

Answering the Call:  
Christian Leadership and Cultural Impact  
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LDRS 502 Cornerstones of Christian Leadership

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“God is looking for some strong-shouldered leaders who say, ‘If there’s a tough assignment any where in the world, I’m available’ ” (Hybels). *The Hole in Our Gospel* is written by one such leader, Richard Stearns, who was willing to ask some tough questions and then responded to the call. World Vision is one of the largest international relief and development nonprofits in the world and through their sixty years of experience they have developed a practical and proven approach to helping children and families and have transformed communities around the world (Stearns, 2009). Richard Stearns has been their president for fourteen years and is leading the way in their global impact. His influence goes beyond his corporate leadership. He is taking the Christian gospel message and seeing it as the powerful agent of change that it is intended to be. He is challenging those who claim to be followers of Christ to embrace the gospel and embody it in their lives and their work and to make a difference in the culture around them. He truly is following Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, who said, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God” (Stearns, 2009, p. 9). This impact, that Richard Stearns has had and is continuing to have, comes through his personal story of resistance and obedience, his work at World Vision as their president, and most strongly through his challenge to the church, the very people that Jesus called to be the salt and light of this world.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your

Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16 New International Version)

Richard Stearns has had a journey that is plagued with asking some important questions. Why did God make me? How does our Christian faith impact the way we live? What does God expect of me? Stearns was not an extraordinary man with an unquestioned calling to save the world. In fact, he was quite the opposite. He was an ordinary man, pursuing his life goals and living the American dream. As CEO of a large company, quite comfortable with his opulent lifestyle, involved in his suburban church, and respected in his community, he could have been pegged as a 'poster child' for the successful Christian life (Stearns, 2009). "In my own life, success, the prestige of my career, the admiration I felt from others because of it, and the financial prosperity that had come with it had become more and more important to my identity" (Stearns, 2009, p. 43). It was exactly someone with those types of credentials that was needed to get the job done. God began to get his attention and reveal to him he had much bigger and better plans for him. Richard Stearns, through a series of circumstances, divine appointments, and promptings from God began to discover and understand what his true calling from God was. "He called us to go out, to proclaim the 'good news' - to be the 'good news' - and to change the world. Living out our faith privately was never meant to be an option" (Stearns, 2009, p. 3). He had to ask what type of gospel he had embraced;

a revolutionary gospel that is truly good news for a broken world or a diminished gospel - with a hole in it - that's been reduced to a personal transaction with God, with little power to change anything outside your own heart. (Stearns, 2009, p. 279)

His personal story of resistance, struggle, apprehension, lack of courage, and eventually transformation draws us as individuals to ask the same questions. Most Christians in America, if

they would be honest, would have to say that they are pursuing the lifestyle that Richard Stearns had achieved. Have we each asked the question, “Are you willing to be open to God’s will for your life” (Stearns, 2009, p.94)? In order to have an impact in the world around us we need to be transformed ourselves by what is at the heart of the gospel. “It takes transformed people to transform the world” (Stearns, 2009, p.74). Stearns’ personal story calls us to ask these difficult questions and spurs us to dig deep within our hearts for honest answers.

As CEO of World Vision, Richard Stearns has tremendous opportunities to travel throughout the world. In doing so he gets a much larger perspective and a better view of the bigger picture. Making us aware of the global needs and crisis’ is inevitably part of the responsibility of an organization like World Vision. Indeed, the need is great and the challenges seem insurmountable. In 1999, former president Jimmy Carter was asked to prepare a speech that would answer the question, what is the greatest challenge facing humankind in the twenty-first century (Stearns, 2009)? His conclusion was “that the greatest problem of our time was the growing gap between the richest and the poorest people on earth” (Stearns, 2009, p. 98). Today, through media and all forms of communication, we can much more easily see what is happening in the world around us. “Lack of awareness is no longer an issue” (Stearns, 2009 p. 102). In fact, maybe this constant bombardment from the media has desensitized us to the harsh realities we so frequently tune in to. “We have become detached and indifferent toward the constant and repeated images of poverty and adversity that bombard us. In fact apathy has earned its own term: compassion fatigue” (Stearns, 2009, p.102). Despite this, Stearns and World Vision don’t ever let us lose sight of the fact that we are not simply talking about statistics or facts but these are real people struggling to survive every day. The child sponsorship approach that World Vision has taken helps us to personalize the difficulties. Even those outside of Christian circles

