

Morph! The Texture of Leadership for Tomorrow's Church

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Leadership, a topic broached numerous times in a variety of ways, is no less true concerning leadership as it relates to the Christian Church. Ron Martoia explores the important arena of leadership in his book, *Morph! The Texture of Leadership for Tomorrow's Church*. Martoia investigates the changing landscape of twenty-first century Western culture and illuminates how these changes impact the way churches approach and articulate the message and mission of Jesus Christ. In order for the Church to fulfill its calling, the author contends, it must be led by insightful leaders willing to adapt and change. This paper will outline Martoia's central thesis and offer reflective responses to three main ideas as they relate to my leadership and ministry.

Martoia's central thesis contends that the Church of Jesus Christ must hold firmly to a high a view of Scripture while simultaneously morphing its ministry language, models, and methods in order to effectively communicate and demonstrate transformational ministry amid a rapidly changing cultural landscape. In addition, Christian leaders serve as the primary catalysts for transformative change. The author contends that three leadership changes are central and essential for fruitful and effective Church ministry in the future: (1) leaders must foster and form a growing,

spiritually vibrant, and healthy inner life—what is inside a leader will spill out or “leak” to shape the ethos and atmosphere of ministry, staff, and the church as a whole; (2) leaders must become faithful exegetes of Scripture and culture—presenting God's eternal truth in personal and experiential ways; (3) leaders must learn to navigate and initiate God-honoring change.

As a pastor and leader for more than twenty years, Martoia's central thesis provided a sense of reaffirmation, inspiration, and challenge. The idea of cultivating a growing, spiritually vibrant, and healthy inner life as the fulcrum of transformational leadership and ministry is an important truth that has become an increased personal focus. My current ministry context, a secular work environment where the majority of my co-workers are not Christ-followers, has taught me that Christian idioms wield little or no influence among people who are either unfamiliar with the language or have witnessed the glaring disconnect between Christians who speak of God's power and love, but fail to demonstrate such qualities with any consistency. The world's willingness to tolerate, much less follow, inauthentic and mediocre Christian leadership is quickly evaporating.

A primary cause for ineffective leadership and the Church's marginalized influence in Western culture may be attributed to pastoral leaders and ministry volunteers who allow pressures and demands to gradually lead to exchanging a genuine, expanding, passionate pursuit of God for rote exercises and lifeless ruts. My pastoral experience supports the notion that the progress and development of my personal journey with Christ, and the spiritual journeys of those around me, has a ripple effect for good or ill on the congregation as a whole. For example, several years ago, I led a growing ministry in an overly driven and exceedingly busy manner. As a result, that season of ministry was marked by a harried lifestyle and a loss of joy. Toward the end of a capital campaign and ministry expansion, one church leader observed that he felt we accomplished in five years what would have taken fifteen years for most churches. My lack of maturity with regard to pacing and timing spilled over into the life of my church.

Martoia, in further developing his main concept, warns against substituting information for transformation and champions the overarching practices of self-leadership and self-discovery. Learning to take personal responsibility for leading and understanding oneself are critical steps toward a stronger, healthier inner life. He stresses that the goal of spiritual habits and practices is to deepen and broaden God's imprint on my life. He then outlines a simple process for leading a life that is morphing into a deeply-formed, fully-maturing Christ-follower: information plus incubation, plus application, equals transformation. Simply put, being a Christ follower is learning to live like Jesus would if He was in my body.

Reflecting on Martoia's inner life development practices and values helped me identify three truths from my own spiritual

formation journey. *First, inner life development is more difficult than I anticipated it would be—much harder.* Whether working in the marketplace or leading ministry, the pressures of life and leadership quickly squash good intentions and noble desires unless I create an ethos of daily surrender and bring all my energies to bear on attitudes and actions that foster a growing, vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ. I believe the Apostle Paul stresses this very concept when writing to Christ-followers in Philippi (Phil. 3:12-14). The apostle concludes his thought on "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" by saying, "All of us who are *mature* take such a view of things" (Phil. 3:15; emphasis added). Apparently, a mark of maturity is the realization of and appreciation for the energy and effort associated with a deepening apprenticeship with Jesus Christ.

A second truth that emerges out of my inner life development journey is the realization that *going deeper with God takes longer than anticipated.* The path of my spiritual journey is marked with repeated starts and stops and a great number of well-worn circles, which reveal the countless times God has had to re-teach the same truth. Re-learning is a way of life for the one who is serious about growing a deep-rooted spiritual life.

