

Leadership from deep within

Ann Wigley and Rose Dowling

As a small gathering of leaders
 we join to celebrate, to reflect, to laugh, to receive and to give.
 In this place together, we are free to roam
 beyond our usual boundaries.
 Venturing into the realm of the Mystery of Life within us
 we open ourselves to the power of possibility.

THE WHOLE OF SOUTH AFRICA IS VENTURING into a new phase of its history. During this time of transition, chaos, hope and violence we need leadership that believes in and promotes the opening of ourselves to the power of possibilities within and around us. Leaders who are aware of this and able to be with others in a way that releases their gifts are indispensable. Having come out of a situation of extreme oppression most South Africans need to develop new skills in order to cope creatively with the new reality. Some women of South Africa, such as Albertina Sizulu and Helen Joseph, have taken an active role in the process of transformation. However, many South African women have yet to take their place in the leadership of our society.

Why women? Who are they?

Leadership and women. What to do? Women who have some insight into themselves know that they do not lead exactly as men do. The spiritual needs of women and men are very different in our times. The retreat described here was originally offered to both men and women so it can be adapted to the needs of men because, to a large extent, the group itself shapes what happens. Daniel Pietrzak¹ gives an explanation of the different emphasis needed for men. Men often have a clearer sense of their own boundaries and can therefore avoid becoming too enmeshed in situations. Women leaders often become over-involved – to their detriment and to the detriment of the people they lead. The decisiveness and energy involved in making dreams come true through good leadership has traditionally been attributed to masculine energy, but they need to be part of all leadership. However, there are also feminine aspects like nurturing relationships, collaborating and taking time to dream together that women need to discover within themselves

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and nurture in their lives. An integration of the masculine and feminine is much needed in our world's leadership.

Although this retreat was on offer to men and women, it was women who responded. Consequently it is currently designed for Christian women in leadership roles who desire to lead from their spirit centre. They come to know about the retreat through a brochure or by word of mouth. It involves a group of eight to ten women and two retreat leaders. Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic women from a variety of ethnic groups have taken part. There have been Zulu, Tswana, Swazi, Xhosa, Namibian, English, Irish and German participants, all of whom live and work in Southern Africa. Some are in urban situations like Pretoria, Soweto, Johannesburg, Durban and Umtata; others are from rural areas of Kwa Zulu Natal, the Northern Province, the Eastern Cape or Namibia. Most of them are in leadership roles in religious congregations; others are involved in running hospitals or spirituality centres. One woman is involved in pastoral work as the wife of a Lutheran minister.

Exploring the inner source and meaning of leadership

The purpose of this retreat is to provide a place and atmosphere of reflective quiet, enabling each woman to come from a place of integrity within to touch the source and meaning of leadership for herself. As well as finding new, creative ways to lead, she also discovers where the Spirit is calling her to grow and develop in her leadership. Throughout the retreat the participant shares, learns, prays and celebrates her source, discovery and call with other women.

Creating space

Even when the retreat is held in a city, places are chosen where it is possible to enjoy solitude and nature. In Johannesburg we have used the spacious retreat centre run by the Holy Family Sisters. In Kwa Zulu Natal the retreat was held at the Mercy Sisters' holiday house near the Indian Ocean. In order to respond in creative ways, the women need time and a place to distance themselves from the situations in which they normally find themselves.

The daily rhythm

With two people leading the retreat the way of partnership is modelled in its very style. Each day has its own movement or emphasis beginning in the morning when everyone gathers for a ritual and to be given the theme and guidelines for the day. The day is given to

reflection with participants being encouraged to use paints, clay, pictures, paper, crayons, poetry, song and dance to express their experiences.

In the evening the group comes together to share the day's insights and to celebrate. Rituals in both the morning and evening include drumming, body movement, music, mantras, shared prayer in the whole group or in groups of two or three.

The movement through the eight days

Taking the primary theme of leadership, the retreat process focuses on each person becoming consciously aware of her own Essence/Spirit/God Centre within, and of how this awareness can give rise to creative leadership in each individual's particular role.

First movement

The first evening consists of introductions, reviewing the practicalities of the retreat and the venue, and releasing and letting go of what the women have left behind in order to be fully present.

Second movement

Each one has brought with her a symbol reflecting the meaning of leadership to her at this time in her life. This symbol is shared with the group and its meaning is deepened throughout the day by dialogue with the symbol itself or by speaking with God or Jesus about it. Two of the symbols, for example, were a three-legged pot which depends on closeness to the fire to be effective, and concentric circles denoting both equality and partnership. The purpose of the dialogue is for people to become more conscious of where they are with their leadership *now*.

Third movement

The third day is spent on the relationship with Jesus at different periods in the retreatant's life and how this has affected behaviour in regard to leadership and authority at each of these periods. The participants then focus on where they are now with leadership and authority. The morning session has input² showing how religious leaders, consciously or not, express in their decisions and actions who God is for them. Time is given for participants to reflect on how their practice of leadership reflects their personal image of God.

