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RESPONSE TO DONALD SAHLY'S PAPER "LEADING THE CHURCH"

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When we asked Dr. Don Sahly to come and speak during this forum, we asked him to address Asian, or Third World, issues in church leadership. We asked him to address dimensions where we, leaders of the church in our part of the world, need to grow. We asked him because he has served in our part of the world and because he leads the leadership training department of our world church.

When I first read the paper, I was looking for specific references or applications for the Asian setting. Dr. Sahly has not mentioned anything explicit about the Asian, or even Third World, context at all in this paper. I initially thought that Dr. Sahly had missed the intent of his presentation. But as I read and read again, this time with the mind-set of an Asian, I began to see that the issues in Asian church leadership are all there.

I think Dr. Sahly has mastered the art of indirect speech, having served in Southeast Asia for seven years. You are aware of the ways of wisdom in Asia. A guest comes into your house on a hot day and he says, "It is hot today." If you are wise, you will switch on the fan and open the windows. In case you missed the implied request, he might say, "I wore clothes that are too thick for this weather, because I am perspiring." The message, without being explicitly stated, is, "Please turn on the electric fan." There is a story of a salesman who comes to sell his wares just about lunch time. First he says, "I am thirsty." The message? "May I have a cup of water?" The host gives him a cup of water. Then the salesman says, "Is it wrong to drink water when you are hungry?" The message? "Can I have lunch with you?"

When we analyze the main points being emphasized in Dr. Sahly's paper, we can infer, I believe, what he sees as growing points for our leadership, the areas

where we need improvement. When we look at the message and major points of this paper, we can infer the Asian situation that he saw as needing change.

At the beginning of Dr. Sahly's paper, he states that he is focusing on two issues: "What leadership is," and "What real leaders should do and practice."

The kind of leaders needed in this new century are "true servant leaders that will transfer ownership and responsibility of the work to those who are called to carry out the tasks involved." Is he implying here that in Asia ownership and responsibility are mostly in the hands of the senior leaders and not in the hands of the younger ones? Or, that ownership and responsibility are mostly in the hands of the leaders and not in the hands of the members?

He further suggests that leaders "create environments where each member chooses to be responsible." Is he implying that in many of our churches and institutions, members feel obligated to accept responsibility rather than freely choosing to accept it?

Another characteristic of "true servant leaders" is that they "empower and coach others to assume greater responsibility." Dr. Sahly emphasizes the reproduction of leaders at the end of his paper. Is he implying that in our leadership style, we are forcing rather than empowering, finding faults rather than coaching, eliminating upcoming candidates rather than reproducing leaders?

Historians look at what actually is taking place, to understand what is actually happening beyond the rhetoric and postures. Historians also evaluate what has happened and is happening in the light of our stated ideals and goals.

I have an observation about church leadership in Asia, an observation which many of you may challenge. We are educated and attend leadership courses and training. However, most of the ideas and strategies in these leadership seminars are formulated in Western contexts and cultures. My observation is that, beyond our personality differences, many of the leadership concepts, many of the conceptions of what leadership is and what real leaders should do and practice, are very much based on culture rather than shaped by our education. In spite of education, yes, in spite of the M.A. or the Ph.D. here at AIIAS, when people go back to their fields or institutions, the leadership styles they practice go back to their cultural traditions.

I believe that in training leaders, a very basic step is to make them aware of their cultural background, especially in the Asia-Pacific and African contexts where culture is a dominant factor in human thought and behavior.

Of course, culture is also dominant in the part of the world we call the "West." But in the West, individualism is a very important cornerstone in their culture. Nobody can dictate to anybody what leadership is and what real leaders should do and practice. But that is not the case in cultures in this part of the world. A culture of conformity and community standards is the implicit and the explicit mold of thought and behavior. Culture serves as the social control in most if not all aspects of life.

When I point out the areas in which we need to grow, I am not saying we are willfully bad. The ideal of what leadership is and what real leaders should do and practice, is part of our values, beliefs, and attitudes. We do not intentionally practice them. It comes naturally. In a sense, we cannot be blamed if we continue to think and act that way. In fact, our societies continue to provide affirmation in regard to how we think and act according to our cultural standards.

However, we are not just Filipinos, nor just Koreans, nor just Kenyans anymore. We are Christians first of all. We have surrendered our motives, our minds, our talents and capacities to Christ our Lord. We are not just leaders, we are Christian leaders, leading a people who also have given their lives to the Lord. And we all have one aim in life: to do the will of God individually and collectively, to fulfill His mission as a church.

As we will notice by now, what I am doing, in order to be true to the intent of this part of the Forum, is more of a reflection rather than a response to the paper. But I will use the criteria given in Dr. Sahly's paper of what leadership is and what real leaders should do and practice, as the basis for my reflection. Let me summarize the criteria briefly:

1. Christian leadership makes one's relationship to God the source of authority and power. Christian leaders are always conscious of their dependence upon God as evidenced by a prayerful life.
2. The priority in our lives should be God's call and will, as well as God's will for the church, over the views and demands of others.
3. The structure of decision making and responsibilities for Christian leaders should be characterized by shared and participative leadership.

