Life’s Lessons of a Lay Leader

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Almighty God, give us wisdom to perceive you, 
intellect to understand you, 
diligence to seek you, 
patience to wait for you, 
vision to uphold you, 
a heart to meditate upon you, 
and a life to proclaim you.

—a Prayer of Saint Benedict

For the past twenty-two years I have worked as a lay professional in the Episcopal Church and spent most of my free time serving on national and international committees and boards, or in mission. My ministry did not begin with a major moment of call. Instead, a series of life experiences and lessons compelled me to learn more and offer more for what I gradually recognized as the mission each of us accepts once we say “I believe.” Through my work as a counselor with runaway kids and with cancer patients, a corporate consultant, and a staff stewardship director, I have learned to serve, to be authentic and trustworthy, to identify talents, to develop effective strategies, and to take a long view of ministry and mission. I have been lucky to work with clergy who valued partnership. Their goal-setting and my ability to create simple sustainable plans for achieving mission established me as a professional equal in our partnership. In the past twenty-six years, mentors have appeared in unlikely and unexpected places. Yet they catapulted and transported me on my spiritual and professional journey. I have been blessed with a clear yet uncomplicated sense of how my lay leadership might uphold God’s mission through the Episcopal Church. Throughout these years, I have always attempted to stay true to my desire to seek, uphold, and proclaim God.

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My leadership in the Episcopal Church has primarily been in identifying and securing resources for ministry. As Director of Development and External Church Affairs at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University, I have worked very hard over a long period of time to develop trust and be an authentic partner. It is imperative that development officers and fund-raisers have clear vision and concrete plans for achieving goals. My ability to work on projects, communicate in other than church language, and recognize how to engage laity has allowed me to be an integral part of leadership teams. Only twenty years later, do I feel as if my career has been a ministry and not just creating and implementing a strategic plan.

Along the way, I have learned that effective life and leadership require a personal spiritual practice and discipline which help to identify and clarify purpose. What has helped me to ground my lay career has been a spiritual discipline adapted from a lifetime of mission, retreat, and worship. It is only my annual mission work which prevents my professional life from getting stuck in my intellect and lacking passion and enthusiasm.

Serving on the board of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes has taught me the true value of connectedness and the power of proclamation. It is here that I have learned most of what I know about leadership for mission. I am grateful for the community of lay and ordained who strive to grow together in leadership and mission. The Consortium will celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2010 and I have watched it evolve over twenty-one years. Together we convene conversations, offer continuing education, and look ahead for opportunities to serve God and the church. It is among the few places in the church where clergy and lay leadership seem to function in true partnership.

Dr. Bob Johansen, in his newly released book *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*, describes a new leadership that will be required for the coming decade. It is a leadership based on agility, connectedness, and the ability to seed, nurture, and grow shared assets. The Map of the Decade outlining the future for the Episcopal Church, commissioned by the Consortium with the Institute for the Future, indicates a rapidly shifting society and

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The map offers scenarios that all communities and churches will probably face in the coming decade. The identification of challenges in the environment, technology, urban ministry, health issues, and the economic gap between rich and poor gives helpful direction to areas that professionals with specific skills might address as planning and implementation advisors with expertise to help the church understand how its mission might have a more focused and accessible face. Continuing changes in the U.S. economy make it necessary for the church to respond to greater need with reduced resources.

Partnerships and leadership will require clarity of vision, simple sustainable steps to achieve objectives, and a clearly communicated mission. The ordained leadership of the Episcopal Church carries a tremendous responsibility. But they alone do not have all of the various talents required to operate a thriving parish. Successful clergy find talented lay staffs and volunteers to help them manage the sheer magnitude and scope of work.

Old models of serving the church must be reviewed in light of the demographic shift and changing lifestyle structures. We need to explore new models of leadership. The rapidly changing dynamics of the secular world require new skill sets that will manage situations rather than fix problems. The shifting economic patterns and the current generational shift must be analyzed and new economies of collaboration identified. Clergy and laity alike must be creative in leading parishes that can no longer support a full-time priest. We must be more realistic about the cost of deficit spending on congregations and physical plants.

The great opportunity for engaging a very talented pool of laity also represents a challenge for the Episcopal Church as it focuses on mission. Laypeople often bring to the organizational church perspectives with very different disciplines and structures. And yet, so often at the seminary I meet physicians or investment bankers who feel silenced or compelled to discard their previous practices because they may not be comfortable expressing themselves in correct ecclesial terms. It surprises me that there is often an abdication of opinion in the presence of an ordained expert.

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Further information about the Institute for the Future may be found at www.iftf.org.
I encourage laypeople to examine why they seek ordination when what they really desire is a lifelong pursuit of mission in the service of God. Too often I see very successful individuals search for a role and perhaps attend seminary or do mission work, only to be discouraged by the church’s focus on clergy. Unable to find a meaningful way to serve or be in partnership with the church, talented laypeople may go on to lead other successful nonprofit groups and organizations. There is a lack of clarity in the church about entry points, roles, and easily identifiable projects or mission for people with lay vocations. My greatest hope is that there might be a more inclusive way to identify and engage lay professionals as partners in the church’s mission.

The volatility and changing nature of our world require partnerships with other nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations. Parish nurse programs and groups like AmeriCares, Doctors without Borders, and Habitat for Humanity have been wildly successful because of the clarity of their mission and invitations to serve. The church too offers wonderful possibilities to a workforce searching for meaning. Laypersons in particular can take the lead in defining entry points that make the church more open as an institution. If we do, we will have access to expanded resources and talent which traditionally have had limited opportunities to flourish. We must “work smart” in developing opportunities that are more project-oriented or have well-defined timelines.

For the first time in a long time, lay professionals are moving from position to position within the church just as clergy do. The Church Pension Fund offers lay church professionals programs like CREDO as well as better pension plans. There is a directory of lay professionals, and the Church Deployment Office regularly posts positions for which lay leaders are sought. There are models of success, certainly. But if the church is going to attract and retain the very talent needed for future mission, patterns of training, recognition, and compensation of lay professionals must be evaluated. The church must explore new models and opportunities for partnership.

At this moment in the Episcopal Church’s history, laity have both the competence and opportunity to be real partners with those who are ordained. My experience in the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes has proven to me that there are effective patterns of lay and ordained partnerships in mission. A major generational shift is occurring and there are legions of retiring Episcopalians who desire to offer their vocational gifts for mission. For many reasons, the Episcopal
Church currently has a chance to think strategically about its witness and leadership in a global and diverse communion. We are using this opportunity to become increasingly creative in developing and utilizing leadership. As the Consortium approaches our twenty-fifth anniversary, I am more certain than ever that the vision of lay and ordained leadership for mission is essential as we adapt to lead in an uncertain world. Love, authenticity, connectedness, clarity, legacy, enthusiasm, strategic thinking, and striving for excellence will be essential for successful mission together.