

## Back to the Future: Visionary, Entrepreneurial, Missional Anglican Leadership for Today's Church

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### *The Open Secret*

*It is a Tuesday afternoon. My iPhone rings. It's a priest on the phone from Virginia. Someone I've never met. Priest on the phone: "Are you Karen Ward?" Me: "That's me." Priest on the phone: "I read about your emerging church in a book. I'm interested to reach young adults. So what do you guys do?" Me: "Come again?" Priest on the phone: "What kind of things do you do to attract young adults?" Me: "We don't." Priest on the phone: "But your church is full of young adults. What kind of music do you use? Is it contemporary?" Me: "God no." Priest on the phone: "So you must be doing something." Me: "What we are doing is trying to participate with God in God's redemption of the world. We celebrate the weekly Eucharist. We confess our sin and receive absolution. We baptize new disciples. We pray the Daily Office. We follow the liturgical year. We practice hospitality. We soothe the suffering. We tend the sick. We shield the joyous. All for God's sake!" Priest on the phone: "That seems like basic Anglican stuff." Me: "It is." Priest on the phone: "So how is this different from any other Episcopal church?" Me: "It's not." Priest on the phone: "There must be something different, as your demographics are." Me (thinking): "If there is anything, it's that we radically hang our lives on this stuff at the center our common life and this matters to the young adults you speak of."*

My name is Karen Ward and I'm the Abbess and Vicar at Church of the Apostles, Seattle, a six-year-old mission of the Diocese of Olympia, Washington. Because around 70 percent of our church membership are people in their twenties, we are often called an "emerging church" or "young adult church." When we describe ourselves we say we are "an intentional, sacramental community in the way of Jesus

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Christ.” There is no mention of young adults, and nowhere on our website or in any of our literature do the words “young adult” appear.

The Episcopal Church is at a missional crossroads, which Brian McLaren calls “the Episcopal moment.”<sup>1</sup> If we can embrace missional change and renew our identity, purpose, and participation in God’s mission, many more young adults will join with us, and perhaps in droves.

### *Into the Wild*

Political economist Francis Fukuyama describes what has taken place in our culture as the “Great Disruption.” Beginning in the 1960s we have undergone a huge cultural shift “from one world to another.”<sup>2</sup> Management guru Peter Drucker says it this way: “Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation. . . . Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself—its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world. . . . We are currently living through just such a transformation.”<sup>3</sup>

Hundreds of books have been written to describe the characteristics of the “postmodern turn” (the massive shift that has happened in how people view and navigate the world). We have moved beyond the Enlightenment era and its credo of “science, progress, truth, and reason,” and into a new world in which life is not better, truth is relative, diversity is normal, objectivity is mythical, science can’t save us, power is distributed, hierarchy is flattened, knowledge is networked, life is chaotic, reality bites, mystery happens, and reason is highly overrated.

One of my favorite movies is called *Into the Wild*. In many ways it explores the circuitous journey of spiritual seekers in the postmodern world. The movie tells the true story of the adventures of Christopher McCandless, a twenty-four-year-old man who leaves behind his troubled family, his identity. He changes his name, gives away all his worldly goods, and sets off to find himself on a long solo journey to

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<sup>1</sup> From the title of Brian D. McLaren’s keynote presentation in January 2009 to the annual convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999). <http://www.fsmitha.com/review/r-fuku.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1.

the wilds of Alaska. To make a long story short, in his solo journey, he discovers that life is better lived in community, and that the identity and heritage you try to downplay is a foundation for your belonging.

So “into the wild” of our emerging culture, the provisions we need for finding our way forward in mission have always been with us, shaping our identity and heritage: community in the Holy Trinity, reflection on Scripture, praying the Daily Office, and celebrating weekly Eucharist, all as formation for engaging God’s mission in and for the life of the world. What is “new” is not resources, but how we behold them with new vision, apply them with new depth, use them with new creativity, and engage them with new courage for mission in the new world.

