Global Leadership Summit

Cooranbong, NSW, Australia

January 28-30, 2014

**THE CHARACTER AND TRAITS OF GOOD SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST LEADERS**

Barry D Oliver, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The thoughts presented in this paper are set within the conference theme: Adventist Leadership-A Spiritual Responsibility. Because much will be said specifically about the nature of spiritual leadership by various speakers, this presentation will not rehearse that topic in any depth. However, it should be understood that the imperative of spiritual responsibility for a Seventh-day Adventist leader is uncompromisingly presuppositional to everything else that is said. In our context, every leadership quality and trait is without purpose if there is no foundational commitment to, and practice of consistent spiritual responsibility.

Further, this is not an academic presentation as such. The thoughts presented are drawn from my own background and experience. I have not specifically consulted with or referred to many excellent presentations and publications which cover this topic. Many are available. Rather, I will reflect on over forty years’ observation of Seventh-day Adventist leaders that I have known and had the privilege of working alongside. To that end the presentation will be practical in nature illustrating my observations with examples from actual experience. In most cases I will attempt to preserve the anonymity of persons described. Some of you who work closely with me may be familiar with some of the incidents I refer to. You may even recognise references to yourself.

Of course a presentation such as this cannot possibly be exhaustive. Rather I have chosen those aspects of character and those leadership traits which I find myself prioritising given my own experience and the contexts in which I serve God and our church. I am sure you will think of others that are important to you. So you should. Your context is obviously different from mine and we all need to reflect on, and prioritise that which is specific to our situation.

My observation is that with respect to “character” there are almost universal constants which describe those who are called and who are successful leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Spiritual responsibility is one such constant which we have already described as presuppositional. Others will be discussed below.

With respect to “traits” it is my observation that such leadership qualities vary somewhat from person to person and also vary in the way they find expression as leaders exercise their leadership in diverse contexts. Because of contextual variability it is important that we recognise that I will be describing leadership traits in the contexts of my own experience. Again, I reiterate that you will want to consider such traits as they are applied in your own experience and service.

ASPECTS OF THE CHARACTER OF GOOD SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST LEADERS

I have chosen six aspects of character that I believe to be universal necessities for good Seventh-day Adventist leaders. It is very difficult indeed to prioritise these as all are necessary. Although I have re-ordered the list a number of times, I have attempted to give you a scale of priority as I have considered the impact of each aspect of character in my experience over the years. They are:

A secure sense of self and spirituality

Uncompromising integrity

Wisdom

Reliability

Unselfishness

Appropriate flexibility

1. ***A secure sense of self and spirituality****.* A secure sense of self enables a leader to make decisions which are not threatening to themselves. A secure self concept engenders confidence in those who work closely with the leader. Secure spirituality has the same impact. The Seventh-day Adventist Church requires leaders who are mature in their spiritual journey and who can give an example to those whom they serve. Such spirituality is to be an informed spirituality in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition. It must enable the leader to live with questions for which all the answers may not be available right now.
2. ***Uncompromising integrity.*** Tragically from time to time there are leaders who do not act with integrity. The Church expects and has a right to expect integrity as an essential attribute of the character of its leaders. No leader should ever compromise themselves by falling into the trap of thinking that the ends justify the means. Both the end result and the means of arrival at that result must be a matter of the highest integrity.
3. ***Wisdom****.* If a person cannot think, speak and act with wisdom then they cannot be a good leader. Wisdom may be a function of wide experience. But that is not necessarily always the case. I have seen some people who are young and have relatively little experience who act with wisdom. On the other hand I have encountered many who have all the experience in the world but just are not wise. Somehow wisdom must be imprinted in the DNA of leaders at every level of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is what sets leaders apart from the pack as it were.
4. ***Reliability****.* Healthy leadership is reliable leadership. At my ordination the Division President at the time spoke more of the importance of reliability than of anything else. Unfortunately too many people disqualify themselves from leadership because they do not demonstrate this important aspect of character.
5. ***Unselfishness*.** To be able to place the needs of the Church, family and others before their own needs is again an essential ingredient of the character of a good Adventist leader. While one must ensure appropriate balance, unselfishness is just not negotiable if leadership is to be exercised successfully in all its dimension in the Church setting. This is in stark contrast to secular contexts where competition for positions of responsibility depends on the applicants’ ability to promote themselves, their experience and qualifications. Leadership in the Church is very different.
6. ***Appropriate flexibility****.* The reality of change is itself a constant. Leaders cannot be inflexible when it comes to attitudes and methodology. Paul himself recognised the need to be “all things to all men” in the context of the mission delivered by Jesus Himself.

TRAITS OF GOOD SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST LEADERS

Below I have listed 13 traits of good Seventh-day Adventist leaders. Unlike the aspects of character above I have not been able to prioritise these traits of leadership. I regard all as important. But some are more essential than others in my context. It may be different for you. Given the varying contexts in which we all work, each of us may order them differently. In the presentation itself I will illustrate a number of these with experiences from my lifetime of service. I will not include those illustrations here in the text but simply list the traits which are, I believe, self explanatory:

1. A good Adventist Leader gives uncompromising allegiance to God and Church
2. A good Adventist Leader has an examined philosophy of leadership
3. A good Adventist Leader recognises their stronger and weaker abilities
4. A good Adventist Leader empowers their team
5. A good Adventist Leaders is a team player
6. A good Adventist Leader has a broad knowledge base specific to their span of control
7. A good Adventist Leader knows when to listen
8. A good Adventist Leader knows when to speak
9. A good Adventist Leader is organised in their personal and professional life
10. A good Adventist Leader is not a procrastinator
11. A good Adventist Leader has good health and has a family with good health
12. A good Adventist Leader has a supportive family and supports their family
13. A good Adventist Leader knows when to delegate and when not to delegate

CONCLUSION

Perhaps one final word is appropriate. It is my observation that we are facing a crisis of leadership in the Church. Maybe we always have. Because of the demands which leadership places upon individuals and the families of those individuals many are intentionally choosing to decline the opportunity of accepting leadership positions. In such a context the Church must be especially vigilant to ensure that the quality of those who do accept leadership positions is not compromised. More importantly, it must be intentional about leadership development and the support of those who are in leadership. Leadership can be very lonely. Unpopular decisions may have to be made. Scarce resources have to be allocated. Difficult people have to be dealt with. Good people have to be nurtured.

May God grant to His Church the grace and wisdom to provide leaders who will demonstrate the character and traits needed for this time.