

Lead with righteousness and justice in chaordic times

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The 21st century church needs apostolic leaders for chaordic times that blend elements of chaos and order, Randel Everett told participants at the 2024 Christian Leadership Summit at Dallas Baptist University.

“We are immigrants in a brand-new world,” said Everett, a former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas who recently retired as founding president of the 21Wilberforce human rights organization.

Rapid advances in technology and massive global migration create extraordinary opportunities and challenges for the global church, he observed.

The current context demands apostolic leaders in the church—those who believe they are sent out into the world by God with the message of hope in Christ, he asserted.

Everett contrasted the crowd in Jerusalem to whom Peter preached in Acts 2—Jews who shared a common religious background and understanding of Scripture—and those whom Paul addressed in Acts 17 on Mars Hill—Athenians who represented a wide variety of philosophies.

“We live in Athens, not in Jerusalem,” he said.

Many people today do not share a Christian worldview, but they are spiritually hungry and craving meaningful relationships in a world where they often feel isolated, he observed.

Rather than presenting logical proofs in linear fashion, non-Christians from

varied backgrounds in a chaotic age respond better to narratives—personal stories, Everett noted.

Recognize citizenship in God's kingdom

Apostolic leaders in the current context need to engage with society and seek to be positive influences in their communities and countries, he said.

However, they should recognize they are sojourners whose primary identity is as citizens of God's kingdom, he added.

“Our ultimate authority is in Christ. Our ultimate instructions are in God's word,” Everett said. “We should never forget our first loyalty is to Jesus Christ.”

Church leaders today need a Christian worldview that is historically grounded and global in its scope, he said. Christians in the West can learn deep lessons from fellow believers in other parts of the world who live under oppression and persecution, he asserted.

“The Bible makes sense to them because the Bible was written by persecuted people for persecuted people,” said Everett, senior fellow for religious liberty with DBU's Institute for Global Engagement. “We should listen, and we should learn. ... We are part of a global family.”

Furthermore, apostolic leaders in the 21st century need to be willing to take risks and “travel light,” so they are free and nimble to respond to rapidly changing circumstances, he said.

“We need leaders who persevere,” Everett said. “We need leaders who are single-minded—whose eyes are fixed on Jesus.”

‘Enact righteousness and justice’

Christian leaders have a responsibility to lead with righteousness and justice, said Raymond Harris, an architect and entrepreneur who has used his profits to invest in the lives of others who are committed to justice and promote sustainable community development in Africa and Asia.



Christian leaders have a responsibility to lead with righteousness and justice, said Raymond Harris, an architect and entrepreneur, when he addressed the Christian Leadership Summit at Dallas Baptist University. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“I believe righteousness and justice are sisters in the Scripture,” said Harris, senior fellow of entrepreneurship in DBU’s Institute for Global Engagement. “When righteousness prevails, there is human flourishing around leaders.”

Scripture provides examples of righteousness among “the least,” such as a widow who gave all she had to the temple treasury and a woman who demonstrated “righteous extravagant generosity” when she anointed Jesus,

he noted.

Leaders not only should think about how their decisions benefit the poor and vulnerable, but also how they can learn from the poor what truly matters in God's economy, he said.

"We can learn a lot about righteousness from the most unlikely people," Harris said. "Those who are poor in society and low in society have a lot to teach us about leadership. You see, in God's upside-down economy, he uses the least and the poor to demonstrate true eternal righteousness."

Practice the Golden Rule

Leading by principles of righteousness and justice—particularly in the marketplace—means allowing the Golden Rule to govern decision-making and business deals, Harris said.

"Think of the contract negotiations you might go through someday and do it from the other side of the table," he said. "What's really best for the other guy? And can you live with that?"

All interpersonal dealings in the marketplace "should be marked by God's righteous love," he said. "And this can be demonstrated very simply by gratitude and generosity."

Righteousness is a gift God bestows on those who submit to Christ's lordship and allow their lives to be guided by the Holy Spirit, he explained.

"Our works on Earth develop our righteousness but do not provide our righteousness," he said.

Harris explored the relationship between "doing and becoming" in regards to righteousness and justice.

“The more we do good works, the more we develop a character of righteousness,” he said. “Righteousness is truly a gift of God that we are to work to integrate into our daily lives by walking closely with the Holy Spirit. ... Right actions develop fruit, which develop right character, and right character motivates us to perform right deeds.”

Leaders have a responsibility to empower others to pursue righteousness and justice, he asserted.

“We are to enact righteousness and justice. We are to enact righteousness so that those around us can flourish, and we are to enact justice to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves, so they, too, can experience abundant life,” he said.

“Building your leadership around righteousness and justice will provide a light to those who are in darkness, for those who need to be rescued and for those who need to be uplifted.”

Stories have power to foster empathy

In a world of “selfies” and a narcissistic preoccupation with self on social media, leaders have a responsibility to inculcate empathy both in themselves and in those who follow them, said Mary Nelson, director of the Ph.D. program in leadership studies at DBU’s Gary Cook School of Leadership.

✘ “Leaders need empathy,” Nelson said, noting how compassion fatigue and psychic numbing can contribute to a sense of hopelessness.

Jesus modeled “the power of the story,” and leaders have a responsibility to be open to learning from stories, she said.

“How can we lead diverse populations if we don’t take time to learn their stories?” she asked. “As leaders, we can’t afford to be numb.”

Studies demonstrate employees prosper when they work with empathetic leaders who are person-focused and sensitive to different cultures, she said.

“Reading can broaden our awareness of the world beyond our phones and beyond ourselves and deepen our empathy,” said Nelson, a professor of English.

Literature can “expand the scope of our empathy” by introducing readers to people, cultures and experiences beyond their own lives, she observed.

Fiction offers the opportunity to “delve into the unfamiliar,” and it “humanizes experiences” that may be personally unfamiliar to the reader, she noted.

“I really believe fiction helps you to read the world better,” she said. “It helps you to be more sensitive to the world around you.

“Let’s never forget that we are called to ‘weep with those who weep.’ We must seek ways to penetrate compassion fatigue. The hurting world needs love, and it needs Christ so much.

“So, I would encourage you to allow fiction to awaken the empathy within and see people and worlds you have yet to explore.”