provides support for their development.

1. Present youth activities

- a. Encounters – this is a collaborative effort of CRWRC, Youth Unlimited, CRWM, CRHM, CTS, and Calvin College to involve one hundred or more teens in summer ministry sites.
- b. Facing Your Future at CTS – this program involves thirty-five to forty students who come together to investigate ministry at seminary and in a ministry environment.
- c. Calvin College Summer Leadership Seminar – this program, held at Snow Mountain Ranch in Colorado, features service and weekly leadership seminars.
- d. SERVE – 2000 young people each year come together during one week. They serve and are spiritually challenged by YU and are networked into Encounters.
- e. Pathways to Possibilities, MLK Young Leaders Weekend, and Entrada Scholars – these programs are aimed at promoting higher education with inner-city youth.

- f. Calvin Worship Symposium (Youth Track) – held last year in collaboration with Facing Your Future is a special event for teens interested in ministry.
- g. Calvin College – offers worship apprentice training, a Jubilee Fellow scholarship program for selected students in their senior year, the Service Learning Center, and a resident advisor program.
- h. Youth ministry courses and internships – these are offered through Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary.

2. Key future directions

We must develop training programs that will help congregations identify young people with leadership potential. We must develop programs for middle-school-aged young people that focus on identifying and developing leaders. Finally, we must encourage networking among present youth activities by way of shared positions and shared programs.

D. Communications and connections

A communications hub—to be located on the CRC web site—is essential. This will provide links among all areas of leadership development in the various agencies and organizations.

Note: The key concept here is to create a focal point in the culture for enriching and encouraging leadership development initiatives.

1. Present communications and connections activities

Communications and connections in leadership development are currently taking place through e-mail communication from the committee requesting input from the Ministries Administrative Council (MAC). This process has already raised the awareness of the agency directors regarding the work and objectives of the Leadership Development Committee. Other efforts include:

- a. Dynamic Youth Ministries, which offers conventions and regional rallies.
- b. Estes Park, at which the YMCA of the Rockies Summer Leadership Institute takes place. Glenn Triezenberg is the director.
- c. Calvin College, which has the Service Learning Center.
- d. VIS/SERVE/CRWRC, which provides communications training.

- e. Classes, which have Classical Diaconate Committees.
- f. Orientation, which applies to agency and institution boards.
- g. Lilly Vocation Grant, which funds a program at Dordt College.
- h. CSI/Calvin College partnerships, which provide leadership training for potential Christian school administrators to connect, communicate, and encourage each other.
- i. CSI, which provides regional conventions for educators.
- j. Churches, which have youth leaders and pastors.
- k. Lilly Vocation Grant programs, which are for Calvin College and are directed by Shirley Roels. These programs include:
 - a mentorship program in spiritual leadership, codirected by Cherith and Robert Nordling.
 - a youth ministry program offered in collaboration with CTS.
 - a Jubilee Fellows program (onsite leadership internships), directed by Dale Cooper.
 - a worship apprentice program.
 - a faculty scholars for research and a curricular innovation by faculty.
 - faculty/staff development retreats and programs.
 - a department retreat program.
 - a ministry resource center in the Hekman Library, directed by Ed Seely.
- l. Calvin Institute for Christian Worship (CICW), which is a collaboration between CC, CTS, and CRCNA. The programs here include:
 - an annual Symposium on Worship and the Arts.
 - onsite retreats and conferences on worship, leadership, and other congregational ministry topics in North America.
 - worship renewal grants.
 - Reformed Worship (RW) in partnership with CICW and CRC Publications.
 - COLAM, a Conference on Liturgy and Music in partnership with CICW and RW.
- m. Agency and institution publications including:

- *The Banner*.
- Henry Hess and the CRC Communications Office.
- video, radio, and TV programs by the Back to God Hour, Inner Compass (Calvin College), and agency and DYM videos.

2. Key future directions

When the draft of the leadership definition paper is approved by MAC, it should urge the use of all appropriate means of communication on this topic (newsletters, publications, video, and staff retreats) available through the agencies and institutions of the CRC, many of whom have current leadership programs. It should also raise the awareness of the leadership component in all the recruitment for and training in the programs listed above. Additionally, it should (1) connect with other colleges and institutions that have similar programs; (2) retool *The Banner* to combine with the *CRC Source*, by using this opportunity of change to coordinate leadership objectives among all agencies and institutions; and (3) utilize existing news and story resources to enhance knowledge of leadership objectives for all agencies and institutions; and (4) because video, radio, TV programs by the Back to God Hour, Inner Compass (Calvin College), and agency and DYM videos are in process all the time, we should utilize them to raise awareness for leadership development efforts.

IV. Recommendation

The Leadership Development Team recommends that MAC endorse the basic direction and focus of the LDT's efforts as outlined in this memo, including:

- A. Its central focus upon how to foster a healthy leadership development culture in the denomination.
- B. Its strategy to capitalize upon the four areas mentioned above in which there is already considerable energy and momentum.