

Church Administration, Leadership & Polity 3.521

Course Summary Spring 2006 Cooper-White

In our first session, you described previous leadership experiences and your hopes for the course, which included: desire to learn more about leadership, preparing for internship or first call, hopes to hone administrative skills, deepen understanding of polity, and expanding practical skills related to matters of budgeting, conducting meetings and communicating. The class expectations appeared congruent with overall course objectives.

In early class sessions and subsequent readings, we pondered the elusive nature of “leadership” and some common traits of effective public leaders. We looked at some biblical examples of leadership among the people of God and pondered how the likes of Moses, St. Paul and of course, Jesus exercised their leadership.

Introducing congregations as contexts for the exercise of leadership, we pondered: What are they? What is their mission? (*Kerygma, Koinonia and Diakonia*) What are they for? (worship, nurture, proclamation, service and other functions as described in Chapter 4 of the ELCA constitution). We also recognized that congregations are legal entities and employers with corporate responsibilities set forth in state and local laws.

Expanding our consideration of leadership, we examined how one’s style and approach is determined by social location and also may be shaped in some measure by one’s gender, birth order and a variety of other factors. Recognizing that “administration” is often disparaged in churchly contexts, we looked at it through redemptive theological lenses as an essential component of ministry and service. We contemplated concrete suggestions for the start-up phase of ministry, and heard helpful testimony from a recent seminary graduate in his first call who impressed upon us the importance of exercising administrative leadership, coping with conflict, and “coaching” lay leaders who may be resistant to good business practices in a church context.

In a series of case studies, we delved into the ELCA constitution, bylaws and other governing and administrative documents. Frequent visits to the ELCA website offered an introduction to the thousands of resources just a few keystrokes away. Becoming familiar with the ELCA congregational reports was achieved through a quick review.

Two key areas for leaders are planning and responding in the midst of conflict. A variety of approaches to planning were described and discussed. The most class time given to any subject was dedicated over several sessions to conflict dynamics and possible responses. Case studies and student paper response led us into a few of the countless scenarios for conflict that churches discover and live out.

Recognizing that effective leadership always involves teaming with many others, traits of effective teams were explored. Knowing that while time-consuming and often boring, meetings are keys to effective teamwork and coordinated leadership, there were readings offered in meeting conduct, effective committee leadership and related matters.

Turning to a host of practical issues that will be encountered in congregations and other organizations, a brief overview of fiscal management tools was offered. Likewise given attention were personnel matters, including keys to non-discriminatory hiring, supervision, and if necessary termination of ineffective or possibly unethical employees. Planning a stewardship emphasis was treated briefly.

Student presentations helped us grapple with multiple insights offered in books and other course readings. In creative ways, utilizing mini-lectures, guided discussion and *Powerpoint* presentations, our student leaders offered reading summaries and led discussions of key themes.

Expanding the circles with relation to ELCA polity, the role, purpose and basic organizational patterns of synods were discussed, noting their great variety of size, staffing and ethos. Guest presenter on synodical ministry was our bishop in residence, the Rev. Paul Blom. A brief overview of the churchwide organization's purpose and organizational pattern was provided. also offered. We were blessed by the presence and class participation of students from several denominations, who helped us compare respective polities and deepen ecumenical insights.

Those who serve in public ministry today find themselves regularly giving attention to matters that earlier generations of leaders seldom considered. Readings on legal issues in ministry were supplemented by in-class discussion of some key considerations, including confidentiality and privileged communication, insurance and risk management, employment-related matters, including criminal background checks and anti-abuse prevention, and church-state relations.

Recognizing that a public theologian must communicate effectively in various media, we turned attention to media relations, effective communication strategies, and ways to capture attention in an inviting and hospitable manner. Clear communication becomes particularly important in times of crisis.

Throughout the course, in class discussions and reflective papers, students were encouraged to think theologically, to ponder and probe for the deeper meanings inherent in everyday situations. It is hoped the course contributed in significant ways to the formation of public theologians and mission leaders!

And finally, two additional perspectives on the course and our journey together:

I fully realize that I have not succeeded in answering all of your questions. Indeed, I feel I have not answered any of them completely. The answers I have found only serve to raise a whole new set of questions, which only lead to more problems, some of which we weren't even aware were problems. To sum it all up: In some ways I feel we are as confused as ever, but I believe we are confused on a higher level, and about more important things. (Source unknown)

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12:6-8)

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