Let us now take each of these points and relate them to the cultural elements in our contexts. Speaking of contexts, you may say that Asian contexts do not apply to those of you from Africa. Geert Hofstede made cultural maps based on his interviews of thousands of business executives and managers. In his maps, he placed the contours of Asian leadership and those of East and West Africa quite close together.

The first issue is, What or who is the source of authority and power in our leadership? What is the source of authority and power in our contexts? There is not one general answer, because in the East Asian contexts at least, there are two.

The Southeast Asian countries, particularly the Malay cultures, have a strong point in this issue. Leadership in this context is people centered and relationship oriented. However, the weakness is that the source of authority and power is perceived in relation to the number of people loyal to the leader. Many a leader in this culture cultivates a following or a network of relationships because, in his eyes, without that following, without those connections, he has no power at all. I

remember a piece of advice I got when I was beginning denominational work. The person asked me if I aspired to be a Conference president. His suggestion? "You'd better learn how to play tennis so that you make the important connections."

The source of authority and power for the Northeast Asian cultures, the cultures influenced by the Chinese civilization, is different. In these contexts, the good thing is that leadership is also person centered and relationship oriented. However, the weakness is that, if you are young or do not belong to the hierarchy, you have no power, no authority.

Yes, cultural concepts with regard to authority and power shape the degree of our influence in our groups and societies. We have to be sensitive to, and work with, group behavior patterns in our culture. But, as Christians, we must move away from the mainly humanistic thinking of Asian cultures, that power and authority are derived from people.

As Dr. Sahly reminds us, the power and authority in Christian leadership come from God, flowing from a spiritual life, a life intimately related to God in prayer. Our dependence is not on the arm of men but on the strength of God.

Let us go to the second issue: motives in leadership, an issue that can only be understood in relation to the conceptions of the function of groups in these cultures.

For the Malay cultures, the main purpose of the group is to keep social order and make people happy. One good thing in this value system is that people and relationships are in the center and are given priority over any task. The weakness, however, is that when we talk about happiness, we are not talking here about an abstract set of ideals. The conception of happiness, and therefore how people can be made happy, is highly particularistic and personalistic. What will please now may not please them next year; therefore, the struggle of a leader to always please and avoid criticism and blame is constant. Many a leader in this context has one goal: to make people happy and satisfied. In this setting, the task of the group is often forgotten. Actually, this is an inaccurate comment, because the main task of the group is to make people happy.

With such a setting, where the satisfaction and valuing of individual members are most important, the leader cannot be too autocratic. He must be a good consensus builder. The best leader in this context is one who is "soft outside, but firm and tough inside."

For the Chinese-influenced cultures, the main purpose of the group is to maintain social order, so that each part of society functions to meet its role and delivers. The strong point is that the groups are still centered on people and relationships, with the leader making sure that the members of his/her group are taken care of and are growing in prosperity. People in this context are willing to trust their leaders in making decisions. Another good point is that groups in this context are task oriented. Leaders are evaluated based on whether or not they deliver on promises. The weakness of the Northeast Asian cultures is that they

have very strongly centralized groups and autocratic leadership. The best leader in this context is one who is hard outside and hard inside, but has a soft spot inside for each member of his group.

Dr. Sahly reminds us, in the light of our cultural contexts, where people's wishes and approval are the measuring point of leadership, that God's call and will have priority for our lives, and that God's will for the church is more important than the views and demands of others.

Let us look at the last issue: the structure of decision making and responsibilities. In the Southeast Asian contexts, the strong point is the high value for consensus, harmony, and the consideration of the views of others. The good result is that once most of the people in the group are happy and satisfied, you have their support. The weakness is that it takes a long time to reach a consensus, if ever a consensus is reached in many issues. Many a Malay leader will not accept full responsibility without a consensus.

In the Northeast Asian setting, the strong point is that the group moves fast once the leaders decide. The Northerners are already marching like an army while the Southerners are still sitting down at a potluck trying to reach a consensus. The weaknesses in the Chinese-influenced setting are the rigid pyramid structures, and the large distance between those in power and the ordinary members. Decisions are made by a few, with very little input from members.

Dr. Sahly reminds us that in Christian leadership, decision making and responsibilities should be shared. People should participate in making decisions and be given corresponding authority and responsibility that go with the decision-making prerogative. The ideal of a shared and participative leadership is above culture because it is based on the theology of the Holy Spirit and the gifts He bestows.

We need to examine ourselves and ask God to change our hearts, minds, and actions. This examination and reflection is like what should take place between the stages of childhood and adulthood. Nobody is born into a perfect family. Nobody has a perfect background or training. We must be aware of, and overcome our weaknesses, while building up the strong points. We must consciously form an identity so that we can stand firm in the challenges and rigors of life. Otherwise we will always be like children, tossed to and fro by external influences.

The work that needs to be done is like the work of repentance. What should take place is the simultaneous work of the Holy Spirit that opens our eyes to the perfection of the law, showing our mistakes and failures against that ideal. More than that, the Spirit gives us hope that with His power, we can change, slowly but surely; that He is writing the principles of the law in our hearts; and that He is empowering our faith so that it is manifested in good works.