

The Good Shepherd – what constitutes true leadership?

In an election year it is important to reflect on the qualities of leadership. Remembering that those elected to go to Washington represent the people who chose them, it is especially important that elected officials carry with them an attitude of service. The following story, told by Maryknoll lay missionary Alicia Butkiewicz, demonstrates the leadership that stems from service, allowing people to live life to its fullest expression.

Some years ago I met two young indigenous women, Julia and Elena. They were only 22 and 23 years old. When they came to study at the Institute for Rural Education for Women, they stayed with us in Cochabamba, Bolivia. This institute where I was teaching hosted around 45 indigenous women every year who were from different rural communities in Bolivia. We usually provided training in knitting, cooking, sewing, first aid and some mathematics and organizational tools to use in their community. After one year of preparation, the students would return to their own communities to work and practice everything that they learned at the institute.

However, during the second year, Julia and Elena came back to the institute with specific educational needs. They wanted to learn more about mathematics and how to calculate expenses and income. They wanted to learn about the prices and market value for potatoes and other vegetables. They wanted to learn about management of meetings and organization of communities. They expressed that they did not want to only learn to knit and cook. They were so convincing that we decided to modify our program for that year. Again, after this year of discovering and learning, they returned to their community and I went to visit with them. I had the opportunity to see first-hand, the reality of their daily lives and the needs that prompted their demand for leadership training and not just cooking and sewing.

They lived in Alalay, an isolated community in the middle of the mountains between the Quechua and Aymara cultures, where the only income their people had came from cultivating potatoes. They didn't have access to public transportation, so it was impossible to bring their products to the main cities. They would instead, sell their potatoes to middlemen who would in turn, transport them to the big cities and sell them for three times more than what they paid. Julia and Elena, in their contact with the institute and with the city, realized that the people in their community were victims of exploitation by the people who had means to get the potatoes to the cities in big trucks. They saw their potatoes selling for three times more than what they were receiving back in their community.

Thanks to the awakening of these two young women who used their studies and personal initiatives, a community was organized and found the strength to fight against this injustice. These women organized a union of potato producers and fought the exploitation that robbed them of fair prices for their vegetables. They successfully assumed the role of leaders and through and with their community, fought for their rights. And this movement was further extended to other communities in the area.

Can we attribute leadership and good shepherding to Elena and Julia? Yes, we can. They were committed to change an injustice that was being done to their community. Day

after day, month after month, year after year they made this change happen. All of their studies and education were used to uplift the quality of life in their community.

When Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd and I lay down my life for my sheep," He spoke of a "life" commitment to his flock – the 24 hour, seven days a week, 365 days a year kind of commitment that enabled him to say, "I know mine and mine know me." A Shepherd is the essence of commitment. Elena and Julia were true Shepherds in their dedication to their community.

I don't know if Elena and Julia are familiar with this gospel image, but it is clear that they were good leaders, good shepherds in their vocation of service and used their knowledge to become committed, caring and courageous catalysts for change. They challenged a system of exploitation and also the educational program at the Institute. Thanks to them, we had to review and change our program to serve the needs of the women, so that they could be better prepared to be instruments for social change.

Leadership is service -- Julia and Elena worked hard to make it possible for their community to have a better life and have it in abundance.

Through her work with the Rural Education for Women program in Bolivia, Alicia Butkiewicz came to know how to recognize true leaders, leaders who take serving their community very seriously. In this election year we are challenged to exercise our power to choose good leaders who serve the community in bringing about the common good for all. As part of our commitment to seeking the common good, U.S. Catholics should begin to insist that lawmakers enact policies that will reverse some of the damage done when decisions were based on the interests of a few.

Read more about the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions in Maryknoll's [Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world](#). Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 U.S. elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the United States and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change

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