

Theological Vision Shapes Organizational Vision
Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary
Commencement Address
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Thirty-eight years ago, I spoke at my installation as the second president, and first full-time president, of the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. I was privileged during my tenure as president to officiate at the first APNTS Commencement service with three graduates in the inaugural class of 1986!

What a privilege to return to APNTS and congratulate the class of 2023. I am honored and take this opportunity to share with you **my passion for servant leadership in faith communities.**

Most of us in leadership positions in faith communities want and need to be known as “visionary leaders.” Governing boards for organizations often ask, “What is your vision for this organization” when interviewing candidates for leadership positions.

For faith-filled leaders, however, a deeper question persists. What does “visionary leadership” mean for servant leaders in local churches and in district or regional ministry organizations? I seek to explore with you today this question. The theme of my address is

THEOLOGICAL VISION SHAPES ORGANIZATIONAL VISION

Vision refers to seeing things at a *great distance* and with *great depth*. A vision is a consuming, passionate, and compelling *inner* picture. It is seeing what others may not see. Having a clear *organizational* vision as a leader is essential, but it is *not* enough. An important function of leading in a faith community is communicating a *theological* vision of the organization’s preferred future.

We live and lead within a *community of faith*. We *first* envision or “see” the people we lead in the home, church, or school as God’s own creation, worthy of dignity, respect, and with ministry gifts, *before* we outline what action is desired of them for the organization. “Open the eyes of my heart, Lord...” is the formative prayer of the spiritual leader.

We are motivated by a *theological* vision that our communities of faith are the *graced, blessed, called, and gifted* people of God! It is this vision that leaders seek to transfer to others for whom they are responsible.

We *envision* ministry within the fellowship of faith not just *to* the people, and *for* the people, but ministry *with* the people and ministry *by* the people!

A *theological* vision is an inspired and inspiring inner picture of our *identity* and *calling* within the Christian fellowship and faith community. Servant leaders increasingly and consistently model and affirm our identity within the faith communities regarding

Who we are as the people of God,
What we are called to do in the mission of God, and
How we are to live together as the family of God.

Recall the biblical imagery that defines our relationship with other Christians. We are:

“Brothers and sisters in Christ” (*Col 1:2*),
“A fellowship of God’s people” (*Acts 2:42*),
“A community of faith” (*Gal 6:10*),
“A kingdom of priests” (*1 Pet 2:9*), and
A sacramental community in and through which the grace of God flows (*Eph 4:1-7*).

Effective Christlike leadership is grounded in these *biblical* perspectives of the Christian community, not just in organizational skills. Of course, skills are needed. **However, sharp skills without Christian motives often lead to manipulation.** The primary orientation and motivation of our actions as servant leaders must be deeply theological.

In my consulting work with governing boards, I continue to observe two dynamics at work in many board members. On the one hand, I am impressed with the commitment of board members, their professional abilities, and their desire to contribute to the organization. Interestingly, I also see another pattern. These passionate board members, especially lay members who want to contribute their professional perspective to many of the issues facing the boards on which they serve, are amazingly frustrated.

Frequently I hear from them that decisions had already been made by a few board leaders who only wanted the full board to "rubber-stamp" these "decisions" that had previously been made. These Holy Spirit-gifted board members willingly sacrifice time and sometimes money to contribute to the board, organization, or church. Instead, they often feel undervalued and underutilized.

The Jewish philosopher/theologian Martin Buber wrote the book, *I and Thou*,¹ a brilliant but difficult book to read. He described the most healthy and mature relationship possible between two human beings as an I-Thou relationship. In such a relationship, one recognizes that both of us are made in the image of God. This makes the other person a "Thou" to me. Because of that reality, every person with whom we live and work is God's own creation to be *served* with **respect, dignity, and grace.**

The opposite, according to Buber, is to relate to others within our sphere of influence in an "I-It" relationship, as individuals to be dehumanized or "objectified" by us for *our* benefit and "things" to be used for *our* purposes.²

Jesus taught, *"Whoever wants to become great among you must first be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve..."* Mark 10:43-45a. **Jesus made leading in the fellowship dependent upon *service to others.***

With deep conviction, we "see" the people of God as *called* and *Spirit-empowered* to incarnate ***the healing, guiding, sustaining, and reconciling work of Jesus*** in the lives of those with whom we work and live.

We envision that *all* Christians are called to this ministry of serving others in Jesus' name! As those specifically called and gifted as pastors, teachers, evangelists, musicians, missionaries, or administrators, we are also called and privileged to *use our gifts and graces in developing the equally specific gifts of the people of God whom we lead and serve.* We nurture, mentor, model,

¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, (1970). p 48.

