

# OVERCOMING COMMON LEADERSHIP VICES

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It does not seem to matter which church you are talking about in Malawi, they fall into the trap of the same vices. The churches may have different names, claim to have different doctrines but when it comes to leadership challenges, the issues are the same. From the established and largest Episcopal congregations that have thousands of followers to the emerging charismatic churches that have less than a hundred followers, the churches are characterized by similar leadership weaknesses. My experience as a facilitator echoes what was said in last month's paper about vices and virtues. I have observed that the two vices of fear and lack of self control affect most of the churches I have worked with in Malawi.

## FEAR

Fear makes decision making in churches weak and 'populist'. Churches cannot make firm, strong and solid decisions especially if such decisions will lead to sanctioning people. Quite often church leaders evade strong decisions that are seen as unpopular and may alienate certain sections of the church. These decisions include disciplining offenders and enforcing rules. If church discipline is needed many leaders remain mute and pretend that things are normal. In one church, there was a rumour that people were embezzling church funds. At the church council meeting, they reluctantly decided that should these rumours prove accurate, those found guilty should be arrested as a way of deterring other would be offenders. But when somebody did actually steal church funds, instead of acting on the resolution, the church leadership asked the members that *'he who had not sinned should throw the first stone'*. As a result the culprit was let off scot-free and the church continued doing business as usual. There are numerous examples in Malawi where funds have been embezzled with impunity within the churches and their 'cousins' faith based institutions.

Just like Pontius Pilate, who handed Jesus over to be crucified in order to please the crowd, church leaders often avoid unpopular decisions. But if the church is to live out the true meaning of its creed, it needs to have the virtue of courage. It should call a spade

by its name and not say it's a big spoon. Just like Joshua in Bible who was told to be strong and courageous, church leaders need to be strong and courageous especially in rooting out wrongs.

## **SELF CONTROL**

Another vice that is eating the fabric of the church and faith based institution is the lack of self control of leaders. Leaders lack the self control to abide by healthy systems for accountability and transparency. In my experience, I have seen churches that have failed to put in place basic systems to run the church. The leadership believes that things will just move and any talk of professionalism within the church is viewed as promoting secularism. The church leadership sometimes wants the institutions to operate without any form of documentation. Even in areas where the systems are there, the systems are ignored just because their implementation may create feelings of mistrust. Take for instance the way how church finances are handled, the simple rule of segregation of duties may be missing. The church can have the same person handling cash, authorizing and approving.

In one case, a church minister took with him all church assets when being transferred to another station. The established church in question does not have inventory records. Any talk of setting in place an inventory system has always been viewed as 'heathen'. The general belief is that the Reverends, servants of God, should not be policed. The church does not have systems for accountability and at best relies on the principle of '*God sees it all*'. In another case, I was asked to train church elders in leadership skills (before they assumed their roles as elders). The idea was to equip them with basics leadership skills and also assist them develop systems to be put in place. Come the day of training, one senior church elder asked if really leadership training was necessary. In his own words he said "Without God we can do nothing. These trainings cannot change things here!" While that statement of sovereignty of God is true, it's also true that without being properly trained leaders will continue making the same mistakes and reduce the holy institution called church to a mere 'circus', The church needs to have self control and devise systems of looking after assets. After all what is good stewardship all about if it's not exercising self control over the abuse of God-given assets?

## **WAY FORWARD**

The church needs to develop the virtues in leadership as taught in the Bible. These Biblical foundations for good leadership are increasingly recognized by celebrated secular leadership facilitators and authors. Articles and books abound on the subjects of

servant leadership, stewardship, even spiritual leadership. These principles have worked in secular organizations. Remarkably and sadly, the church appears to be lagging behind the secular world in applying Biblical principles of leadership. The Bible has the answers to good human leadership. Good leadership requires us simply to live out God's word. The church should have a head start. We must overcome our tendency to lead with our vices. Instead, putting into practice leadership virtues in churches can and should be a witness to the world, revealing the truth of the Bible. It would also be an immense blessing to its members.