

Right or Wrong: Leadership and ‘followship’

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I chair our church’s pastor-search committee, and members keep telling me, “Find a leader.” They seem to think our church has suffered because of poor leadership, but I’m wondering if we’re afflicted with poor “followship.” What kind of leader can help us be better followers?

Your question implies people coming to you think leadership and followship are exclusive. In a Baptist church, and almost any other organization, the vision must be embraced by both the leader and the followers.

I once heard of a pastor-search committee that held a town-hall meeting. A senior member of the congregation rose from her chair. “We do not want a dictator,” she said. “We just want someone to tell us what to do.” Most Baptists see the contradiction in her statement but also understand exactly what she expressed. We want a leader we can follow, but one who will give consideration to our visions.

Pick the right kind

Perhaps your church wants both leadership and followship, but you need to pick the right kind of leadership in order to cultivate appropriate followship. Although they don’t say it directly, people in the pew usually want a pastor who shares their vision. The task of the pulpit committee is to find a leader who can synthesize and then communicate a vision that can be shared by the congregation.

Michael Lindsey, president of Gordon College, published his summary of interviewing leaders over a 10-year period, *View from the Top: An Inside*

look at How People in Power See and Shape the World. Lindsey interviewed 550 leaders at the top level of American life—presidents, CEOs, university presidents, chiefs of staff, coaches and the list goes on. He found very few leaders begin their work building consensus in their organization.

The long-held assumption of consensus building results in maintaining a status quo rather than moving the organization forward, he demonstrates. Instead, great leaders use their time to gather input. Some leaders might visit every department and meet every employee, others might go undercover, and a few might walk from floor to floor and building to building. But all understand contact with the people who do the work of the company is vital. From that experience and contact, a vision grows. Great leaders then proceed to enroll the support of everyone in the organization.

Leaders who listen

Perhaps your congregation does not need a leader or to be better followers. Possibly you need to find a leader who listens to your church and proceeds to create a shared vision and a path to fulfill that vision the church can follow.

So many search committee conversations consist of promises that are easy to make but difficult to fulfill. For example, every church wants young families. But how do you get young families to start attending a church where young families are not attending? And are you willing to neglect those who currently are supporting your church to seek people who are not attending your church?

This is just one example of genuine conversations that are required to forge a leadership/fellowship relationship.

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If you have a comment about this column or wish to ask a question for a future column, contact Bill Tillman, consulting ethicist for “Right or Wrong?” at btillman150@gmail.com.