

Excerpt from Chapter 3 Breaking Rules

The Responsibility of Breaking Rules

Movement rule breakers see greater purpose and therefore risk different behaviors or practices for missional ends. Many of our local church, conference and denominational leaders like to see themselves in such light, as do I. To be a rule breaker is to be courageous, it is to be creative, it requires insightfulness. Many of us like to see ourselves this way. Nonetheless, some discernment of our own motives and actions is appropriate before assuming the mantle of courageous, creative leader.

Courage, independence and personal creativity may be the reason given by a pastor for why he behaves unilaterally without approval of the church board or for why she absents herself from district clergy gatherings that she sees as purely administrative requirements. Creativity and insightfulness might be claimed by a district superintendent who doesn't do annual interviews of all clergy on the district. A claim to hold the big-picture reality that others can't see might be used to explain why a bishop or general agency executive does not comply with a regulation. We like to see ourselves in such bold roles as the person who will risk the rules for some other end. Nonetheless, we need to wrestle with pride, self-deception and perhaps even laziness if the end result of breaking a constraint is to have the effect of increasing ministry instead of simply making less work for ourselves or relieving personal stress.

One of my favored memories of my time on staff at the Alban Institute was a casual bagel-and-coffee conversation at a café with colleagues. The conversation turned to naming the ten best books used most badly. We were reflecting on our experience of how really good ideas could be, and were, misused for personal reasons. Quickly the Bible went to the top of the list, with few explanations needed. Then we began to share experiences from working with congregations and their leaders. One of us noted the important concept of the "non-anxious presence" from Edwin Friedman's work in applying family systems theory to congregations. The non-anxious presence is that person who manages his or her own anxiety in a way to provide a calm presence as a leader. Such a presence is essential in a system where people are becoming increasingly anxious to the point of not functioning well. An important idea from an important book. Then the colleague told the story of when a pastor arose from the board table during a contentious meeting with leaders to declare that it was 9 pm and that he was a "non-anxious leader" who would not be moved by their threats and so was going home to his wife. In fact, he was not non-anxious and was not trying to help. He simply no longer cared if he offended the other leaders in the church. It was a good book used badly. Another colleague recalled a pastor who was a self-declared alcoholic who carried a sense of pride about his disease. Drawing on Henry Nouwen's writing about Jesus as the wounded healer who provided wholeness by unwrapping his own wounds, this pastor drew on this important insight into the divine humanity of Jesus to claim that he maintained his affliction so that he could connect pastorally to the people in his parish. As we gathered around coffee we were able to provide a growing list of good books used in self-deceptive ways. We do at times deceive ourselves, giving greater purpose to our actions that may, in fact, be designed to make it easier on ourselves. Not all

leaders are noble. Not all rule breakers are the same. We must discern our own needs and evaluate our own motives.

The Criteria for Breaking Rules

Beyond personal gratification or comfort, rule breaking requires a thoughtfulness that addresses purpose. Indeed, rule breakers will want to consider criteria for breaking rules since there should be as much discipline in breaking rules as in following them. In speaking of his own leadership in a military culture, Retired Lt. General James Dubik, who was the Commanding General of the Multi National Security Transition Command in Iraq, offered his own discipline for breaking rules.¹ He noted that a military leader might face ~~the~~ a situation in the field or while developing strategy where new direction needs to be taken, despite the strict chain of command that set the original course. General Dubik pointed out that leaders may need to break rules however, they cannot act unilaterally, lest such action encourage a culture of rule breaking among soldiers. Instead leaders must progress methodically and thoughtfully. He noted the three questions that he used as a general to discern right action in such situations. The three questions are:

- What is the purpose of the rule?
- Is this rule still appropriate?
- Does the rule serve or prevent the mission?

As one would imagine, General Dubik spoke with an appreciation of bureaucracies and saw them as necessary, because they provide transparent processes that allow repetitive actions and decisions already known to the organization to function without slowing the organization down. However, when it comes to new situations requiring new decisions, he noted that bureaucracies “don’t do new or fast well.” In such settings the people closest to the action must make new decisions. Purposeful, missional questions are critical for making decisions in a discerning way. If rules are to be broken, there must be reason and the reason must be missional.

If a rule is determined to not be missional, the leader is still not free to act unilaterally. The leader is first obligated to change the rule. In the military, seeking such change might be managed by addressing a superior or group of colleagues. A response might be received quickly. In local United Methodist churches, where governing boards meet only monthly, Annual Conferences meet only yearly and General Conferences meet only quadrennially such appeal for change is rarely swift. Still, rule breakers are not set free to work unilaterally and spontaneously. There are other helpful steps.

One such step is the act of publicizing. Publicizing means that the leader states his or her intent to change or to vary from the rules publically before acting. Publicizing is most commonly done with supervisors or with colleagues. A pastor does not have the freedom to not submit an annual list of local church officers and leaders, if such a report is required by the conference. However, the pastor can speak with his or her district superintendent in advance of the deadline of the required report and go public.

For example, she can explain to the district superintendent that in the coming year the leaders of the church have determined the next year to be a “Year of Jubilee”. Instead of electing officers and holding administrative meetings, the church will meet for prayer and discernment about their future and their ministry. Holding a Year of Jubilee in which officers are not elected and meetings are not held breaks the rules. However, sharing reasons of missional purpose in advance is more commonly met with support and accountability than with old enforcements. The district superintendent is much more likely

to support the efforts of the leaders and to add accountability by inquiring regularly about progress than to simply require a report for the sake of reporting.

A bishop who discerns the missional need for veering from a disciplinary rule or common practice would do well to public the intent with colleagues in the Jurisdictional College of Bishops for their support and accountability. Effective leaders must guard against change for non-missional reasons. Since change of long established rules and practices are subject to personal motive it is both wise and responsible to approach such change prayerfully, with discernment and clarifying conversation with others who are in a position to give thoughtful feedback and critique.

Courageous and faithful leaders must confront old practices in order to move ahead. Such courageous and faithful rule breakers are needed in a time of movement, as rule bound organizations and institutions are commonly limited to do only what they are already doing. Rule breakers are needed, but the idea of a rule breaker is not the best way to frame the leadership that a new Wesleyan movement needs. The identity of a rule breaker is a negative identity. A rule breaker is someone who stands against something. What movements call for are those people who stand for something.

¹ Retired Lt. General James Dubik, private conversation – Duke Divinity School, 6/29/10