

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

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VISION FOR THE JOURNEY NEW MINISTERS FOR RENEWED CONGREGATIONS

In 1996, the film *Jerry Maguire* was nominated for an Academy Award for best picture. The film starred Tom Cruise, a handsome, popular Hollywood star who in the title role played a sports agent in the midst of emotional breakdown. Jerry Maguire, locked in his apartment, turns on his laptop computer in an effort to seek relief and redemption. He set out to write a one-paragraph mission statement for his life, hoping that it will serve as a compass for the journey ahead. When he stops writing he has a twenty-five page statement, outlining the necessity of instituting more humane practices and values into the corporate culture. He feels relieved after sending a copy to all of his colleagues, but is soon fired for pushing against the corporate grain. He finds spiritual fulfillment in a simpler life marked by honesty, commitment, sacrifice, and service. When a Holly Wood superstar like Tom Cruise has a spiritual crisis on the big screen and touches millions of viewers, something significant is happening in our culture.

Clearly, large numbers of people are on a journey to discover spiritual fulfillment. The Gallup Poll organization continues to report that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in God. National news magazines regularly feature cover stories on prayer, angels, healing, the afterlife, and values. We have always known that America is a religious nation, marked by belief in God, church attendance, and appreciation for religious rituals such as weddings

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and so forth. But now it seems that Americans wish to become people with insight into the meaning of life and who commune with higher powers.

For people seeking to satisfy their spiritual search in organized religion, I think that a special kind of leadership is needed. Before focusing on the qualities that leaders ought to cultivate, we should consider the challenge of leadership in a broader framework. Despite widespread cynicism concerning leadership in our society, we still can be moved by the presence of authentic moral guidance. In our time, President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, Mother Teresa, and former President Jimmy Carter have challenged us to suspend our cynicism and to support those striving to promote our highest values.

Perhaps the culture is waiting for more leaders of this sort. The problem is that they are not easily made. In fact, we don't know precisely what happens when a person becomes a leader. In his classic study of leadership, James MacGregor Burns has observed that:

Leadership is a process of morality to the degree leaders engage with followers on the basis of shared motives and values and goals. Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers.

He also distinguishes two types of leadership. Transactional leadership establishes temporary contact with people for the purpose of exchanging valued things (jobs for votes, goods for money, or hospitality for a listening). Transformational leadership engages with others so that the leader and followers "raise one

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another to higher levels of motivation and morality.” “Transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both. Perhaps the best modern example is Gandhi....Transcending leadership is dynamic leadership in the sense that the leaders throw themselves into a relationship with followers who will feel ‘elevated’ by it and often become more active themselves, thereby creating new cadres of leaders.”⁵³

I would like to build on Burns’ model of transformational leadership with a metaphor. Authentic leaders are like diamonds who typically exist in the rough, their value and potential unrecognized by most people. Over time a process of refinement occurs. The value within is hammered out through times of testing and crisis. Years of prison refined Mandela; a struggle with cancer gave Bernardin the power to teach us how to die with dignity; a life devoted to serving the poor has transformed Mother Teresa into a saint who challenges the materialism of our time.

Searching for Diamonds

I envision a diamond with seven facets, each representing a critical feature of religious leadership. I believe that all religious leaders and clergy should become public theologians like Martin Luther King, Benjamin E. Mays, Andrew Young, and Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund. Public theologians are committed to presenting their understandings of God along with their ethical principles and values to the public for scrutiny, discussion, and possible acceptance. In contrast to sectarians theologians who understand that they are speaking for and to the community of believers, public theologians understand

⁵³ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 18,19,20,36.

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themselves as ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). They stand between worlds, representing the distinctive vision and virtues of Christianity to a secular culture. They stand in a particular faith tradition but seek to address people from all walks of life. And they do so with a deep respect for the belief systems that others may already hold. Consequently, public theologians move into the public arena with a profound sense of humility, reverence for the sacredness of people and traditions, and, in view of their manifold limitations, a sense of humor about their noble calling. This is part of what it means to be a fool for Christ. As fools, we know how and when to laugh at ourselves. How different religious conflicts would seem today if believers would pause to laugh at themselves, their conceits, their mistakes, and their aspirations, and that God has entrusted humans with such great treasure of grace and truth.

The public theologian should first serve as an *anointed spiritual guide*. Spiritual guides understand their role in helping to lead people to a deeper experience of God. The spiritual guide, like a priest, mediates an encounter with the holy, sometimes through words, rituals, gestures, and silence. The guide also understands when to get out of the way.

