

Lay Leadership:

By James Ennis

I have been reflecting a lot over the course of the past two years on what it means to develop lay leaders in rural communities. In June, NCRLC completed the second year of a four-year pilot program in two rural dioceses on lay leadership development in rural communities entitled, *Life in Christ* (inspired by Part III of the Catechism of the Catholic Church). And early this summer I attended a lecture on “True Leadership” presented by Reverend Michael J. Keating, Associate Professor of Catholic Studies and the Director of the Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn. Of course there are hundreds of seminars and books on leadership, with many more coming out every year. Leadership is an important topic. During my studies for a Masters in Business Administration from the University of Minnesota and in my nine years working for large corporations, I studied and observed many different corporate leadership models, so I was interested and intrigued to hear what Reverend Keating might have to say about “True Leadership”.

I was not disappointed.

Keys to transforming rural communities

Feature Story

There is a distinct difference between our world's view of leadership and God's view of leadership. Out of love for each of us, He sent his son, Jesus, to show us the way to God.¹ All of us are invited, called, to follow Jesus. And Jesus' philosophy of leadership is very different from our culture's view of leadership. For example in the Gospel of St. Mark, Jesus' disciples argued about who would be the greatest among them and sit at his right and left side in his glory—very powerful positions. Jesus said to the disciples, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant...For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."² True leadership involves service to others.

All of us are following someone or something in life. Jesus invites us to follow him, to participate in his true leadership. During the wedding at Cana in Galilee that Jesus and his mother, the Virgin Mary, were attending, when the host ran out of wine, Mary turned to the servants and told them, "Do whatever he (Jesus) tells you."³ At the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, God spoke to the three disciples who were with Jesus saying, "This is My Son, my Chosen,

listen to him!"⁴ What he is calling us to do may look different for each one of us, but it begins with hearing Jesus

and seeing what he wants us to do with our lives. The acts of hearing and seeing are the most difficult things for us in our busy and distracted lives. There are many competing voices and images vying for our attention in our media saturated society. How do we encounter Christ? Where and how do we hear his voice? Who am I following in my life? These questions are so important for us to reflect upon. But most of us have to confess that we either do not make the time or we simply do not believe that Jesus speaks to us today in our sophisticated and technologically savvy, 24-7 communications world. True leadership requires listening and obeying what we hear Jesus calling us to be and do.

True leadership also involves taking risks and stepping out in faith. The way of Jesus is often the difficult way. It is the way of the cross. Jesus leads us by challenging us to follow him and deny ourselves and take up our cross daily, doing whatever he is calling us to do. For example, John and Peg Faber from Adrian, Minn., and part of a four-parish cluster in the Diocese of Winona, took a step of faith outside of their comfort zone in the Fall of 2011 to go through a NCRLC leadership training retreat and then commit themselves for a year to lead two groups of lay people (16 participants) from St. Adrian Catholic Church through small group discussions covering St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, the encyclical *God is Love*, and two chapters from Part III of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. They had no idea if anyone would be interested in reading and discussing the teachings of Christ and his Church in a small group format and applying the teachings to their lives. They are now working with

their pastor, looking to expand the number of groups in Adrian this next year. NCRLC also expanded into the Diocese of Sioux Falls in the fall of 2012, beginning at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Huron, S.D., with four groups (38 participants). They are planning to send more participants for training this year.

True leadership is also grounded in charity. Acts of love and service look beyond someone's skin color, ethnic background, socio-economic status, or political affiliation to be able to see others as made in the image of God, and therefore deserving of all human dignity. Without charity, leadership is a clanging cymbal. Leadership matters a great deal. There are good leaders and very bad leaders. That is why leadership formation is so important. It is an act of charity to lead well. And NCRLC is developing effective and fruitful leaders in a rural context to serve the Church and build up the body of Christ through small group discussions of the Church's social teachings as well as collaborating with others to train women and men in how to address the injustices in their community through both parish-based social action committees and broader coalitions that cross multiple parishes and multiple dioceses.

And finally, leadership formation is not just a program, or a methodology, or a fad; but rather an invitation to a dynamic personal relationship with the living God who loves each of us. If we accept His invitation and follow Christ, then there is reconciliation with God that transforms our lives. We can then begin to transform our communities.

1. John 14:6
2. Mark 10:42-45
3. John 2:5
4. Luke 9:35