What this amounts to is being “freshly converted” to our own selves, so that as leaders we can live more fully into who we are and who we shall be, and in greater congruence with our spiritual heritage and giftings. God’s future is calling us to become more deeply committed to the Anglican way of life *and* more deeply committed to bringing our Anglican giftings to bear in engaging God’s mission within emerging culture and among emerging generations.

### *Will the Real Leader of this Congregation Please Stand Up?*

*It is a typical Saturday afternoon around 4:45 p.m. People are beginning to arrive at the Fremont Abbey, an old, brick church building in the urban Seattle neighborhood of Fremont that serves as the missional hub of Church of the Apostles. A bunch of young adults (mostly in their early to mid-twenties) are hanging out in the narthex, sipping tea and chatting. Others are tuning instruments. Some are sitting quietly, praying using beads. Some are texting on their iPhones. Some are greeting visitors. There is much energy in the room and it is a tad chaotic. Then a priest from an established Episcopal parish walks in with a group from his suburban congregation. They walk among a loose cluster of young people lounging on couches or against the surrounding walls. They look around and ask a young woman standing nearby, “What do we need to have for the liturgy?” She looks puzzled. The priest goes on, “Are there Prayer Books?” Young woman: “No. Just common prayer.” “Is there a bulletin?” “No. You just follow along. You will be fine, and welcome to Church of the Apostles!” The priest does not seem reassured by her responses. Then another young woman carrying communion bread, freshly baked from the church*

oven, whisks by him. A young man toting a large plywood icon almost hits him. He turns to inquire of another young man, "Who is in charge here?" Young man: "That would be the Holy Spirit." He clarifies: "I mean, where is your priest?" Young man: "Do you mean our Abbess?" He shouts around, "Has anyone seen Karen?" No one replies. Then the young man asks, "Why are you looking for Karen?" Priest: "To find out more about your church." Young man: "I can tell you about the church. Let's go over here and talk. Can I get you some tea?" Then after Liturgy, the visiting priest does catch me. He asks a one-line question: "How do you get so many young adults to go your church?" I give my one-line answer: "It is not my church."

Leadership is essential for seizing missional opportunity, but it is a new kind of leadership. My friend and author Pete Rollins makes the point that often a leader is the one who refuses leadership. But what does this mean? It is something like, "If you see the Abbess on the road, kill her" (or at least don't try to find her!).

I choose to make the same point using a more generative term than refusal. In our context, a leader is a "curator" of "open space" where the leadership of baptismal priesthood can be *developed*, *blessed*, and *released*. A curator is one who helps create and maintain an open environment where a community of baptismal priests can participate in God's new creation. Curating is more collaboration with a collective than commanding a brigade. Authority comes not from your "position," but from your *contribution* to your community's well-being, your *connection* to the artisan/priests you apprentice, and your inner *cohesion* and integrity, so what you say and what you do in your own life and among those you lead, coheres.

### *In Search of Visionary, Entrepreneurial, Missionary Abbots/Abbesses*

When it comes to describing the kind of parish leaders needed in our churches today the term "*visionary, entrepreneurial, missionary abbots/abbesses*" comes to my mind.

*Visionary* leaders have the ability to imagine God's future and to cast the vision of how God's future and the giftings of a particular community can meet. Or in the words of the missiologist Gerard Kelly:

Leadership that doesn't inspire the imaginations of those who choose to follow is little more than cleverly disguised bureaucracy. . . . If human beings did not need help in understanding

their times and inspiration to overcome fear and inertia, they would not need leaders. It is crucial that leaders see this and take seriously their responsibility to inspire—to switch on the imaginative functions of those they lead. This is just the opposite of closing down creativity because it is too much of a threat. The capacity to inspire courage, to give vision against the odds, to create dreams out of the raw materials of fear and uncertainty is more needed than ever in a context of fluidity and change.<sup>4</sup>

*Entrepreneurial* leaders “see lemons and make lemonade.” This also involves vision—seeing the (extra)ordinary possibilities for ministry all around you. There is more than a bit of “MacGuyverism” in this, as entrepreneurial leadership makes the most of what is available, in any circumstance, to creatively engage God’s mission.

