

## From the Pastor

January 11, 2012

An insightful article about leadership and followership (a word coined by Unitarian minister Paul Beedle) appeared in the most recent issue of *The Christian Century*. Most understand the dynamics of good leadership; a myriad of workshops are held and books published on the essential ingredients in being a good leader. We do not often consider what it means to be a good follower and the importance of followership in the life of the church.

Paul Beedle defines followership as “the discipline of supporting leaders and helping them to lead well. It is not submission, but the wise and good care of leaders, done out of a sense of gratitude for their willingness to take on the responsibilities of leadership, and a sense of hope and faith in their abilities and potential.”

Anthony B. Robinson, the author of the article, contends that “by becoming mature and engaged followers of the leaders we call and elect in the church, we demonstrate one aspect or expression of Christian discipleship.” In the church, many of us experience seasons when we are called to lead and seasons when we are called to follow. Robinson suggests five ways that we can work on being good followers:

1. *Good followers recognize that leadership is necessary, important, and difficult work.* A dangerous assumption is that a group made up of smart, capable people does not need a leader. “We don’t need someone to tell us what to do,” is an oft heard refrain. On the contrary, good leaders do not tell people what to do, but help a congregation identify its challenges.
2. *Good followers share a commitment to a larger congregational purpose or mission and the priorities derived from it.* Healthy congregations have plenty of divergent opinions, but good followers possess a commitment to the good of the organization and do not act in ways that compromise that common vision.
3. *Good followers cultivate relationship and trust.* Followers are called to offer support to the leaders of the congregation that is not fickle or conditional. (If you do this, I will....) Followers allow room for disagreement and learn to manage expectations appropriately.
4. *Good followers practice the art of learning and giving good feedback.* Providing thoughtful feedback is much more difficult than giving non-specific praise. Good followers develop the ability to respond positively, honestly, and in a way that is focused. They learn to disagree without severing relationships.
5. *Good followers keep good boundaries.* The author suggests that in less healthy congregations, too many people treat everything as if it is their business. Being a good follower means trusting those who have been elected to make good and wise decisions, in the hope that, when the leadership/followership roles are flipped, the same trust will be accorded to them.

If you would like to read the article in its entirety, I have placed a few copies on the coffee table in the Hospitality Room. It may be helpful for all of us to think about those areas in our congregation’s life where we have been called to lead and those areas in which we have been called to follow. Contrary to what some might imagine, one is not an active role and the other a passive role. Both call us to active engagement in the ministry of the church—and the congregation thrives when both roles are carried out intentionally, joyfully, and prayerfully.

Grace and Peace,  
Mary Gene