

being a theologian

BE PROPHETIC

October 4, 2019 J. A. Dick

Change Agent

The gift of prophecy is listed among the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and Romans 12:6. The Greek word translated “prophesying” or “prophecy” in both passages most properly means to “speak forth.”

Many people misunderstand the gift of prophecy as the ability to predict the future. Knowing something about the future may sometimes have been an aspect of prophecy; but it is really a gift of proclamation (“forth-telling”) and not of prediction (“fore-telling”).

Prophets and prophetic movements are agents of social change. We need them. We also need to support and take on the prophetic challenge. In my RCC tradition, I greatly value the Roman Catholic Women Priests movement. These ordained women are courageous contemporary prophets.

We need prophets in religion and of course in politics and environmental issues. I find Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish environmental activist, a contemporary prophet.

Maybe we need to set up formation centers for training prophets, who can be effective change agents....A good parish project for Advent or Lent? A project for youth ministry?

I see five qualities necessary for effective prophetic change agents (drawing from the book *THE INNOVATOR’S MINDSET*, by the Canadian educator George Couros):

1. Having a Clear Vision – The change agent does not have to be the person in authority, but does have to have a clear vision and has to be able to clearly communicate that to others. A clear vision does not mean that there is only one way to do things. Having a clear vision means one can draw on the strengths of the people one works with and can help them see that there are many ways to work toward a common objective. Interactive dialogue is important. Know-it-all little dictators are not bonafide change agents.

2. Being patient yet persistent – Change does not happen overnight. To have sustainable change, it must be presented as something truly meaningful and something people see as important and something they should embrace. In our push-button culture, many people get frustrated that change does not happen fast enough and they lose sight of the vision as something that can really be achieved. Effective change agents need to help people see that every step forward is a step closer to the goal. This helps people to continue moving ahead.

3. Asking tough questions – When a solution is someone else's, there is little accountability for seeing it through. When people feel a personal connection to something, however, they can truly move ahead. Asking questions and helping people come to their own conclusions, based on their experience, is when people truly take ownership in what they are doing. Effective change agents ask questions to help people think. They don't just tell people what to do.

4. Being knowledgeable and leading by example – Effective change agents have character and credibility. They are not just nice people. They are knowledgeable in what they are speaking about. If one wants to create change, one must not only be able to articulate what that change would look like but actually show it to others. What I like, for example, about the women priests movement is that women are truly and effectively ministering as ordained ministers.

5. Having strong relationships built on trust – All of the points above, mean just about nothing if one does not have solid relationships with the people one is serving. People will not want to grow if they do not trust the person who is pushing for change. Change agents must be extremely approachable and reliable. This doesn't mean that they aren't willing to have respectful but tough conversations. That also builds trust. Trust is built when one knows someone will deal with things and not be afraid to do what is right, even if it is uncomfortable.

A friend asked me last week what changes I would like to see in our communities of faith. There are three I would stress right now:

First of all, I am very concerned about young people. I would like to see our Christian communities actively listening to young people and truly involving them in life and ministry in our communities. A Catholic bishop acquaintance told me, not so long ago, that he was going to meet with about a hundred young men and women from his diocese. I said: “Terrific. What are you going to do?” He replied: “I have a list of things to tell them, because, as their bishop, I am their teacher.” I chuckled and replied: “But maybe you should first of all just listen to what they are thinking and want to say. Perhaps they are YOUR teachers.”

Next month I am starting a new course about Jesus, his disciples, and the early Christian communities. In my first class, I will point out to my students that the men AND WOMEN who were Jesus’ disciples were YOUNG — most likely all under 20 and some quite possibly as young as 15 or 16.

Secondly, in our communities of faith, we must absolutely affirm and support our gay, lesbian, and transgender people. People should not be fired or expelled from our institutions because of their sexual orientation. Jesus said, as I stressed in an earlier post, absolutely nothing about sexual orientation. I find especially repugnant the ecclesial hypocrisy of church leaders who are publicly homophobic and privately abusively gay. I am thinking right now of a bishop who died this past year. In public he was strongly anti-gay and proclaimed that they were “innately disordered.” Privately he was a regular sexual molester of handsome young seminarians.

Thirdly, I am a firm believer in the separation of church and state. Church leaders have no business telling people for whom they should vote. Church leaders, however, do have a responsibility to encourage believers to Observe, Judge, and Act: (1) Observe how our political leaders are speaking and behaving, (2) Judge whether or not their rhetoric and actions are consistent with their often-professed Christianity, and (3) if there are obvious values failures and shortcomings, to take appropriate Action. There are many contemporary applications here.....

May we all be prophetic,

Jack Dick