*Missional* leaders have a passion for mission that belongs to God. This is a key point: *we* do not have a mission. *God* has a mission. We have a calling to participate in God’s mission. Also, God’s mission is not something we “do” to others, but it is something that God does to us and within our world. Missional leadership is opening space in our lives for our ongoing conversion by the Holy Spirit to live more fully into the way of Jesus, so that we may be passionate in curating space for others to do the same.

An *abbot/abbess* is the spiritual director to an order. I have come to view what we are doing at Church of the Apostles as “congregational monasticism.” The “Order of Jesus” under the “Rule” of the Baptismal Covenant. Anglican parishes have always been de facto “third order” communities. What is new is the intentional practice of this as a way to renew our communities in mission in today’s culture.

Alan Roxburgh, author of *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition*, wrote the following blog post about being an “abbot.”

For leaders, cultivating growth is about becoming an abbot in a congregation rather than a pastor. An abbot is a leader who forms a way of life among a whole people. Missional change is primarily about formation—and formation is about the habits and practices which shape new ways of being the church. Cultivation is an ancient word taken from agricultural practices. It is an organic metaphor rather than one of management or warfare. A gardener or farmer understands that the life and purpose of plants or crops is not something over which the farmer has a great deal of control.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerard Kelly, *RetroFuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 215–216.

And so, leadership as cultivation is not about people fitting into your strategy; it is about providing the environment in which missional imagination buds and develops and in which the farmer may well be astonished by the results.<sup>5</sup>

### *Working Yourself Out of a Job*

*Once I had a conversation with our twenty-something Music Director at Church of the Apostles. I said to her, “Lacey, have you found your replacement?” She looked at me with wide eyes and in horror. “But I’m only twenty-three and not ready to retire yet!” I replied: “Not to worry. You are not being fired or retired. Just remember that somewhere out there, sitting in one of our plastic chairs or in a coffeehouse someplace you walk into, will be a thirteen-year-old girl playing a guitar. Begin to listen for her voice and when you find her, open up space for her and begin to mentor her, so whenever you do retire or move away, your legacy of music will be passed on to the next generation of musical leadership you have apprenticed.”*

Missional leaders are able to comprehend the paradox that God stores treasure in clay jars. So whatever strength we have as leaders is not of our own doing, but comes to us from God. Missional leadership in the church today can't be “set in stone” (as in the modern era), but is more organic, as formed from clay. This clay jar leadership is *contextual*, is connected to a given context. Leaders equipped for one context may not translate at all to another. Missional leadership is also *provisional*: it changes as mission changes. Someone who starts a church may not be the best person to lead it into maturity. It is *marginal*, just as Christianity in the postmodern era is at the margins rather than the center of culture. The church can no longer direct culture but must influence it, so those who lead cannot rely on their titles to give them a voice in the culture but need to be deeply embedded within the culture to bring the gospel to bear. It is *vulnerable*: missional leaders are willing to take risks for God's reign and are okay with failing miserably, ever relying on the Spirit to give guidance and trusting in a God who does not fail. It is *receptive*, knowing that leadership is utterly dependent upon God. Leaders give by first receiving.

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<sup>5</sup> Used with the permission of Alan Roxburgh. See [www.roxburghmissionalnet.com](http://www.roxburghmissionalnet.com).

Leaders lead by being led. Leaders nourish others by being fed. Leaders speak by being spoken to. Leaders love by being loved.

When all is said and done, the greatest test of leadership is what happens when the leader is not around. Instead of cultivating a culture of dependence, a leader cultivates a culture of apprenticeship, which calls for leading something while others observe, leading it with others, having others lead it while you observe, then going on your way to apprentice others who will go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

