

## Musings on Spirituality and Leadership, No. 1

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Many in today's U.S. society claim to be spiritual but not religious. Though many of them do not adhere to any established religion and are "unchurched," they say that they take spirituality very seriously in the way they live. Regardless of how one defines spirituality, it is a reality that spirituality has become a serious matter of engagement by people in many disciplines, notably in the business sector and in leadership/management schools. A proliferation of book titles that discuss spirituality in the context of leadership is another indicator of this trend. Spirituality, in fact, is seen by experts in leadership studies as a necessary component of leadership and organizational life. Leadership in this perspective is defined by some as a process that invites, nurtures and leads one's spirit.<sup>1</sup>

The word *spirituality* indeed has become part of the common lexicon of workplaces, essentially doing away with the binary framework that has historically divided the world into the secular and the sacred. Spirituality is no longer confined to the private domain of the religious or the domain that has been traditionally considered sacred. Spirituality in the workplace is even being recognized as a movement, and some attribute this change to the increasing presence of women in the workplace. According to Corinne McLaughlin, a study reported in MIT's *Sloan Management Review* has concluded that "people are hungry for ways in which to practice their spirituality in the workplace."<sup>2</sup> For example, Reell Precision Manufacturing is one company that has taken the spiritual dimension of the organization seriously from the beginning. The first principle of its Direction Statement says, "We are committed to do what is right even when it does not seem to be profitable, expedient, or conventional,"<sup>3</sup> and it has practiced this principle in its day-to-day life as an organization and in its business practices. Given this context, it is only natural for a faith-based organization such as Presbyterian Women to think about the connection between spirituality and leadership. This is my first articulation on this topic for Presbyterian Women; more will follow.

Let me begin my reflection with the term *leadership*. *Leadership* is a loaded word. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition*, defines leader as "a person who has commanding authority or influence" or "a first or principal performer of a group" and leadership as "The office or position of a leader" or "capacity to lead." I am aware that some PW leaders do not appreciate the word *leader*. I tend to think that this discomfort expressed by some women in PW is natural and that it can be largely attributed to two things: 1. women's lived experience with and of leadership; and 2. Christian teachings about leadership. Let me explain what I mean by this.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from Russ Moxley, *Leadership and Spirit: Breathing New Vitality and Energy into Individuals and Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999) 123; cited in "The Trend Toward Integrations of Spirituality and Leadership," on the Seventh-Day Adventist Church's Trans-European Division website, [www.ted-adventist.org/features-and-analysis/the-trend-toward-integration-of-spirituality-and-leadership](http://www.ted-adventist.org/features-and-analysis/the-trend-toward-integration-of-spirituality-and-leadership), accessed July 6, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Corinne McLaughlin, "Spirituality and Ethics in Business," Center for Visionary Leadership, 2009, [www.visionarylead.org/articles/spbus.htm](http://www.visionarylead.org/articles/spbus.htm), 3, accessed July 5, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Benefiel, *Soul at Work* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2005), 21.

The conventional notion of leadership is based on a model of management that is linear and hierarchical. In this model, a few lead and most are led. What has been women's experience with this model? Not very good. First, women have historically been excluded from positions of leadership and socialized into the role of a follower. Exercising leadership is a rather new experience for a majority of women. Secondly, for many women, our experience of this type of leadership by a few in power "at the top" has not been positive. We, in fact, have witnessed too much abuse of power by those in leadership. Because of such experiences, many of us have become suspicious of power and the so-called leaders who are accorded power.

For women of faith in the Christian tradition, like Presbyterian women, we have another reason to be uncomfortable with the conventional model of leadership. Jesus of Nazareth, whom we follow as our Lord and Savior, is a leader who declared that he "came not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20: 28a). Furthermore, he claimed, "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16). His unconventional teaching and practice offended the elite religious leaders of his day because he essentially turned the conventional model and wisdom of leadership on its head. As believers in and practitioners of Jesus' model of leadership, it is, then, no wonder that we experience internal conflict with the terms and concepts of *leader* and *leadership* that are tied to the conventional model of leadership.