have compassion and are willing to help another human being. By reducing the global issues down to helping an individual child, World Vision enables people to have an impact that they might otherwise dismiss. “I believe that we really can alter the world, but we can only do it one person at a time. And when enough people choose to do this, even a crisis on a global scale can change” (Stearns, 2009, p. 163). As Stearns shares the personal stories from those around the world, there creates a sense of connectedness and responsibility. He believes and pursues the idea that each of us as individuals can make a difference and he encourages others to embrace that same idea. “It is possible to change the world’s realities, and that is exactly what God has challenged us to do. This is what it means to be ‘salt and light’ in a dark and bleak world” (Stearns, 2009, p.164).

His personal story and his strength as a corporate leader for World Vision certainly reveal Richard Stearns’ impact as a Christian leader. However, I believe his strongest impact potentially comes through his challenge to the church. He has seen first-hand the dramatic gap that Jimmy Carter referred to. He has witnessed the incongruity between the teachings of Jesus in the gospel and the goals and values predominantly embraced by the churches in America. “I try to imagine what this looks like to God as He sees all of His churches - the wealthy and the needy - and wonders why the churches He has blessed have not reached out to their poor, burdened brothers and sisters” (Stearns, 2009, p. 177). Stearns unapologetically asks Christians to really take a good look at how we are responding to the call of Christ in a hurting and desperate world.

If church leaders do not have an outward vision to become salt and light in our world, to promote social and spiritual transformation, pursue justice, and proclaim the whole gospel, then the church will fail to realize its potential as an agent of

change. It will become inwardly focused on meeting the needs of its members, to the exclusion of its nonmembers. It will be a spiritual cocoon, where Christians can retreat from a hostile world, rather than a “transformation station” whose primary objective is to change the world. We need only to read our church bulletin to see where our priorities have been placed. How many of the announcements involve programs that focus more on meeting our needs than the needs of those outside the church? ...When our churches become spiritual spas in which we retreat from the world, our salt loses its saltiness, and we are no longer able to impact the culture. (Stearns, 2009, p. 179)

Richard Stearns see the church, the body of Christ, as having the greatest potential to be an incredible agent of change in our culture and around the world and yet “without the collective and organizing power of churches, the ability of Christians to impact the world is greatly compromised” (Stearns, 2009, p. 179). Stearns has been the American Christian ‘poster child’ so he stands perfectly positioned to challenge the church, to give a wake up call and to see if our gospel indeed has a gaping hole in it. If the church genuinely responded to their call, wouldn’t that be the most incredible witness to the world around us as to the true transforming power of God’s love? “When we do the gospel - the whole gospel - the world takes notice and likes what it sees” (Stearns, 2009, p. 186).

It is important for students of leadership to examine the life of Christian leaders, like Richard Stearns, and look at the impact they have had through their personal life and their work. More importantly, we must draw from their experience and understanding and put that into perspective in terms of our own calling. “A changed world requires change agents, and change agents are people who have first been changed themselves” (Stearns, 2009, p. 244). As our

thinking is challenged, our convictions defined, and our understanding of the gospel message is reframed, Stearns concludes with some very practical and doable ways to respond. He first challenges us to answer the question “What has God given you” (Stearns, 2009, p. 259)? How are we using our time, talent and treasure? Throughout the scriptures and Christian history we see that God took what was offered and used it. Moses had a stick, David had a slingshot, Paul had a pen, Mother Teresa possessed a love for the poor, Billy Graham had a gift for preaching and Joni Eareckson Tada has a disability. The one thing that they had in common was simply a willingness to let God use whatever they had (Stearns, 2009). The challenge is set before us then, to be the agents of change that we are called to be and catch the vision. “Picture a different world. Imagine one in which two billion Christians embrace the gospel - the whole gospel - each doing a part by placing his or her piece into the puzzle and completing God’s stunning vision of a reclaimed and redeemed world, the kingdom of God among us” (Stearns, 2009, p. 278). Am I ready to answer the call? Are you?

## References

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