

Empower

*A Guide for Supervisor-Mentors in
Theological Field Education*

Edited by John Senior and Matthew Floding



An Alban Institute Book

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Chapter Ten

Mentoring for Leading in Systems

Nathan E. Kirkpatrick

In the tenth chapter of St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus sends His twelve disciples out to engage in ministry on their own for the first time. He offers some instructions for how they are to travel, what they are to do, and then concludes with this: "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16 NRSV). It's a strange benediction for a first mission trip, and, yet, it is not a bad admonition for congregational leaders—be wise *and* be innocent.

As you mentor newer leaders in their work of navigating congregational and other institutional systems, part of what you are aiding them to do is to cultivate the capacity to be both. You are offering them a different vision of leadership than what they may have seen before—those dangerous experiences of ineffective leadership, leadership marked by the innocence of a copperhead or the cunning of a turtledove. Instead, what you are helping newer leaders learn is that it is possible and necessary to be both savvy *and* holy, strategic *and* ethical, political *and* pastoral. To lead effectively and faithfully in congregational and institutional systems requires the *and*. Through your mentoring relationship, you will model this before your mentees through your own ministry and you will help them come to embody this in their own.

Yet when we think about learning to lead congregational systems, how do we mentor toward the *and*? It may be difficult even to imagine the place to start. After all, we have an incredible body of knowledge and writing about the structures, dynamics, challenges, and opportunities in systems generally and in congregations specifically.

What are the necessary first learnings about leading in systems that support vibrant, vital future faithful ministry? I want to suggest three conversations to have with new leaders that can help them find their bearings and learn to inhabit the *and*.

First, newer leaders need mentors to help them explore what systems exist to do. Systems exist primarily to preserve what they care about most. As such, they are inherently conservative structures—not in the political sense but in the sense of safeguarding or sustaining something that is understood to be valuable, perhaps even precious. Denominations were created not just from disagreements or disputes but out of deeply held convictions that some theological truths are too important to lose, and without the structure of the denomination, they would be lost. Seminaries were born out of a conviction that an educated clergy in a particular geography or within a particular tradition mattered for the formation of generations to come of faithful people. Congregations were born as a way of carrying out the mission of God, however that was understood, within a particular community or within a particular family at a particular time. Something was too important to lose, and so systems were created to preserve it.

To preserve what they care about most, systems develop an internal culture with all of its trappings—symbols, stories, artifacts, language even—around the thing that is most valued. It is this culture that makes “us” who we are. In healthy systems, this culture serves not only to reinforce identity but to sustain vitality over time: “we are the church that hosts the city’s soup kitchen,” “we are the seminary that prepares students to embody a progressive gospel in the world,” “we are the denomination that offers an unashamed Christian witness in a changing world.” In dysfunctional systems, however, this culture often holds organizations captive with dramatic and ossifying effects: “we were the church that had eight hundred people coming to worship on Sunday mornings,” “we were the flagship seminary of our denomination,” “we were the embodiment of Christianity within American life and culture.” Even in dysfunctional systems, a system’s culture reinforces its identity—just not in ways that are conducive for a generative future.

These systemic cultures have another apparent and significant effect. They set expectations for leaders and members, defining “rewards” and “punishments” for compliance and deviation from organizational norms. In many cases, these expectations are unspoken but still palpable. Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist and philosopher, says that, over time, people learn to have a “feel for the game” that is necessary to navigate a system or culture. For newer leaders, that can sound a bit abstract, but it is important for them to understand that systems behave this way.

Perhaps an example will help to illustrate this. A few years ago, I worked with the clergy leaders of a sizable congregation in a major American city. In one of our conversations, the associate pastor told how, upon his hiring, he had been told by multiple people in the congregation that he should only wear a certain name brand of suit. “It’s what we do here,” he had been told. It may sound ridiculous, but in that congregation, what mattered most was image—both internally (how the congregation saw their clergy as profession-

al and sophisticated people) and externally (how the congregation wanted to be viewed by those outside its walls). Systems create cultures, which create expectations, all in service of the thing that they care about most.

Having a conversation with your mentees in which you help them name how the systems of which they are a part work toward self-preservation and describe the culture of these systems is a first and necessary step in helping them lead in an “and” way. It is helping them to get their bearings on the ground.

One thing that may surface in such a conversation: your mentees may have observed that what actually matters most to systems with which they are familiar may be different than what that system states publicly matters most. For example, some congregations say publicly that what matters most to them is to be welcoming and inclusive, but in practice, the system cares most about familial bonds or preserving its homogeneity. Giving voice to this disparity and others like it is important because it can cause a kind of cognitive dissonance in the system that is not only worth the leader’s noting but also worth the leader’s time in challenging and changing.