² Buber. *I and Thou*, 53-85.

and reflect this *theological vision* through clear *communication* with our people, *integrity* in our relationships, the way we *make and implement decisions*, and the *credibility* we establish through serving them and working with them.

Servant leadership is the transference of a theological vision of servant leading!

One particular insight has transformed and profoundly shaped my vision regarding leading in faith communities. **God is grieved** when Christians relate to each other in ways that are no different from those of non-Christians. He grieves **when** we fail to treat those we lead as the people of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as the fellowship of the Spirit, and as members together of the family of God (*Eph 4:25-5:2*, especially 4:30b).

More specifically, **the Spirit of God is deeply concerned with the Speech of His People.** The Apostle Paul, in *Ephesians 4*, shares fundamental Christian relationship imperatives. We are to be *honest* with the believers, *immediate* in dealing with conflict among us, *upbuilding* with our words, and *forgiving*, even when others do not forgive us. We are to express gentleness, humility, patience, and supportiveness through words and deeds that consistently communicate *I love you; I accept you; I respect you; I need you; I trust you; I serve you; I forgive you; and I accept your forgiveness.*

When we do *not* live together by these guidelines as a Christian community, God is *grieved* (*Eph 4:30b*). Offending a sister or brother by a false word or act especially grieves God. We must guard the words we speak by continually asking, does what I say *build up* or *tear down* the other person? Are persons *encouraged* or *discouraged* when they leave my presence?

According to the Apostle Paul, *our gentleness should be known to all* (*Phil 4:5*). Dialogue is for grace-giving and grace-receiving! Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (*Eph 4:29*). Guard against sarcasm, judging, cynicism, condescension, and gossip. God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative, with intention and grace, in forgiving those who hurt us.

I well remember a faculty member, after signing a contract to teach for the following year, informed me rather rudely that he was resigning and going to another university to teach. I could have insisted on his fulfilling the contract but realized that I should agree to the breach of contract. Within several weeks of his departure from the university, I received what I felt was a “blistering” letter from him, outlining complaints and problems he had with the university and with me. I purposely delayed responding to him for several days. Instead of trying to answer his points one by one, I wrote to him a letter of apology for apparently failing him, while he was on our faculty. I asked him for his forgiveness; I did not receive a response from him.

Life together in Christian community is not an alternative for the spiritual leader; it is an *imperative*, even in conflictual situations. Leading with theological vision teaches us to view *all* relationships as important and equips us to care enough *to confront* our sister or brother in Christ, when necessary. We care too much about the relationship to *ignore* destructive behavior. We speak the truth in love, and we also care enough *to allow our brother or sister in Christ to speak truthfully to us*.

Relationships within a faith community are intensely theological. Anything that tends to destroy fellowship *grieves the Spirit* who seeks to create fellowship. During conflicting expectations and seemingly irreconcilable differences for the Christian leader, *the challenge is to lead in these often-conflicting situations with “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16b)*. Bring out the best in those around you, not the worst. Encourage them. Bless them. Honor them. Inspire them! Do not treat them as objects. Do not belittle or ignore them.

Remember that, as gifted as you are, God has gifted others with equally important gifts – and with fresh eyes and fresh thoughts - to assist you and the local church or ministry organization you lead or represent, in accomplishing its mission.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book, *Life Together*, lists seven expressions of ministry by which the Christian community must be judged and characterized. The first three are:

The Ministry of Holding One’s Tongue.

The Ministry of Meekness (or humility).

The Ministry of Listening. The first service one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to others.

For Bonhoeffer, these expressions of Christian ministry are the context within which our primary ministry of leading, teaching or preaching must function.

My challenge to each of you is to *connect intentionally the faith in Christ you profess and proclaim to the way you live and lead.* The Spirit of God is pleased when we *intentionally* relate to each other as redeemed children of God.

So, when you are asked by a governing board, “What is your vision for this local church or ministry organization?”, passionately share *your* vision of leading a “*community*” of faith.

Before focusing on the needed projects, stated problems, or changes in the organizational charts, articulate a theological vision of seeing the people you are asked to lead as God sees them. Commit to guide those whom you lead, embracing *their* identity as the graced, blessed, called, and gifted children of God with a ministry to each other and a mission in the world!

You and I are *shaped* in this process and so are the communities of faith we lead. This theological vision of *servant leading* empowers us, strengthens us, changes us, and guides us when we lead decisively *and* faithfully in our *unique* leadership assignments!

May Jesus be seen in us and the faith communities we lead as we passionately model, mentor and transfer *this* vision of ministry! Amen.

lfairbanks@boardserve.org

www.boardserve.org

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