

Reflections on the Person and Position of the District Superintendent

Dr. Harold Curl

It must have been a very uncautious moment when I mentioned to Jon that I would be willing to present some of my recollections of the District Superintendents I have known. My idea was to just recall what I remember about these men and add some of the memories I have of how they have been perceived by laymen like myself. Jon must have been desperate when he eagerly seized on this idea and thus here I am with great ambivalence. I agreed willingly but later I had second thoughts, so now I proceed with great reluctance.

My second DS was R.V. Starr. He also was a physically large man with a very direct manner. In his presence, one felt energy and commitment. As a teenager, I thought that I would like to become a Christian like R.V. Starr. I enjoyed his sermons and one point he made in a sermon has stayed with me throughout my life. In reference to finding and doing God's will in life he said, "Do what you can where you are with what you have." I am sure he added that God will bless your efforts and open opportunities. I have had many occasions in life to wonder just what I should be doing or what direction to take. In these times, often in the midst of some confusion, I have recalled the sage advice: do what you can where you are with what you have. It has been a key to moving on in faith. I was saddened by the news that my DS had died instantly in a head on auto collision.

There was a time while in college I felt great uncertainty about direction in my life toward entering the ministry. I listed this goal as I entered college. Thus each year when Dr. Gibson, DS of Wisconsin, came to give advice to "preacher boys," I attended. He listed a number of practical items, such as: attention to dress, relate to your audience, read the farm papers if you are in a rural area, do not be afraid to lead, be organized. Then he would always leave with the admonition regarding the sense of call. He insisted that only the called should preach and his test was this: Do not preach if you can get to heaven without preaching. I liked his earnest and practical style. I decided to follow his advice and try to get to heaven as a layman.

My next DS was a man of very different disposition. He was much less domineering in style, yet he led with vigor and steady dedication. W.S. Purinton was a man people respected and loved. He was positive and friendly and approachable. All the influence about my entering the ministry Dr. Gibson had exerted, Dr. Purinton attempted to set aside. He was patient and long-suffering and supportive with this layman who was involved in home missions work. Obviously, Dr. Gibson's advice won out.

Only one D.S. ever called me to his office. Dr. Mark Moore had a struggling congregation that was in the process of giving up. He called my wife and I and asked if we were willing to attend that congregation and do all we could to help it survive. We had just arrived in the community where the church was located and since that was our community, of course, we would attend and do all we could to serve as laymen. I remember his concern regarding three families and a dozen young people who had been won to the church. What would happen to these few people if the church failed? Well, Louise and I stayed. We learned new lessons in struggle and heartbreak, and friendship with young pastors still in college. Mark Moore had learned to live

on the edge while serving as chaplain in WWII. He did not hesitate to ask others to live there too.

The next DS always gave me the impression of being an administrator. My guess is that he had a clean desk and orderly files. He never had an occasion to get the measure of the kind of man Grady Cantrell is. He preached one sermon that really registered with me. I had always been troubled by persons who seemed to live recklessly, whether in money management, life choices, or religious devotion. He dared to preach the text: Be wise as serpents but harmless as doves. In other words, one doesn't have to be a fool and then blame all the bad outcomes on god. God rewards all men whether Christian or not who choose wisely. So the Christian church is not helped by the foolishness of some of its members. We should be careful to prove ourselves honest and reliable and sensible to the world out there. In other words, deserve a good reputation. Given other influences I had received, that sermon stands as a good corrective.

Up to this point I have recalled the positive influences on my life of the men who have been my DS's at various times. The conclusion to be drawn is that for me, the DS has been preeminently a spiritual leader and model for Christian living. As I became acquainted more with the actions required by persons in this position I was exposed to conflicting opinions and emotions. My fellow churchmen often expressed opposition to some of the programmatic goals which the DS had proposed. Stories of bad decisions, personal foibles, and bumbling misdirection circulated, often in great numbers. How was I to reconcile this contradictory evidence? Here were spiritual heroes with feet of clay. Here were great leaders with mistakes on their records. This brings me back to my first DS, Dr. Chalfant. I have his autobiography, *Forty Years on the Firing Line*. Yes, the title says a lot. Long years of service, and on the firing line. I recall respected churchmen and women recounting decisions of his with bitter tears and deep emotion. I remember how his flamboyant style so offended me. He was often blunt and many were offended by his directness. He appeared to be crass, and unconcerned with the feelings of others. Some of his idiosyncrasies reduced his stature in my opinion. How was I ever to hold him in esteem?

