

Vestry members help share in the spiritual, financial and programmatic arenas of parish life. Before that can happen with integrity, however, such leadership needs to come from the inside first. Here businessman and author Bill George explores the spiritual dimensions of authenticity in leadership.

LOOKING INWARD BEFORE LEADING OTHERS

The Spirituality of Authentic Leadership

by Bill George

When I was just a teenager, I was strongly influenced by the passage from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says:

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do people light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it gives light to all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:14-16)

These words have been calling to me throughout my life, and they are words particularly fitting for vestry members as they seek to ground their own spiritual life in preparation for leading others.

On fire or asleep?

We are all pilgrims, together on a journey through life. As we go down our path, each of us is seeking to learn the deeper meanings of life. Often that path is like a labyrinth in which the path takes you close to the center, only to turn away and wander around the perimeter. Just as you are about to give up on ever reaching the center, the path turns toward it and suddenly you are there!

The labyrinth is exhilarating, but also highly instructive: the journey itself is the message. As writer-philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis once wrote, “There is no Ithaca. Only the voyage to Ithaca.”

On our journey we are searching for our unique way to make a difference in the world. For those of us in the church, that search becomes a spiritual journey, tapping into our deeper yearnings to “hear the call” for our lives and to heed that call.

Poet Pablo Neruda spoke to that call in one of his first poems,

“Something ignited in my soul, fever or unremembered wings,
And I went my own way, deciphering that burning fire.”

That fire to decipher the call burns in each of us. But if we go sleepwalking through life, the fire gradually dies out and is eventually extinguished. When we join with others in pursuing that call, we become fellow pilgrims. In that sense, we are called to help others and lead them on their journeys.

This is what authentic leaders do. They are true to themselves in pursuing the call as they hear it through their inner voice, yet bonded together with others on a similar path.

Discerning my calling

Returning to that passage from the Mount, I was strongly influenced by the words, “Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

I heard them saying to each of us, “We are born with gifts given us by our Creator. Develop those gifts and use them in such a way that they honor your Creator, and that other people will honor Him as well in seeing your deeds.”

What is our calling? What is our purpose in the short span of time that we dwell on this earth? How do we know or discern our calling? How do we know when we are following God's call or just pursuing our ego needs and our self-aggrandizement? Or are we trying to set ourselves above others with our success and our sense of self-worth?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus admonishes us,

“No one can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other;
Or else he will hold to the one and despise the other.
You cannot serve God and money.”

In recent years far too many of our leaders have ignored or abandoned their calling to pursue the God of money and/or other secular priorities. In so doing, they have also abandoned their fellow pilgrims. All of us are subject to such temptation, whether it be about money or other issues, both inside and outside of the church.

God's call or my ego?

The hardest part of all for me is discerning every day whether I am pursuing God's call or my own ego needs. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” How do we square this message with the admonition, “Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works?” Is it meek to do so? In this day and age, those that let their lights shine most brightly certainly don't seem meek to me!

The line between using your gifts to honor your Creator, and advancing your own ego is a very thin one. I have learned this repeatedly throughout my lifetime. Even now, I struggle with it: Do I want outstanding ratings from my students to know that my teaching is reaching and helping them, or because I want to be seen by my colleagues as an excellent teacher? These are the questions I wrestle with every day.

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Do you have similar questions that you wrestle with? About whether your deeds are seen as honoring your Creator or honoring you? St. Francis said it best in claiming that we are the channel of God's peace. If we can hear His call, and get our egos out of the way, we can embrace the opportunity to become a channel of His peace. As vestry leaders, your service will only be enhanced by such honest wrestling with inner issues.

Authentic leadership

We are all called to be leaders, each of us in our own way. We are the servants of the people we lead, and stewards of the assets of the organizations we are chosen to lead, most important of which are the human assets.

In becoming leaders, we are called to be the *authentic* person that God created — to be our own person, to use our unique gifts and to be true to our values. Authentic leaders lead with their hearts, with a sense of compassion and passion for those they serve. They establish deep relationships over many years that are characterized by connectedness.

Leadership is not about image, it's not about charisma, and it's not about style. It is about having a clear sense of purpose for your leadership, based on your calling as you discern it, and practicing your values every day, especially when no one else is looking. To stay true to those values, we must know the “true north” of our moral compass. It is all too easy to rationalize the small steps that give us immediate gratification, yet lead us away from our true north.

This is how so many corporate leaders got in trouble. They didn't start out to do bad things. But little by little, bit by bit, they made marginal decisions that benefited them personally in the short-run and won them praise from their peers and outside observers, yet took them farther and farther away from their true north. And no one had the courage to tell them they were on the wrong course.

Then one day they realized they were in deep trouble and couldn't hide it any longer. That's when the real trouble begins — the gross errors, the defensiveness, the cover-ups, and ultimately, the destruction of the very enterprise they are responsible for leading. Viewing this makes us sad about the inner destruction that is taking place. Sad because it did not have to happen, and sad because so many people get hurt.

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Staying centered

The secular world these days is filled with a myriad of temptations and distractions that are taking us away from our call. Not just money, but things — material things — most of which we do not need to have a fulfilling life. But they are tempting, none the less. Yet I cannot think of anyone who has worshiped the God of money that seems really fulfilled. If money is your God, there is never enough. Someone out there always has more, and envy can possess you. The CEO of Oracle said recently that his goal was to die the richest man on the face of the earth. For what purpose?

To avoid these temptations, which I feel every day, we need to develop practices and relationships to help us stay centered. In addition to regular prayer, I practice meditation twenty minutes, twice a day, and use exercise like jogging to clear my mind and my body of all those distractions.

But it is my relationships that help me the most in staying centered. In addition to my family, I have the benefit of a men's group where we talk about our lives, our struggles, our dreams, and we pray together.

And my wife, Penny, and I have been part of a marvelous couples' group over the years who come together monthly in a spirit of sharing our beliefs and our lives. Having these groups in our lives is one of our greatest blessings — a gift that helps us stay centered.

Making a difference

Envision yourself at the end of your days with your granddaughter on your knee. She looks up at you and says, Grandma, or Grandpa, what did you do to make a difference in the world in your life? How many of you are going to say you earned so much money that she never will have to work a day in your life? Or will you be able to say, I did my best to use the gifts I received from God to help others. In so doing, I let my light shine. Other people recognized the God in all of us that is calling us, guiding us, and bringing us together as spiritual pilgrims and leaders.

*The author of **Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value**, Episcopalian Bill George is the former chairman of Medtronic, a leading Minnesota-based medical technology company. He sees his current calling as developing the next generation of authentic leaders through mentoring, teaching and writing.*