Differentiated Leadership, by Arthur Paul Boers

While it is important to consider healthy congregational responses to difficult behavior, it is vital to consider the responsibilities of church leaders. The truth is that many congregations either do not know how to respond to destructive behavior responsibly or are incapable of doing so. Whether we like it or not, the implication is clear: leaders are on the front line, and our responses are crucial.

The pastor plays a unique role in the congregational system. This role gives certain responsibilities. While pastors cannot choose whether to be involved, they can choose how to be involved. The issue, then, comes down to choices and decisions about how to respond appropriately to challenges.

This decision can feel onerous. Many prefer to put responsibility for difficult behavior elsewhere. But to do so is to shirk our responsibility as leaders. Oddly enough, this style can be the less stressful choice. It involves owning what is our responsibility and delegating responsibility.

Differentiation is a key notion. It is the ability to be a "self" or an "I" in the face of pressure by others or by systems to be part of, or blend into, the "we." To be differentiated is to know and act on one's own mind, especially when our position is different from the group's. It means to know one's opinion, stand, or stance without imposing expectations or demands on others. It is the ability to state clearly and calmly our position without suggesting (with "must," "should," or "ought" language) that others need to have the same position.

Here is a key to why responsible leadership is less onerous than other forms of leadership. Differentiated leaders realize that their primary and ultimate responsibility is taking charge of self and not changing, motivating, or shifting others. As the truism goes, "We cannot change others, only ourselves." This is far less debilitating and draining than focusing all one's energies on getting others to do things right; one focuses on oneself, rather than on everyone else in the system.

Additionally, when we understand other people's varying levels of differentiation, we are less apt to overreact anxiously when we see them "misbehave"; i.e., act undifferentiated. This insight helps us to deal more realistically with them, and it challenges us both to serve as models of differentiation and to coach church members to achieve differentiation.

Differentiation does not mean being autonomous, cut off, separate, or independent. The leader needs to be oneself and remain part of the system. This is not necessarily easy. The trick is to be connected with people but not to condition one's emotions on them. Cutting oneself off from others does not show a lack of emotion but too much emotion and an inability to cope with that intensity of emotion.

Edwin Friedman says another element of differentiation is the ability to take clearly articulated and nonreactive positions. He explains how this skill works in family therapy when the therapist helps people take "I" positions: "An 'I' position . . . defines self; it is saying, 'I like,' 'I don't like,' 'I believe,' 'I don't agree,' 'I am going to do this,' 'I am not going to do that,' etc. It is mutually exclusive of 'you,' 'us,' and 'we' positions such as, 'You always—' or 'We should—' which are cohortative, or coercive, blaming."[1]

A leader's declaring nonreactive "I-stands" can liberate healthy, self-differentiated people in the congregation. Defining ourselves is one of the main contributions we make to parishioners. The results may be surprising. When the leader tries to change his or her followers, then the followers are "in charge" and can sabotage the leader. The followers then are in control. But this outcome is reversed when a leader exercises leadership.

Dealing with Sabotage

Lest we become naively optimistic about the guaranteed or unqualified benefits of differentiation, Friedman notes another element of differentiation: being able to deal with sabotage. The better we are at acting in a well-differentiated fashion, the more likely we are to encounter resistance and even sabotage. Ironically, our best behavior may bring out the worst behavior in others.

While sabotage may feel off-putting and distancing, the behavior actually is intended to bring us back into a togetherness mode: the separation of differentiation is too uncomfortable for the system. Leaders must not be surprised, hurt, or offended by this reaction. Leaders are called to responsibility and growth, and this role can be lonely. Leadership includes the willingness to be misunderstood. Our differentiation is not assured until we can respond to sabotage in a healthy way without retribution, rigidity or dogmatism, cut-off, or withdrawal.

Be Not Afraid

One day, as I was praying the gospel lesson, I chose to dwell on the oft-repeated phrase, "Be not afraid." I was anxious about a pending pastoral visit that evening with parishioners whom I knew to be disgruntled and unhappy. Moreover, as I was praying, another parishioner phoned. She was scheduled to have a counseling session that day with her husband. Their marriage was going through a rough patch, and she needed courage. As I reflected on them, I pictured them and breathed, "Be not afraid." As I reflected on my upcoming visit, I prayed the same for myself. It was a helpful and calming exercise.

"Be not afraid," Parker Palmer notes, does not mean "that we should not have fears" but "that we do not need to be our fears, quite a different proposition." [2] I like that distinction between having fears and being fearful. Having fear means that we can act from inner resources rather than being driven by inner fear.

Our fears and anxieties often compel us in unhelpful directions. I see this tendency in the curious story of Jesus stilling the storm (Mark 4:35-41). Jesus, you may recall, was sleeping in the stern of the boat when a storm arose and almost swamped the craft. Not surprisingly, the disciples were terrified and thought they were about to perish. In great desperation they awoke Jesus. "Why are you afraid?" Jesus asked.

Metropolitan Anthony, Eastern Orthodox churchman and scholar, has an interesting take on this story. He believes that the disciples' desperate question to Jesus—"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" was not just a cry for help. They want him to share their suffering. They want him to be as anxious as they are. They think he will not help them unless he shares their anxiety. [3]

While Jesus does in fact help them, he shares neither their anxiety nor their panic. He remains serene and centered. He solves the problem by throwing his own serenity onto the storm: "Peace! Be still."

---

[1] Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 83.
[2] Parker J. Palmer, The Courage to Teach (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 57.
[3] Metropolitan Anthony, Courage to Pray, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1984), 30ff.