Second, public theologians should be *grassroots intellectuals* who initiate and encourage informed public discussion. Such efforts revive the role of preachers in the early slave community, who often were the community's most literate members and were relied on as interpreters of reality. Ministers served as public intellectuals and educators. Although members of contemporary communities discuss issues in barber shops and beauty parlors, at social events, and on the street, these discussions often occur outside a governing moral framework or without a sense of how to translate dialogue into public action. Grassroots intellectuals can bring this dimension to the conversation.

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Third, public theologians should be *civic enablers* who understand how to empower neighborhoods both through the political system and volunteerism. Civic enablers should ensure that community members take advantage of the benefits of citizenship through voting and by holding public officials accountable. As political power devolves to local communities, enablers should take responsibility for convening meetings with elected officials and insisting that these officials become educators, willing to give citizens the power to understand and affect discussions about public policy and spending. Enablers should also help people realize the power that can grow from organized activism.

Fourth, public theologians should be *stewards of community economic development*. They should recognize the potential economic power of billions of dollars in aggregate income that African Americans receive and organize ways to harness it for community development. As we discovered in the Hampton survey, 57 percent of clergy believe that churches should own for-profit businesses. Good stewards identify and seize opportunities to make financial resources work more effectively for the improvement of living conditions.

Fifth, leaders should be Afrocentric *cultural celebrants* who proudly affirm our African past and use it to enrich our personal and collective lives today. Celebrants should design rituals to teach values that animate traditional African societies. However, they must be critical celebrants who bring those values and practices into conformity with the core values of the African American Christian tradition. For instance, it would not be desirable to impose the patriarchal practices of some African societies on women and men in the American context, who are striving for respectful relationships. Celebrants should also seek to build bridges to non-Africans who wish to work together for a better

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society. As Dr. Manning Marable of Columbia University has noted, Afrocentric pluralism affirms particularity but also places its beliefs in relationship with the larger human family. By contrast, Afrocentric exclusivism seeks to separate humanity along racial and ethnic lines, thereby recapitulating the social evils which European racists had earlier accomplished.

Sixth, public theologians should be family facilitators. Recognizing the declining rates of marriage and family formation in the Black community, they should promote a culture of marriage and family. They should design programs to address the needs of single people, married couples, single parents, and others. Ultimately, they should seek to facilitate the growth of extended family networks.

Finally, public theologians should be *technologically literate visionaries*, aware of emerging technologies and trying to harness their potential to improve lives. Rev. Martha Erinkitola⁵⁴, an ITC student, established a cyberspace church featuring music, homilies, prayers, and sacred art for Internet surfers desiring spiritual refreshment. Recall from Jerry Maguire that the computer can become a tool for self-discovery, renewal, and empowerment—a very different picture of technology from what we saw of the computer “Hal” in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Renewing American Society

My thesis is that the renewal of American civil society depends on vigorous religious groups doing their part to heal, reconcile, nurture, guide, discipline, and inspire individuals to join in authentic community. Churches can accomplish this goal in ways

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that differ from any other sector of civil society, incorporating the logic, as argued by Boston University economist Glenn Loury, that sustainable, good communities are built one persons at a time, from the inside out.

My concern, however, is that African American churches are not as ready as they should be to meet the challenges ahead. Although all faith communities will have a role in the renewal of civil society, Black churches play a unique role in Black, underclass neighborhoods with few other community organizations. Since the symptoms of poverty are concentrated in these communities, the most promising solutions will emerge within their boundaries. However, churches and other change agents will need the assistance of outside partners and supports to alleviate poverty in the long term.

During the 1997 commencement exercises at ITC, Dr. Gardner Taylor revisited the familiar passage from Ezekiel 37 regarding the valley of dry bones. He asked continually, “Can these bones live?” His question is suggestive for the challenges facing urban Black churches. The renewal of inner-city Black churches depends on a reckoning with the significant demographic, political, and cultural changes that have occurred in Black communities since the Civil Rights Movement. This process will involve self-assessment and self criticism. Healing will come only after we admit our illness. The churches must ask the surrounding community for a report card on past stewardship efforts. Churches must ask residents how the church can be a better servant and partner in community development. Church leaders must accept the harsh criticism and challenging suggestions, and even the outright rejection that some community members may express. This self-assessment will constitute part of the long and painful process of healing and empowerment that churches must undergo as they retool and re-engineer for the next century.

