



A vision of our future

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I am not a fan of turning nouns into verbs. So, I have an internal resistance to using the word visioning, but I know it describes a distinct reality. Before beginning a test I'm sure the All Blacks spend some time visioning on how they will make their winning tries. I'm sure Roger Federer visions how his serve will ace his opponent and Lydia Ko sees in her mind's eye a vision of where her chip shot will land on the green. I know I spend time visioning how I want Sunday's service to go.

I know visioning doesn't guarantee the intended result. It has been known to happen that the All Blacks lose, Federer double faults, Ko ends up in the bunker, and the Sunday service doesn't faintly resemble the plan? But without visioning those outcomes would be the rule not the exception.

I am reminded of the importance of visioning every time I cross the Harbour Bridge on my Vespa. It is tempting to take in the spectacular views afforded by the skyline and the harbour, but that is an invitation to disaster. The key to getting to where you want to go safely on a two wheel vehicle is to remember that where you're looking is where you will go. Visioning gets us to our goal. It keeps us from being distracted.

Now distraction has certain uses. As a puppy, Waldo loves to chew. He has plenty of chew toys, but he prefers a stick he found outside and Rachel's slippers. Fortunately, he is easily distracted from enjoying his forbidden fruit by almost anything that squeaks. It turns out we are not so different from puppies. We are quite good at distracting ourselves from staying focused on future outcomes, especially if we find getting there difficult or seemingly unachievable. Perhaps, it is fear of the change required to accomplish it that makes distraction enticing.

Churches are particularly good at distracting themselves. The equivalent of a squeaky toy for them is *adiaphora*. I love just saying the word...*a-di-aph-or-a*. It is a Greek word that means "all things UNnecessary for salvation." My favourite example of *adiaphora* is that prior to the American Civil War, when debate was raging about slavery in the rest of society, Episcopalians were fighting with each other over whether or not it was right to decorate the altar with candles and flowers. Debating this practice was a convenient squeaky toy to distract them from taking a stand on the slavery issue or to do anything about an evil institution that to this day has incredibly destructive consequences in human terms.

Churches today still have plenty of other squeaky toys. Worrying about the budget and seeking growth are two of many. Focusing on finances is particularly good *adiaphora*, because it sounds so reasonable. Of course we have to be responsible stewards of our resources, but it becomes *adiaphora* when we forget why we have accumulated the resources.

Having resources isn't the church's mission, but fear can stop us from acting in faith and generosity to use them to accomplish our mission. When we are more focused inward on our needs, we are succumbing to distraction.

Seeking growth is another major distraction. There is a whole body of literature devoted to church growth. Being a self-proclaimed "expert" on church growth is a cottage industry reaping in millions. In a time when religious institutions are in decline, church boards are willing to place bets, even though the odds are low, on these charlatans in hopes of reversing their fortunes.

There are a number of problems with focusing on growth, besides it not working. Growth is *adiaphora*. It is inward looking. We need more pledges to meet the budget. That means we have to grow. The congregation is getting older, so we need more volunteers to sit on committees, help on Sunday morning, teach our children, take care of the building, run the canvass, organise fundraisers, and on and on. That means we have to grow. But how many of you would join an organisation of any kind just so you can give them money and do their chores, no matter how essential they are to its running smoothly? The problem with growth is, it isn't the church's mission. The church's mission is out there, not in here. Always has been, always will be. Even if we were to call ourselves a meeting house it would still be true.

The reason is while we often connote the word church with a building or an institution, it began as neither. It began as people who cared for others whether or not they were members of their community. The Greek New Testament calls these communities *ekklesia*—what we would later translate as "church". They were people prepared to share all that they had to make the world a better place than they found it. They lived lives in opposition to the *status quo*. Their mission was purely and simply transformation. Transformation of who they were and the world around them.

Their vision was to turn the world's accepted order upside down where the last would be first. Where love replaced power. This was an incredibly radical mission—it still is. Their numbers grew as the poor, the widow, the slave, the prisoner, the ill, the peacemakers were drawn to a community committed to creating this kind of world. That made them a threat to those still benefitting from the old order. The Emperor Constantine co-opted them with *adiaphora*. He not only made them legal he made them the state religion. Soon they were concerned more with establishing hierarchies, accumulating power, building religious versions of palaces, codifying beliefs into creeds that maintained power, and working hand in glove with the oppressor than with those who were last. But for a brief few centuries, a little like Camelot, the church, the *ekklesia* understood its mission was to transform.

But what transformation was being sought? It is based on a story in the Gospel of John (13:1-17) when the night before he was crucified, following the last supper, Jesus stripped and proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples. They were horrified by their master's action because only a servant washed the feet of others. When Jesus was finished, he put his clothes back on and had this to say to those who followed him: "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

While the story is not historical and nothing Jesus said in John's Gospel is authentic to him, it records the early church's experience of the kind of leader Jesus was—a servant leader. However, it is important to note that Jesus while he did not feel he was better than his disciples, he was not serving his disciples, he was serving the values they held. He wasn't telling his disciples to enslave themselves to others' happiness or desires, but to serve the community's mission. If you are going to turn the world topsy-turvy, you need to transform yourself into a leader who is a servant first and always.

In 1970, Robert K Greenleaf, expanded on this idea of leadership in an essay that became a classic, *The Servant as Leader*. What I find most intriguing in this essay that has influenced much of my ministry, is that Greenleaf was not a theologian or even remotely associated with religious institutions. He worked initially digging post holes as a common labourer for AT&T, at the time, one of the largest corporations in the world. It was not long before he was tapped for formal management training. He would hold numerous other positions before he retired after 35 years. He spent his retirement as a consultant to large institutions helping them to become more effective in achieving their mission from what he learned in his corporate work. He later founded an institute to further the idea of servant leadership.

I don't know how much Jesus' example influenced his thinking, he doesn't say. What he does say is that a character in Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* sparked his intuition. It is the story of a band of men on a mythical journey. The central figure of the story is Leo who accompanies the party as the servant. Leo does the menial chores, waits on the other men, carries the water...he also sustains them with his spirit and his song. Leo, the servant is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well on the journey until Leo disappears. Then, very quickly, the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They could not make it without the servant Leo.

One of the party after many years of wandering finds Leo and is taken into the Religious Order which had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known as servant, was in fact the head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.

From his experiences AT&T and reflection on Leo, Greenleaf became committed to stimulating thought and action for building a better, more caring society.

He concluded that true leadership is serving others. And success in leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. They place the highest premium on serving others rather than being commanding, controlling, self-serving individuals.

The characteristics of servant leaders are these:

1. Listening
2. Empathy
3. Healing
4. Awareness
5. Persuasion
6. Conceptualisation
7. Foresight
8. Stewardship

9. Commitment to the growth of the people

10. And Building community

Begin with listening because this is the initial action that demonstrates you put the values of others first. Empathy is stronger than sympathy, as you put yourself in the sandals of others. Heal and you shall be aware. Persuade: You need to work together. Conceptualise how you can help. Then you can foresee utilising your stewardship and succeed in commitment to the growth of people and building community. To be successful leaders you must be able to follow.

So back to the vision I hold in my mind's eye. My vision I hope to see is a congregation that has chosen to become servant leaders inside and outside these walls prepared to be servant followers of one another. Success isn't assured. It isn't easy. Change is required. There are lots of obstacles. There are plenty of distractions to side-track us along the way. But if we can envision it together and support each other along the way we might actually do our bit to turn the world topsy-turvy—a world where our Seven Principles are the rule and not the exception.

