

1. **Prayer is Absolutely Essential.** Every day it is essential to ground yourself in God. There is so much coming at you as a denominational executive (or pastor or lay leader for that matter) that taking time for your spiritual disciplines helps you know how to keep the main thing the main thing. “An active prayer life keeps it from being about you.”(Bishop Ough) We still operate in a culture where prayer is often about getting something rather than an act of letting go. The kind of prayer that is necessary to effectively lead is about opening ourselves up so that we can be available to God’s purposes—essentially, getting out of God’s way. It is acknowledging through prayer the power and presence of God. And, it’s being reminded that we can’t do it ourselves but God can.
2. **The Belief that God is at Work and Will Work to Guide and Direct our Efforts.** Closely related to prayer is the firm belief that God is already at work and *will* work to guide and direct our transformational efforts. While it is possible to have a fundamental belief that God is at work in the world without fully understanding one’s place in God’s work, prayer provides the space to discern how we can cooperate with the Spirit that is already moving. Related to what a leader fundamentally believes, another key to success is the language that we use. The Sufi poet Hafiz wrote, “What we speak becomes the house we live in.” The pall of despair and decline has been too pervasive in the past 30 years. The lamenting must stop and we must focus our whole selves on God’s work – this means being very careful and intentional about the words we choose to use.
3. **Looking for the Miracles that are Happening and Telling the Stories of Transformation.** The definition of miracles that we are using here is not just the literal miracle of whether or not the person with cancer is healed. Rather it is the more ordinary moments when God’s love and grace overwhelms our sensibilities; when we see our faith communities become submerged in God’s goodness. Recently, one of our small churches gathered together to do the funeral of a stranger, someone who was destitute and without family. That story went viral in the media. This is a miracle. A miracle may simply be that people believe that God’s grace has been unleashed. When we do something ordinary God takes that ordinary act and creates something incredible. We still have to be honest about the despair, brokenness and decline in our mainline situation but we can’t allow ourselves to believe that despair has the last word. It’s about God transforming us and changing us. The stories that we tell only have power if they are told and heard and believed. The stories have to touch the heartstrings in order to inspire change.
4. **Developing a Clear Sense of One’s Mission as a Leader.** A great leader at this time in history has to know how God intends to use them and how God is already using them. “I have a fundamental belief that God wants to work through me to create new life here.” (Bishop Ough) It is important to be bold and have the confidence that God has a clear plan and mission. The other critically important belief is that we cannot control the decline and revitalize simply by being a skillful manager or technician. We will stay stuck in a rut with the only the mechanics. Mechanics and technicians make things efficient but this is not ultimately what will get us to the revitalization of the mainline. It’s about God transforming us and changing us. Again, “we cannot manage our way into revitalization, we can only be led into it.” (Bishop Ough)
5. **Being Willing to Color outside the Lines.** Most of us spend the bulk of our lives and energies trying to create boxes of sensibility. We spend time trying to figure out how to manage our lives according to our denominational rules while our churches feel the pressure to put together

predicable programs and governing structures. Boxes can be helpful and are a necessary evil in some ways in order to keep large organizations in check but when those boxes begin to keep us from seeing where God is at work they then keep us from being able to live into the miraculous. The task of the leader is to work to break down those boxes in order to get to a different place or to create a different organizational culture. All organizations need to constantly re-create themselves. The whole journey of a leader is orientation to disorientation to orientation. We only grow if we have seasons of disorientation. “We typically cannot be arrested by God’s presence unless we are a little disoriented.” (Bishop Ough) A leader sometimes needs to say outrageous things in order to lift up an idea that is out of the box for it is “only when we are disoriented that God can command our full attention.” (Bishop Ough) We can’t get too comfortable with the way things are because we will then feel trapped or, even worse, come to believe that we don’t need God. A critical piece of advice: you can win many trust points by taking a good, calculating risk but you lose a lot if it doesn’t work.

6. **Being Fearless in Making Extremely Tough Decisions and Choices and Managing the Anxiety that Is Generated.** Being fearless is in large part about being consistent. It is one thing to make a tough decision, it is something else to stay with that decision even when the pressure builds. It is important to live with a tough decision long enough to make an impact. But there is a difference between being fearless and being reckless. Being fearless is about courageously living out of one’s values and one’s faith that God is at work. Being reckless sometimes happens when we do or say outrageous things only to get the attention of the organization or to create disorientation instead of making a tough decision because it is the right thing to do.
7. **Humbly Admitting Mistakes and Working to Fix Those.** If a risk doesn’t work you can’t ignore it and you can’t blame someone else for the mistake. A courageous and effective leader readily acknowledges mistakes, takes ownership of them, and humbly and sincerely apologizes for those mistakes. This is the only way to build and maintain trust. When you take risks, not everything is going to work. One doesn’t always know for sure if it is God’s right time. Sometimes leaders want to be fearless without a willingness to take responsibility for the outcomes. This will be a disaster for the organization if you cannot admit your mistakes.
8. **Always Being Grateful.** Every day is a gift and it is a tremendous privilege to be in religious leadership at this time in history. God is doing powerful work in the refining of our mainline traditions and as a people of faith we are breaking free from the structures that held us in bondage. We are confident that we will break free to do God’s will in order to create disciples for the transformation of the world.

Whatever role you play—as pastor, lay leader, or denominational executive—you can help to reverse the steep decline in our traditional systems. We will lose some churches that are too far down the life cycle of decline, while others will turn around in remarkable ways. Choosing life, in whatever form it takes, is key. The spirit, attitude, and tone of our leadership will make all the difference.

Findings of denominational executives Bishop Bruce Ough of the Minnesota and Dakotas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church and Susan Nienaber, District Superintendent web article found in ***PERSPECTIVES***, Congregational Consulting Group