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What Does it Mean to be a Leader?

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After World War II, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Sewickley, Pennsylvania lost her rector to the deanship of the cathedral in Hartford, Connecticut. The new rector arrived in the midst of great fanfare. I was, at that time, a postulant for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, and a communicant of St. Stephen's. I made an appointment to meet the new rector and discuss my future with him.

His name was Benedict Williams and he had come to us from Toledo, Ohio. The part of his past that people seemed to want to talk about most was his parentage. His father was Charles D. Williams, the Episcopal Bishop of Michigan, 1906-1923.

Mid-morning, I walked into the rector's office. We got through the initial greetings and sat down in some comfortable chairs to begin our visit. On his desk was a picture of a rather large man in a cassock, smoking a curved stem pipe. I asked who that man was. In the answer to my question, I found out a great deal about leadership.

Ben Williams said, "That is my father on one of the most significant days of his life and ministry!" Then, quite carefully and proudly, he told me the story of the photo.

Bishop Williams was a person who cared a lot about people — all sorts and conditions. He stood up for the working man — the person who worked hard for small wages while owners of industries were reaping huge profits from their factories. His willingness to confront wealth with human need was well known. The idea of organized labor was one which owners of factories did not like at all and one which Bishop Williams supported. A young minister of a German Evangelical Church in Detroit was a man named Reinhold Niebuhr. He kept a quasi-diary of the years he served in Detroit and published it later. It was titled *Leaves From the Notebook of A Tamed Cynic*. One of the notes recognized Bishop Williams as the only Protestant clergy person in the city of Detroit who understood the mission of the church to all the people of the city and was willing to take risks on behalf of those in need.

Industrial leaders in the city began to complain about "that Bishop." He needed to be silenced or fired or both. Bishop Williams was no dummy. He knew that people were talking about him in negative terms. So he decided to confront the talk.

The picture I saw on the new rector's desk was taken as the Bishop began a diocesan convention.

After prayers, he opened his remarks with something like this: “There are people in this diocese and in this city who would like to get rid of me.” As he was saying this, he packed his curved stem pipe with tobacco and lit it while standing on the steps of the chancel. After a few puffs on the pipe to make sure it was lit, he then said, “I’m going to take a walk around the city for about an hour. While I’m doing that, I would like you to discuss and decide whether I should stay as your bishop or resign. When I get back, you can let me know what you have decided.” An hour later, he returned from his walk. As he entered the church, people rose and gave him a standing ovation. He stayed.

What does it mean to be a leader?

The answer to the question varies with a person’s occupation and personal moral imperatives. Bishop Williams was obviously following his Lord’s words: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these.” Recognition of something David Halberstam has called “the nobility of ordinary people” is evident in this story.

We all have stories of our own personal heroes. They are not found only among the bishops of the church, but among clergy and lay folk, as well. I can think of a few of my own — Bishop Pardue of Pittsburgh, who was willing to argue with Billy Graham on the front page of the Pittsburgh papers as he led a campaign in Pittsburgh in the 1940s; Bishop Dun of Washington, who was known as “Black Angus” in some quarters because of his support for African Americans in the city of Washington DC; Verne Johnson of Minnesota, who founded the Johnson Institute for the Treatment of Alcoholism; David Works of New Hampshire, who founded the North Conway Institute on Alcoholism; and Joe Gregori, who did so much to assist Native Americans in Sioux City, Iowa, during his time as rector of St. Thomas, Sioux City.

We need to hear and record their stories as we have known them, identifying why we think they are leaders and helping to develop and find leaders in our age. Every one of us can name people who have helped us understand our roles as leaders and helped us develop characteristics of a leader — including good judgment, confidence about risk-taking, and caring for others.

Perhaps each one of us has become for others an example, like Bishop Williams is for me. If so — let us rejoice and be glad!



Walter Righter is approaching his 85th year. He continues to write and occasionally leads a book discussion group at the church he attends in Pittsburgh. Reading, crossword puzzles, phone calls from friends, occasional lunches with former high school classmates, and a weekly lunch with his brother, a practicing architect at 77, fill his days. He and his wife, Nancy, who works full-time as a clinical social worker, watch *Jeopardy* on weekday evenings and have a lively Shih Tzu puppy.