His autobiography helps explain his radical approach to Christianity. He came from a long line of individualists who unselfconsciously proclaimed their faith. Yet his story is interwoven with persons very different from himself with whom there was mutual respect. Although I could not imagine anyone taking issue with him, evidently many did and he accepted them. He was a person with a vision and the drive to labor arduously to realize the vision. He entered over 300 communities as a DS and organized 250 churches in his 35 years as superintendent of just one district, the Chicago Central. Four districts now cover the area where he began. He was loyal to coworkers. His love for his wife and children shines throughout the pages. Perhaps, for me, the change of opinion of the man, came as my mother and I concluded the purchase of a home near Olivet. The realtor, from one of the old French Catholic families of the area, said to us as we left, "Your mon Chalfant, a great mon, a very great mon." Knowing the intense conflict Nazarenes had stirred when Olivet Nazarene College had entered this staunch Catholic area, I realized how a person from the opposition had measured my DS and found him worthy of respect and admiration. If he could overlook the idiosyncrasies, the apparent crudeness, then so could I.

With many appeals to do so from Jon, I did just a little research. I interviewed some experts, e.g. college professors, some in the religion faculty, read a little on leadership, and took a survey. So I have covered all the bases, library research, soft ethnographic interviews, and hard data questionnaires. However none of the above was completed with any depth or anything but hasty quick and dirty methodology.

Starting with library research. From the text in organizational behavior by Baron and Greenberg, I gleaned that leadership is best understood from the social ecological context in which it is to be demonstrated. Strong, directive, even autocratic leadership succeeds in situations where there exists little structure, very little precedent, and where the followers may not possess much knowledge or expertise in the matters at hand. As I read Chalfant's life story this principle seemed to fit. He had proven himself in the pastorate, he demonstrated to national leaders of the Church of the Nazarene that he understood the central message and mission of the new movement, and he had to weld together a fellowship drawn from many disparate sources and traditions. Tough and difficult decisions had to be made and implemented. A banner had to be lifted which identified who these Nazarenes were. I used to flinch when Chalfant came to town. Great banners proclaiming "Holiness Unto the Lord," streamed from every available post and high point. Neither Barnum and Baily circus nor political rallies could not top the publicity which went out. An example from his ministry in Indianapolis is a case in point, he pitched the evangelistic tent in front of the county courthouse and spent \$3,000 in a months long campaign, \$1,000 of it on publicity. I was surprised at myself last week when during spring revival on college a big banner graced the altar proclaiming "Holiness to the Lord." My reaction, that's great, I like it.

Other leadership styles are a successful when tradition has been established and remains effective. Likewise a relaxed coordinator style is effective when one has a loyal and able fellowship. When this condition obtains, the leader can best lead through enabling the followers. As I apply these insights to my reflections on the position of the DS, I find that various leaders have been effective as the organizational environment has developed. I think of DS's who have been able to give new direction when tradition became entrusted with too much caution and not enough vision. I think of DS's who served well as coordinators and facilitators. Above all, I find the classification of one of my informants trenchant. He identifies the DS as a top leader only accountable in major matters to the general church. He is comparable to the CEO of a branch company. As such there are three types, said my informant. Type one takes the pastoral role in relation to the pastor and congregations of his district. This person is to the pastors and congregations of his district. This person is perceived as a spiritual leader who identifies with his people. He is flexible in approaching the various pastors and congregations with the goals and programs of the district interpreted to the local situations. Type two is more administrative. District goals are clearly proclaimed and much focus is directed toward these. Type three is the person whose primary orientation is to the fellowship of leaders. In some ways this person appears to play the star role. There is lack of attention to detail with more time spent within what sociologists call "the old boy club."