Women are entering workplaces in record numbers, and some have been very successful in climbing the ladder of success. Still, the percentage of women in powerful positions of leadership remains low. At the turn of the twenty-first century, some had reasoned that this underrepresentation of women in powerful positions had to do with the fact that women themselves do not want leadership and power badly enough. In her article that appeared in *Fortune's* October 2003 issue under the title of "Power: Do women really want it?", Patricia Seller asserted this very point. She wrote that "women are ambivalent about leadership and power and are willing to sacrifice these to invest in their families."<sup>4</sup> In response, Simmons School of Management, in collaboration with Hewlett Packard, conducted a survey of professional women about their views of power and leadership. The results revealed quite the contrary.

Today's professional women are indeed very interested in pursuing leadership and power, but "more than 70 percent of the women reported that it was important for them to make a difference, help others, contribute to their communities, and make the world a better place."<sup>5</sup> In other words, what motivated their pursuit of leadership was much broader than an ambition to achieve a certain rank, position or turf simply for the sake of making it "to the top." The survey found that these women leaders are "seeking to strengthen their organizations and make constructive contributions to their communities and society. They are also redefining traditional models of leadership and power, moving from individualistic and hierarchical models of power over others to more collaborative models of inclusion and expanding power through others."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Merrill-Sands, Jill Kickul, and Cynthia Igols, "Women Pursuing Leadership and Power: Challenging the Myth of the 'Opt Out Revolution'," *CGO Insights*, Briefing Note Number 20, Feb. 2005, 1

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

What these findings say to me is that women in the workplaces who are seeking leadership and power are not comfortable with the current leadership structure and the notion of leadership.

These findings lead me to concur with an assertion made by some leadership experts that inclusion of women in the workplace has given rise to this spirituality in the workplace movement.<sup>7</sup> The reality is that women and men in today's world are all seeking meaning, even in the workplace. "Leadership by the spirit" is being reckoned as a valid and important leadership approach that even benefits businesses. What such shift is calling for is a re-examination/redefinition of leadership, redistribution of power, restructuring of the way we organize ourselves, and reframing the leadership agenda.

The Center for Leadership and Spirituality in the College of Mount Saint Vincent is one school that is trying to guide this process of change toward integration of spirituality in leadership. It understands its mission as "tending the Spirit at the heart of leaders, communities and institutions." I share its stated core beliefs here because I believe that they are very instructive to us, as well, as we think about developing spirited/spiritual leadership in and for our beloved organization, Presbyterian Women:

- Leaders serve the Spirit of their organization and hold in trust its mission.
- Leaders build community and draw on its wisdom.
- The quality of life in organizations is enhanced when leaders pay attention to, and act out of, the spiritual foundations of their work.
- There is a profound connection between the personal journey of the leader toward transformation and the communal journey of the organization.
- Spiritual leaders are storytellers, who give voice to the deep story of a community.
- They discern how the Spirit is embodied in the life of a community and its individual members, and they build community, across roles and boundaries.
- They pay attention to "the grace of the moment," keeping the community focused on the Spirit-center from which its mission springs
- Spirited leadership is about more than developing skills and competences. Ultimately, it has to do with listening, letting go, and allowing oneself to be led.<sup>8</sup>

A prominent leadership scholar, Frances Hesselbein, says "leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do," and "how to be" leaders have to "pay attention to their inner growth, knowing that they must fully develop themselves as human beings if they are to develop as leaders."<sup>9</sup> My next reflection will discuss the inner journey of a leader.

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<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, 3.

<sup>8</sup> [www.mountsaintvincent.edu/campus\\_life/center\\_leadership](http://www.mountsaintvincent.edu/campus_life/center_leadership), accessed January 3, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> L. J. Rittenhouse, "Leadership and the Inner Journey, An Interview with Parker Palmer," *Leader to Leader*, No. 22, Fall 2001, 1.