

INTERVIEW WITH L. ROO McKENZIE

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

Janet Ledesma (JL): Please tell me about your journey as it relates to spiritual leadership?

L. Roo McKenzie (LRM): I was born in a Christian family and the experience of growing up with a biblical worldview made an indelible impression on my life. However, being in a religious home did not make me a spiritual person. I accepted Christ as my personal Savior when I was 12 years old, and that has been the best decision I have ever made. My spirituality (the indwelling of God's Spirit in me—my connection to the Vine) nurtured me into having an unquenchable desire to be like Christ. From the days of my youth, it seems, I was called by God to be a leader. I was chosen from a young age to function as a leader in various roles in my church. When I attended the Adventist high school in my conference, I soon became a student leader. These experiences confirmed in me that God was calling me to lead by precept and example. I attended college and received training as both a pastor and an educator.

As a young pastor, I was constantly on my knees inviting the Spirit of Christ to sanctify, indwell, empower, and direct my every thought, word, and action. When I began my education ministry as a teacher, I made the time to daily consecrate myself to God so that I could represent Him positively to my students. Wherever I have served as principal, I have intentionally given God His rightful place in my school. He is the One to

"Leadership from a sanctified heart begins with a heart in which God dwells and from which He leads, guides, and nurtures His children to do His will on earth as it is done in heaven." Dr. McKenzie lives by this motto. He has invested 40 years in educational ministry, teaching and sharing with school principals ways in which they can plug into the always-available and unending source of power from above as they lead their students, teachers, and parents to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. Dr. McKenzie uses the lives of biblical leaders who possessed a sanctified heart as they built up God's kingdom to help principals do so on earth as they prepare students for His kingdom to come. He is currently the Vice President of University Advancement and University Relations at Washington Adventist University. Previously, he served as Headmaster at Loma Linda Academy, Education Evangelist for Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and Adjunct Professor of Educational Administration at La Sierra University. Janet Ledesma, Ph.D., is the Educational Leadership Coordinator and Associate Professor of Educational Administration at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

be revered, obeyed, and cherished. I have allowed the Divine agencies to have first place in the entire school program and that has created the margin of excellence in the schools in which I have served.

JL: What does spirituality mean to you?

LRM: Spiritual leadership is grace in motion. It is living from a sanctified heart. Spirituality is the connection of a human (the branch) to the Vine (Christ) in a sanctifying relationship that empowers a leader to live a life of consecration and to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. Spirituality is fruit-bearing—it bears the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Spiritual leadership is not so much something that one does. It is a thing of the heart—a state of being born again and allowing the Spirit of God to lead one's life and produce the very fruits that are found on the Vine—Jesus Christ.

JL: What do you see, if any, as a difference between being a religious or a spiritual leader?

LRM: A religious leader could be one who theoretically knows about Christ and the principles of His kingdom. A spiritual leader is one who knows Christ experientially and lives a life of total devotion to Him 24/7. Spiritual leadership is fruit-bearing. It bears fruit without effort, for the ability to bear fruit comes from Christ. Religious leadership may go through the motions by using one's own efforts to produce the desired results. Spiritual leadership is not obsessed with outcomes, for the Spirit of Christ is in charge of fruit-bearing. Religious leadership utilizes human effort to do what the Spirit of God can do with such greater efficiency and grace.

JL: What have you read that most impacted you in the area of spiritual leadership?

LRM: I have read countless books on leadership but none of them inspires me like the Bible does. It is my rule of faith and practice. My greatest inspiration for spiritual leadership comes from selected passages in Scripture and from studying the life of Jesus Christ. Here are three of the texts that have definitely impacted my spiritual leadership in a most positive way:

1. 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” This text is definitely a clarion call from God for people to put away their pretense and approach Him in true humility and contrition. A life of fake spirituality that goes through the motion of pleading with God will not get the desired results—forgiveness and healing that blesses in every area of need.

2. Exodus 34:6-7: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.” This text contains what I call total quality leadership (TQL), for it reveals God in all of His divine attributes that are also communicable/transferable to every spiritual leader. This model of leadership from the heart, in any school setting, will transform a school into becoming God’s kingdom of grace, forgiveness, and growth on earth.

3. Philippians 2:6-8: “Who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.” This portrait of Christ is the essence of spiritual leadership. He had no greed for power. He humbled himself, became a servant, condescended to be like sinful men, and became obedient to a shameful death on a cross. Emulating the Christ described here is the essence of spiritual leadership.

JL: Who has empowered you most in the area of spiritual leadership? How?