Each of the above types represent stereotypes and not pure types. Various DS's emphasize differing degrees of these typical roles. The most successful, my informant said, are those who emphasize the pastor role. As for learning the role of the DS, my informant said, it is on the job learning with the most difficult task that of working to keep collegiality within a hierarchy.

Now to the hard data. I quickly designed a short questionnaire which I distributed to my Introduction to Sociology class and a colleague distributed to a small upper division theology class. Together I received 47 usable responses from Nazarene students. The results are summarized in the appendix table. Most of the respondents had been Nazarene for 6 or more years. Only 45% knew the D.S. personally or as a personal acquaintance, the rest only by reputation. The DS was perceived as very supportive of the pastor and the local church program by 66% and 60% respectively. However, as a resource to the local congregation 51% saw the DS as helpful sometimes, 40% gave an unqualified yes, but 9% said he was not at all a resource. As one who pushed the congregation to reach financial goals, 49% said the DS did this only sometimes, while 32% said this is a primary perception, although 17% said he never did. As a model to emulate, 53% viewed the DS as one of the best, 43% said he was as good as others, while 4% thought him to be lacking. When ranking choices of conceptions of the person, 43% ranked spiritual leader number one, 28% chose administrator, while 28% could not decide on a ranking. Fifty-seven percent said their opinion was typical of their fellow churchmen, 26% said they were more positive, 15% said they were more negative. On the last two open-ended questions, there probably was contamination because of the placement at the end. However, of the positive terms that got three or more mentions regarding the person of the DS, these were listed: Godly and holy, loving, concerned, supportive, friendly, dedicated, compassionate. Positive terms to describe the office were: positive, responsibility, a demanding and difficult job, important, administrative, and authority. There were very few negative terms listed and none received more than one mention. For the person these were: lacks leadership, not informed about local churches, not supportive, wants money, and a faceless elected official. For the office these were: not aggressive, bureaucracy, cold and distant, stagnant, and negative.

In summary, the young people in our college classes are very positive in evaluating the DS. The person is respected, held in esteem as a spiritual leader, and viewed as a warm and caring leader. The office is considered important and very demanding while carrying authority. In regard to my reflections and the opinion of my informants, we tend to be in agreement with these conclusions.

I do not have enough data to test the hypotheses generated by the writers of the organizational behavior text. They do present a scheme which suggests a variety of leadership styles each tailored to success according to the organizational conditions and environment which obtains at the moment. As a good sociologist, I conclude with the familiar statement, this issue deserves more research.

<i>Responses to the questionnaire in percent. N = 47.</i>		
1. Years a member or attender of a Nazarene Church		
	0-5	15
	6-10	85
2. How well respondent knew the D.S.		
	a. knew personally	15
	b. slight acquaintance	30

	c. had heard speak	
	d. by reputation only	25
3. How supportive of pastor is D.S		
	a. very supportive	60
	b. mildly supportive	19
	c. indifferent	8
	d. not supportive	7
4. Does D.S. support local church goals		
	a. very supportive	60
	b. mildly supportive	23
	c. indifferent	
	d. not supportive	2
	e. no answer	2
5. Is D.S. a resource to local church.		
	a. yes	40
	b. sometimes	51
	c. not at all	9
6. D.S. pushes hard for financial goals		
	a. yes	32
	b. sometimes	49
	c. never	17
	d. no answer	2
7. D.S. as a model of Christian life.		
	a. one of the best	53
	b. as good as many	43
	c. somewhat lacking	4
8. Rank of following conceptions of D.S (percent ranked first)		
	a. spiritual leader	43
	b. dedicated church leader	2
	c. pastor to local churches	0
	d. church administrator	28
	e. no answer	28
9. Respondent compared to typical church member		
	a. more positive	26
	b. about the same	57
	c. more negative	15
	d. no answer	2
10. List three words to describe the person of the D.S.		
11. List three words to describe the office of the D.S.		

References

Baron, Robert A. and Jerald Greenberg. 1990. Behavior in Organizations. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Chalfant, E. O. 1951. Forty Years on the Firing Line. Kansas City: Beacon Hill.