

“Living the Story”

by *Diana Butler Bass*

For three years, I researched vital mainline Protestant congregations. Armed with a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., I studied fifty churches to determine if there existed a common pattern of spiritual vibrancy and shared practices that strengthened communal life. Sifting through thousands of pages of data, my team pieced together both an overall pattern and leading practices in the study group, thus developing a picture of religious change, emerging vitality, and potential futures for mainline Protestantism.

As a result of this project, many clergy groups have invited me to share my findings; I estimate that I have now addressed nearly 20,000 clergy and lay leaders across the United States (with a good number of Canadians in the mix). From place to place, people asked a variety of questions, engaging the research in productive ways. At every event, however, someone raised questions of leadership: “What did you observe about leadership? What kind of leadership nurtures the kind of vitality you found? What are the characteristics of the leaders in these congregations?” I quickly realized that in most cases people were asking me how they could lead their congregations into a richer life in God. And, sadly, they felt frustrated in their own attempts to be good leaders. The questions seemed to come from their own spiritual hunger, a nagging sense of failure as congregational leaders, or anxiety about their leadership performance.

My research team did not directly study leadership in vital congregations — we hoped to make that the topic of a later grant. Early on, I actually tried to avoid questions of leadership, feeling vaguely inadequate to address the topic and having no specific data to share. I worry that leadership is difficult to discuss and prone to “magic bullet” solutions of quick-fix gurus. The questions kept coming, however, and although I had no hard data, I realized that I had observed good leadership in the participating congregations. In *The Practicing Congregation*, the first book published about the project, I identified an emerging style of “narrative leadership” for congregational renewal.

Narrative leadership is a deceptively simple principle: *know your story and live it*. Some people know stories and tell them well but live without intentional connection to those stories; others simply experience quotidian life with no reflection on larger stories of meaning. In vital mainline churches, leaders knew their stories and lived them — thus turning the power of narrative into a source of and resource for change.

Story Shapes Leadership

The stories about American religion shape our expectations of leadership. For example, “the Titanic” storyline dominates how we talk about mainline Protestantism. We think of mainline Protestant denominations as a doomed ocean liner; the ship has hit an iceberg (political conflict, numerical decline, or some other crisis) and is sinking. Denominational officials are accused of “rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.” People regularly remark, “We’re going down,” or “We can’t turn this ship around.” Once, I heard an Episcopalian refer to her priest as “the chaplain on the Titanic.”

If we think of churches as the Titanic, that has serious implications for leadership—our bishops, conference ministers, pastors, and priests are required to rescue us. Throw people in lifeboats. Fix the big hole in the ship. Save whoever—and whatever—can be saved. From this perspective, leadership is an emergency rescue operation, heroic but hopeless. We all know the end of the story. The ship will sink. The best our leaders can

do is to save a few—and maybe themselves. No wonder so many pastors are anxious and depressed. Who wants to lead in this scenario?

But what if the Titanic is not the story? A better story—and perhaps more accurate in current circumstances—may be that of the Mayflower. In this story, a boat of pilgrims finds itself in uncharted seas, blown off course by a storm and heading to an unnamed country. Like the Titanic story, there is a sense of urgency, confusion, and fear. But the ship is intact as it sails off course from the intended colony of Virginia. Here, leaders are not trying to patch the hull or load lifeboats. They are not praying for a miracle. Instead, they look for land. They keep calm, providing focus, vision, and direction while they navigate the choppy and unfamiliar seas of the north Atlantic. Once they do reach land, leaders envision a way to structure the new community and take part in building a new life.

In the Titanic story, leaders lead while the ship is sinking. In the Mayflower story, leadership stabilizes a pilgrim community in choppy seas as they head for an unknown world. Leadership in a crisis? Or leadership as an adventure? How a leader leads and the expectations a community has about leadership depend on the stories we tell ourselves.

Leaders Shape Stories

Closely related to this is the capacity of leaders to shape stories. These days, one of the primary capacities of good leadership is to enable people to understand change, interpret chaos, and make sense of a seemingly meaningless world. There are a variety of ways for leaders to make meaning—some religions practice this sort of leadership through creedal conformity, dictates, demands, or intellectual certainty. But another route to meaning-making is through storytelling.

Throughout my research on vital mainline churches, both clergy and congregational leaders were storytellers. They knew their own faith stories, they knew the stories of their congregations, they knew their tradition's stories, and they knew the larger Christian and biblical stories. They exhibited ease and comfort in sharing these stories and invited others into a variety of stories in natural and authentic ways. In the process, they opened paths for other people to learn and tell stories of faith. And they ably moved between personal, congregational, and biblical stories to create worlds of spiritual and theological meaning. They intuited the power of story to rearrange people's lives—using story in much the same way Jesus did—and to open windows to spiritual realities and alternative paths that sometimes escape life's more mundane interpretations.

And, of course, storytelling leaders have the ability to change the story in which they exercise leadership! Scripts can be rewritten. A good leader will be able to move a congregation away from deadening and fear-filled stories, like that of the Titanic, toward life-giving possibilities of faithful adventure.

Diana Butler Bass's research on vital mainline Protestant congregations is featured in her books *The Practicing Congregation* and *Christianity for the Rest of Us* and in recent articles in *Newsweek* and *USA Today*. For more information, visit www.dianabutlerbass.com.

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