A third reflective truth centers on the realization that *cultivating a well-ordered, healthy inner life is far more rewarding than expected.* The deep, pervasive experiences that result from a growing, vibrant, and expanding spirituality cannot be fully comprehended or appreciated apart from personal experience, any more than the emotions and elation associated with pivotal experiences such as childbirth, marriage, or parents becoming "empty nesters." Personal benefits such as assurance, peace, and

strength that accompany authentic personal growth cannot be fully described—only encountered. The Apostle Paul seems to support this idea when he penned, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet *inwardly we are being renewed day by day*” (2 Cor. 4:16; emphasis added). While I do not mean to suggest that I have attained the full measure of maturity, I do encounter on occasion the inner and outer rewards associated with inward renewal. As Martoia wisely noted, the transformational ethos and impact my leadership has on people around me will be commensurate with the transformation going on inside me.

Martoia’s second central thesis focuses on leaders learning to faithfully exegete the Scriptures and their cultural context. Martoia argues that, for the gospel to be compelling and transformational, leaders must learn to articulate and demonstrate God’s eternal truth in personal and experiential ways. My understanding of what it means to faithfully exegete Scripture in a culture growing rapidly more secular has broadened over the last four years as an employee in corporate America. Not having a pastoral platform to stand on or a podium to speak from has taught me that a healthy hermeneutical construct delivers more than a faithful interpretation and teaching, it also develops a faithful life.

My platform and podium has been my workplace environment and my biological and church families. It isn’t that other environments were not places where I sought to live out the Scriptures when pastoring, they were; however, after twenty-three years of delivering messages, a four-year hiatus from the customary platform and podium has heightened my awareness of the importance of what may be referred to as incarnational exegesis. Stated differently, an essential part of scriptural exegesis is learning to embody, not merely express,

what the Scriptures teach. In marketplace ministry, doing what the Bible says often increases one’s opportunities to share what the Bible says about a whole host of subjects. Martoia champions a high view of Scripture as I do; however, in my current context, that cherished presupposition is of little value unless it translates into tangible, countercultural actions. This may be one reason why the Bible repeatedly stresses the connection between loving God and obeying His Word. Authentic, transparent obedience to God’s Word may be the primary way our exegesis impacts twenty-first century Western culture.

Martoia’s notion of cultural exegesis as a fundamental exercise for effective spiritual leadership also carries great merit. My marketplace ministry context has reinforced a long held ministry value—namely, that for the gospel to be transformational, it must be both incarnational and understandable in its leaders and followers. Clear communication requires that a leader discern prevailing cultural values, assess emerging trends and interests, and anticipate possible cultural shifts. Although this leadership was elusive during my ministry experience, I recognize that some values and trends, such as materialism, multiculturalism, and pluralism are more easily identified, while others are more subtle yet equally important if leaders are to clearly communicate scriptural truths. For example, as a pastor of a church in a city near the U.S.-Mexican border, the ministry incorporated a multicultural and multinational congregation, which made assessing values and trends more difficult. Nevertheless, a leader cannot ignore the importance of exploring the mindset and milieu of the people one is called to reach with the gospel.

A final main idea connected with Martoia’s central thesis addresses the leader’s ability to both navigate and initiate God-honoring

change. Referencing the narrative recorded in John 4, Martoia argues convincingly that the combination of creative experiences with God and compelling life stories creates a powerful tandem for creating momentum and transition in ministry.

In 1998, Bonita Valley Community Church (BVCC) was a fairly traditional and terribly wounded church within a rapidly changing Southern California culture. In creating a culture of change, the ministry context required healing and unity. Over time and by God's grace, genuine worship experiences and testimonies of people walking out of darkness into the light of God's love and truth began to emerge. The combination of encountering God, telling peoples' stories, coupled with a compelling vision, created momentum that empowered the church to become more flexible and fluid in its ministry approach.

Two final observations emerge as I reflect on my season of ministry at BVCC. First,

unlike new churches that can establish a fluid and flexible culture in its DNA, cultivating a culture of change in an existing church becomes more complex the longer it exists. A leader must exhibit a great amount of patience and persistence in order to transition an existing church culture toward a more fluid posture. Second, spiritual leaders tasked with transitioning an existing church to increased missional impact embark on an endeavor worthy of fervent prayer and focused action.

Every culture and subsequent generation must address the subject of church leadership due to shifting values, ideas, and driving priorities. Thus, books such as Ron Martoia's *Morph! The Texture of Leadership for Tomorrow's Church*, provide timely and much needed direction for church leaders in North America attempting to prayerfully discern effective ways to lead transformational ministry in the midst of a rapidly changing culture.