LRM: John the Baptist answers this question well for me: “He must become greater, I must become less” (John 3:30). Obviously, John was talking about Jesus here. Jesus is the Supreme Mentor in my life. His life and ministry are my model, my guide, my goal, and my reward. Christ’s example energizes me to seek for something deeper, higher, eternal, and more noble. It challenges me to crucify self, to be transparent, to be humble, to abhor the greed for power, position, and possession, and to serve every child of His with grace; for in doing so I am serving Him. The life of Christ challenges me to be authentic, compassionate, and trust-

ing. It fuels my spiritual engine to draw power from the only inexhaustible source of real power—from God Almighty.

JL: What experiences have impacted you most as a spiritual leader?

LRM: People, rich or poor, old or young, Christian or non-Christian, have needs. I have worked in areas where the needs of students and families were so great that I used my own money to help pay tuition, provide food, and fund other urgent family needs. When I am meeting the needs of others it gives me an opportunity to reveal to them the love and compassion of Christ. I remember once, a grandmother came to me and said that her granddaughter would not be returning to school at the end of the quarter for she could not find the lunch money for her on a daily basis. After a prayer and a request to God, He provided me the extra cash to pay for this young lady's lunch for the rest of the school year. "In as much as . . ." I have also been impacted by the scores of young people who have accepted Christ as their Savior and who I have personally baptized. This to me is the quintessential goal of Adventist education and the strongest indicator that the spiritual development of children is happening in a God-pleasing manner.

JL: What does a spiritually led school look like?

LRM: For students, a spiritually led school is one in which students are clear about the priority of their spiritual development and where they see spiritual values being modeled by the staff. There is a school in my union that decided that God was going to be given priority in the activities of each day. The principal and staff decided that at 3:00 pm every day, everyone would stop whatever they were doing and pray, using the model in 2 Chronicles 7:14. The principal testified that there was a gradual but noticeable spiritual awakening on campus. Students would remind teachers of the prayer time. As a result of earnestly seeking God as a school family, the enrollment of the school doubled over time, the financial problems of the school were resolved, and there was unimaginable reconciliation among faculty and staff. The Lord had healed their land (school) just as He had promised.

Faculty and staff members who are truly born-again and converted at heart understand that their primary role in teaching is to lead students into a loving relationship with Christ. These teachers also recognize that their most effective way to influence students for Christ is through mod-

eling a Christ-centered lifestyle, both in private and in public. A spiritual faculty not only takes time to pray, but also relates to students and to each other with grace, compassion, kindness, and patience. In a school setting, there is no gospel or lesson that is greater than the gospel/lesson according to you—the teacher. The teacher is the greatest lesson book of spiritual graces on any school campus.

When the Spirit of Christ is the dominant force on campus, families, teachers, board members, students, and constituents feel the pulse of the Spirit in everything that happens in relation to the school. The peace of Christ reigns supremely as the Spirit produces fruits of love, joy, peace, kindness, grace, patience, goodness, faithfulness and self-control in everyone.

JL: How do you help leaders grow spiritually?

LRM: A leader's spirituality is a personal thing. Spirituality is like breathing—no one can do it for you. When it comes on to spiritual leadership, “fake it till you make it” is not an option. The Lord loves a contrite and genuine heart. Every leader ought to personally examine himself and be open with God about where his heart is centered. A leader cannot make his life practice what the heart does not embrace. In just about everything in life, there is the genuine and counterfeit. The Spirit of God knows the inmost soul of every follower who claims a relationship with Him. A tried and true way to help leaders grow spiritually is to lure them to the altar of contrition where the soul empties itself of its own agenda and allows God to consecrate, empower, and control one's life to the point where the soul genuinely exclaims, “Not my will, but Yours and Yours alone, O Lord.” For the spiritual leader, there is no substitute for a life of personal devotion and daily surrender to Christ. That is the place where connection is made to the Vine and where the life-energizing sap of the Holy Spirit flows into the life of the leader, thus making her not only a model of holy living and fruit bearing, but also a leader who grows into becoming like unto her Master. Spiritual growth is a voluntary thing. It cannot be mandated or coerced.

JL: What advice would you give to leaders who want to grow their team spiritually?

LRM: First, become a spiritual leader who is genuine and enthusiastic about modeling Christ to the school family. Let the walk be equal to the

talk. People are very discerning and can easily tell when the talk from leadership about spirituality is just empty talk. Second, select and retain only teachers who are passionate about their own spiritual journey with Christ. Third, call a solemn assembly of the staff and pray. Use the 2 Chronicles 7:14 model and persist until the transformation begins in the life of the staff first; then share it with students and families. Fourth, there is no power on earth that is greater than the power of love and prayer—so cultivate a spirit of love on campus and make prayer a part of every class and activity, and also a specific corporate activity of the school.