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Churches and clergy must listen to indictments of their sincerity, relevance, and commitment, not in a defensive posture, but with humility and humor to admit willingly that they have been part of the problem for too long. Congregations are often not taken seriously as change agents in the community because they appear to be on the sidelines, avoiding the messiness of community politics and power dynamic. During the process of renewal, congregations must explore how they can serve as voices for social righteousness without entangling themselves excessively in partisan politics or, at the other extreme, maintaining their noninvolvement. Recall Dante's admonition that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of moral crisis, seek to maintain their neutrality.

The good news is that dry bones can live if they can stand tough medicine. Clergy should take hope from the numerous institutions and resources available to assist in their retooling and leadership development. These include educational programs offered by the Institute on Church Administration and Management at ITC, the Congress of National Black Churches, the Urban Ministries Institute of Chicago, the Summer Leadership Institute on Community Economic Development at Harvard Divinity School, and the Information and Services Clearinghouse of the Howard University School of Divinity.

I began my book *Another Day's Journey*⁵⁵ by describing my vision of the public theologian and pastor as one standing in a particular Christian tradition but speaking to all rational people. I admit my debt to professors and conversation partners at the University of Chicago during the 1970s and 1980s who were occupied with the question of the public role of religion, and who

⁵⁵ Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day's Journey, Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1997.

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accepted my argument that, historically, African American leaders like DuBois and King assume that personal renewal and social change were an inseparable enterprise. I believe that the renewal of religious congregations, particularly Black churches, depends on their ability to retrieve this tradition of public ministry.

In the years ahead, I intend to work on the following dimensions of the renewal in public theology and ministry. First, I would like American seminaries to build churches' capacity to engage in comprehensive community development. Professors of social ethics, church and society, practical theology, and field education may be natural resources for initiating this work. However, they must be in conversation and partnership with colleagues in biblical, historical, and systematic theological studies to ensure that the church's ministry evolves in dialectical relationship to Christian tradition and to contemporary realities.

Seminaries should contact community-development professionals in their area to explore possibilities for training clergy in assessing community needs and for mobilizing congregational resources on behalf of the poor. There are several national organizations that could serve as useful resources, including the National Congress of Community Economic Development in Washington, the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions in New York, and the Local Initiative Support Corporation, which has regional offices throughout the nation.

Second, I think that churches should immediately attend to their support and services for so-called at-risk adolescents. In view of the discussion regarding the "coming storm" of juvenile violent crime, churches need to determine what role they will play in the lives of the prodigal sons and daughters of the future. Churches must ask what would have happened to the prodigal son in Luke if there had been no father and no open door to which he could have

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returned. This is a chilling prospect to raise regarding the biblical text in which a supportive family network is in place. For in so many of our communities there is no daddy and no open door. Churches can supply surrogate parents and support systems to insure that youths who want to reform their lives—who want to go home—have someplace to go.

Most churches have not taken ministries for children and youth seriously. That practice must change. As churches retool youth ministries, they should draw on the expertise in the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA and YWCA. These agencies have much to teach if churches ask to learn. Drs. Edward and Anne Wimberly, who teach at ITC, have developed one of the most innovative and effective programs for training Christian educators in the educators' own development of ideas to help children and families.⁵⁶ Their program should be studied by interested church workers. The Hampton University Ministers Conference has added an annual Christian Educators Conference, which may be the most significant ecumenical gathering of African American Christian educators in the nation. Their program should be studied by interested church workers.

Third, churches need to improve and expand their use of the media, especially radio and television. Although print media is valuable, it appears that radio and television reach larger segments of the population. My hope is that churches of a variety of theological and political perspectives will enter the marketplace of ideas. It is not useful or accurate to allow the public to conclude that all Christians embrace the theology and political ideas of a few conservation leaders. There has always been an enormous variety

⁵⁶ The Youth Hope Builders Academy at the Interdenominational Theological Center

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of perspectives within the church, and this variety should be evident on television and radio.

Seminaries should consider presenting mini-courses through televised and broadcast media. This would add to the intellectual capital of congregations while modeling tolerance, open-mindedness, and diversity to a cynical and searching public. As the great theologian and African bishop Augustine said of theological debate and conflict, “In all things that are essential to the faith let there be unity, in all nonessential, liberty, but in all things, charity.”

The call to action has sounded. Government agencies are calling for partners in social service delivery; nonprofit agencies are calling for greater collaboration among community-based organizations; the neediest individuals and families are calling for training, assistance, and care. People of faith now have an opportunity to answer the call, to become agents of community building and development. I have tried to offer vision and practical resources to help the church achieve a more vigorous public witness. It is an exciting time to be alive and working to uplift humanity. It is time to remember the words of the rabbi: “The world is equally balanced between good and evil; your next act will tip the scale.”