Second, newer leaders need their mentor’s help in understanding how people participate in systems. In order to lead in both wise *and* innocent ways, our mentees must be able to discern the differences between position and authority, role and influence. One mistake that newer leaders often make: they assume that within a system, position and role equate to authority, influence, and power. Sometimes that is true, but, often, it is not.

In the congregation I first served as a pastor, a woman—we’ll call her Frances—made most of the decisions. She was not named to any of the church’s committees and had not been for almost twenty years. If you asked her to serve on one, she would say no. Yet no decision was made in that congregation that, in one way or another, she did not approve. In that same congregation, one man—we’ll call him David—served on every committee and was the first to speak about every issue. Through a series of weaker pastoral leaders, he had appointed himself *de facto* leader of that congregation. He was fiery and forceful in personality. Yet, David often was on the losing side of discussions in committees and on the opposing side of new initiatives and proposals. David considered himself the leader of that congregation and had many titles that would confirm that self-understanding, but no one in the sanctuary was following where he was leading.

Franceses are part of every system, in every organization and institution. They often have no formal position or role, and yet, they wield considerable authority and influence over everything the organization achieves. Most every system has Davids, too—people who have formal titles and enjoy positions of “power,” yet they have little influence over what actually happens within the system.

Helping your mentees distinguish between role and authority is critical for their leadership. Here, you can help them cultivate a real curiosity about their system to prevent them from believing that the organizational chart accurately reflects how their system works. I would suggest that you have them engage in an exercise I learned in that first congregation when a congregational consultant came to help us with a visioning process. The consultant asked the members of the congregation to imagine that they had a difficult personal decision to make, and then, on index cards, write the names of the three people in the congregation they would want to talk to about that decision. They were to put their names on the top of the cards but were told that their answers were confidential, and they dropped them in the Sunday offering plate. As I reviewed those cards, what emerged was a fascinating map of authority and influence in the congregational system. Frances's name appeared on card after card; David's was on virtually none.

Having your mentees engage in a similar exercise may help them understand systems in a new way. As in my case, they may understand why the nod of the patriarch or matriarch moves mountains while the booming voice of the lay leader accomplishes little. They may be surprised at the hidden influencers and leaders within their systems and may find a new political savvy in engaging their congregation. (If surveying the whole congregation or institution would be impractical, your mentees could survey only the largest adult Sunday School classes or fellowship groups and create a similar map.)

In the third conversation, I would suggest that you invite your mentees to reflect on how they participate individually in the system they are leading. The aim of this conversation is a practiced self-awareness. Here, the questions you ask as a mentor are of paramount importance: How are you being both savvy *and* holy? Strategic *and* pastoral? When in ministry have you been too calculating? When have you been naive? When have you found yourself triangulated—cast into the role of victim or villain or vindicator? When have you avoided confrontation or conflict that needed to happen because you wanted to maintain the status quo? When have you done something because you wanted to be liked? What did you learn about yourself in these moments? These are the kinds of questions that this third conversation holds.

Each of these questions, in its own way, points to that larger and more important question about our lives as leaders—am I doing the internal work that is necessary for me to lead faithfully and well in this system? As leaders, it is when we say yes to this question that we lead with integrity in systems. It is then that we are leading from the place of “*and*.” By asking your mentees to reflect on these questions (and by reflecting on them for yourself in the presence of your mentees), you are inviting the kind of self-awareness that helps ministry leaders thrive.

Of course, it is also when we are doing this kind of internal soul work that we can help systems to change. Sometimes when the topic of systems is broached, it can sound as if we are all helpless victims of their immutable machinations, but systems can be transformed. When we discern that systemic change is necessary, it is our integrity as leaders that allows us to facilitate that change because integrity is the seedbed of trust. From that place of integrity, we can call upon our relationships with congregants and other leaders to move a congregation forward—without using those relationships or those people toward our own ends. When they see us leading from that place of integrity, our people can trust that we will say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done, that we will invest ourselves even in the most difficult face-to-face conversations for the sake of the congregation's future.

“Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves,” Jesus invites. Like all of the arts of ministry, perfecting the capacity to be both wise and innocent is a lifetime commitment. The conversations proposed here between mentors and mentees are merely the beginning of that work. Yet, I am persuaded that, accompanied by wise mentors asking good questions, our mentees can learn to lead faithfully and well in complex systems. I am also persuaded that they can do the sometimes-necessary hard work of transforming systems to be more faithful embodiments of the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the end, that embodied witness is why it matters that we learn to be both wise and innocent.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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