Fourth movement

The participants are asked, through a guided meditation, to be in touch with and find the name for their Essence, the God within, after some input³ about Essence and Personality. During the day all are

invited to engage in a dialogue between their Essence and their leadership and to create a mandala or symbol that represents their Essence.

'I am freedom.' 'I am light.' 'I am goodness.' These were three of the names for Essence that emerged, each having its own particular meaning for the person who named it. The mandalas created by the women were either colourful designs, or had pictures, such as a pair of hands, receiving and giving light.

Fifth movement

After input on sub-personalities⁴ and the relationship between these, Essence and one's leadership, and a guided meditation on sub-personalities, the participants are asked to spend the day identifying one or two of their own. One image was of a very starchy nurse in a stiff uniform whose name was 'Know It All', a sub-personality who managed to put a distance between herself and everyone around her. Another one was a lizard sunning itself on a rock; she was called 'Lazy Lizard'. Once these sub-personalities had been identified, their owners then engaged them in dialogue with their Essence. Important questions in this process are: is their leadership coming from the Essence or from one or several sub-personalities? From which part of themselves do they really want to lead?

Sixth movement

By the sixth day there is much to reflect on, so each person, with the help of the facilitators and other members of the group, names and clarifies her own focus for the day and then pursues it in the way she chooses to create.

Seventh movement

Input⁵ is offered on Jesus' vision of leadership, followed by guided questions about each one's vision for herself based on her own reality. Once she has identified her vision of leadership, each woman names concrete responses to the following questions:

- What keeps me from moving this way?
- What resources do I have within me and around me to live my vision of leadership?
- What else do I need and where can I find it?
- What am I actually going to do when I return to implement my vision of leadership?

Eighth movement

On the last day time is given for each person to complete what still needs to be addressed or stay with the highlights of her retreat. After that each one writes a letter to herself, a letter which is posted to her by the retreat leaders three months later. Finally an evaluation of the retreat by the participants is completed and shared.

Discernment

Discernment in this retreat is about how each one can be more true to the Spirit within as she exercises her leadership. This may be accomplished alone, and also with the group if asked for by any participant; the retreat leaders are also available.

However, the participants are encouraged to speak in the group because there the ongoing process can be shared and group discernment is possible. For instance, the person who identified the sub-personality, 'Know It All', asked the group, 'How can I let go of my tendency to be in control and know it all?' In response the group helped her clarify the problem. They identified that when people contradicted her she argued with them to prove her point rather than exploring what the other wanted to tell her. The participant decided that one behaviour she could initiate would be first to ask questions of people when they offered their point of view, and only after that give her own point of view. In this way she would be leading out of her Essence, 'Joyful Communion'.

Some evaluative comments from participants

Participants over the past three years have found the experience very helpful both during the retreat and in the years that followed. Some of their comments include:

'It was invigorating to get in touch with myself, my Essence, my feelings and my dreams.'

'For the first time I realized that I, a woman, am also made in the image of God.'

'It was a great help for me to be more aware of my body in prayer. I noticed where I was storing negative energy and could begin to let it go. I as a leader had allowed negative energy to enter my being and this has not been helpful to me.'

'I keep the letter I wrote to myself in my journal and it has been a helpful reminder to me to lead from within.'

'The greater inner freedom I have experienced enables me to lead with more freedom and less anxiety.'

‘The way the retreat leaders acted in partnership has given me new ways to act in partnership with others in my leadership position at home.’

Some remarks from the retreat leaders

This way of doing a retreat has been very effective for the women with whom we have journeyed. Even when people come from different spiritual practices, different Christian churches and walks of life they find they have much to share with each other, and they bond well in the process, too. Each retreat is unique because it is adapted to the spiritual development and practices of the particular group participants themselves.

We have travelled all this way
to celebrate, to reflect, to laugh, to receive and to give.

We move out cherishing our gifts
knowing there is more than one direction from every stop along the way.

Rose Mary Dowling is a Franciscan Sister of Mary from St Louis, MO, USA. She is an international consultant and at present lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is involved in Organisational Development and Transformation as a member of Community Consulting Services.

Ann Wigley is a Dominican Sister from Kingwilliamstown, South Africa. As a member of Community Consulting Services she works in Organisational Development and Transformation in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

NOTES

1 Cf *Human Development* vol 19, no 4 (Winter 1998), pp 30–34.

2 Cf *Review for Religious* vol 53, no 4 (July–August 1994), pp 486–497; Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus again for the first time* (HarperCollins 1995).

3 Howard Schechter, *Rekindling the Spirit in work* (Station Hill Openings Barrytown Ltd, 1995).

4 *Ibid.*

5 Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO, using ancient wisdom for visionary leadership* (New York: Hyperian, 1995).