

A Christian ethical analysis of the importance of prophetic leadership for sustainable leadership

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In this article, firstly, prophetic leadership is defined and some of its key features are outlined. Secondly, the contribution made by prophetic leadership to sustainable leadership is investigated, using examples from historical and contemporary societies and organisations. The role of truth-tellers and whistleblowers is also discussed. Thirdly, the importance of utilising and nurturing prophetic leadership in church and theological education settings is discussed.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In its analysis of prophetic and sustainable leadership in historical and contemporary settings, this article draws primarily on the theological discipline of Christian Ethics and, secondarily, on biblical studies and Leadership and Management Sciences.

Keywords: prophetic leadership; sustainable leadership; truth-telling; justice; integrity; whistleblowers; organisational ethics.

Introduction

Recent global and local challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, alongside ongoing challenges related to the misuse of political power and widespread poverty, highlight the need for sustainable leadership. Nullens (2019:185) notes that we face 'volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) ... with all our technological power, we are not in control and the future is unpredictable'. Sustainability is a term often used in relation to the natural environment. However, in this article, its importance to leadership in church, social and organisational contexts is emphasised.

Aims and methodology

The research problem that is investigated below is: What contribution does prophetic leadership make to sustainable leadership? The overall aim of this article is to identify how prophetic leadership can contribute to sustainable Christian leadership in churches, societies and organisations. In the first section of the paper, we discuss what constitutes biblical prophetic leadership. In the second section, we evaluate the historical and contemporary links between prophetic and sustainable leadership. In the third section of the paper, we ask how prophetic leadership can be utilised and nurtured in modern-day church and theological education settings for it to play its intended role.

This article draws primarily on the theological discipline of Christian Ethics and, secondarily, on biblical studies to investigate the role of prophetic leaders. It further uses examples from Leadership and Management Sciences to illustrate the importance of ethics for sustainability, but notes the relative lack of emphasis on prophetic leadership.

Several biblical studies on prophetic leadership were consulted, including those by Brueggemann (2011), Stevens (2012), Pugh (2013), Farisani (2019), Westphal (2019) and Birch (2020). In addition, some commentaries and many biblical examples and texts are cited to illustrate the range of prophetic leadership and the varied contexts in which prophets exercised their ministries.

According to Nullens and Michener (2010):

Christian ethics focuses on how we need to live in our current secularized world. We live in a world scarred by sin, often succumbing to its pressures ourselves, but we also hold to the hope of righteousness and complete justice. (p. 22)

Note: Special Collection: Sustainable leadership in times of uncertainty.

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Christian ethicists seek to determine which moral values and actions are essential to nourish and sustain a good life, not only for individuals but also for society and the natural world.

Christian Ethics is a vital discipline on which to draw for several reasons. Firstly, it is interdisciplinary in nature, regularly drawing from theological and other academic disciplines, including Leadership and Management Studies. Its focus on ethical issues and prophetic leadership in the Bible, church history and modern-day experience can throw light on the relationship between prophetic and sustainable leadership. Secondly, it stresses moral norms and values, such as faithfulness to God, love for neighbour, truth, justice, integrity and hope – all of which are central to Christian prophetic leadership. Such norms are both eternal truths, because they are rooted in God's character, and context specific, because they are essential to encourage and sustain moral character and behaviour in countries, churches and organisations.

The body of literature on leadership and management is vast and ever growing. One can speak, for example, of political, business, organisational, civil society, labour, and church leadership. An extensive range of leadership theories can also be identified (Avery & Bergsteiner 2011:20). Nell (2009:3) quotes Osmer's (2008) threefold model of leadership:

Task competence: Performing the leadership tasks of a role in an organisation well. *Transactional leadership:* Influencing others through a process of trade-offs. *Transforming leadership:* Leading an organisation through a process of 'deep change' in its identity, mission, culture, and operating procedures. (p. 178)

The latter definition is closest to prophetic leadership, because the Holy Spirit brings about 'deep change' in the lives of God's people and, through them, to organisations and the world.

Avery and Bergsteiner (2011:32–37) emphasise both ethical and sustainable leadership by distinguishing between 'locust' and 'honey-bee' forms of leadership. They observe the manner in which employees are treated, the role of the chief executive officer (CEO), how decisions are made and the organisation is managed, and what type of interactions there are with social and environmental realities. While the 'honey-bee' model focuses on ethics, the welfare of employees, long-term employment and staff development, the 'locust' approach is more ruthless with the focus on profit. In the 'honey-bee' model, decision-making is more consensual, and corporate social and environmental responsibilities are taken seriously. Finally, in the 'honey-bee' model, a culture of trust, co-operation and innovation is prominent. All these factors make 'honey-bee' leadership more sustainable than the 'locust' model, as the needs of individuals, societies and the planet are taken into account.

What, then, is sustainable leadership? Visser and Courtice (2011) offer this definition: 'A sustainability leader is someone who inspires and supports action towards a better world' ... such leaders 'adopt new ways of seeing, thinking and interacting that result in innovative, sustainable solutions'. Hence,

sustainability is more than seeking to maintain, support or prolong the existence of a country or organisation. From the perspective of Christian Ethics, sustainability requires persons to be rooted in God and to align themselves with God's nature and purposes, as this is the ultimate means of sustaining life. Such an alignment makes possible realistic planning for the future, although human beings are contingent and human designs are fallible. Without being hidebound to the past, valuable traditions can be retained, while remaining flexible to respond to change and new challenges. Furthermore, being committed to the growth of moral character and resisting damaging temptations produces leaders who resemble 'tree[s] planted by streams of water' (Ps 1:3a) that can withstand storms and drought. Constructive moral relationships result in a positive, nurturing work environment, characterised by collegiality and stress-free co-operation that enhances the well-being of countries and organisations. This, in turn, promotes a much better life for people and our planet.

This article regards sustainability as inextricably linked to ethical leadership and, indeed, to prophetic leadership, because leadership needs to be morally legitimate and beneficial. Sustainable leadership is opposed to 'short-termism and poor ethics' (Avery & Bergsteiner 2011:32). Rather than focusing on self-gratification, narrow group interests and retaining positional power, it consistently serves others and the environment at a personal, social and global level.

Some key features of biblical prophetic leadership

Prophets in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible)

The term 'prophet' [*prophetes*] literally means 'before-speak' or 'someone who proclaims'. True prophets were *called* by God and conveyed God's word to the people, priests and kings as typified in the phrase: 'Thus says the Lord' (e.g. Ex 4:22; Is 48:17; Jr 12:14). They acted under divine compulsion; their message was not their own. Some, like Moses and Jeremiah, were even reluctant to accept their prophetic calling (Ex 3:10–4:17; Jr 1:4–8). Arguably, Moses set the standard for subsequent prophets. He was called by God (Ex 3:1–4:17, see also Is 6; Jr 1:4–19) and proclaimed the will of God to Pharaoh:

He brought a stiff-necked people to God and it was the job of every prophet that followed Moses to bring the people back again, and deal again with the same hardness of heart and rebellion that he encountered. (Pugh 2013:131)

Hence, the *personal integrity* (righteousness) of the prophets was important, lest their behaviour invalidate their message. By definition, then, prophetic leadership is also ethical leadership.

Prophecy includes both '*fore-telling*' (predictions regarding the future) such as the Exile (see next) and the coming of the Messiah (e.g. Is 11:1–9), and '*forth telling*' (proclamations in response to current events), such as God's condemnation of

false piety and injustice (e.g. Is 1:10–17). Westphal (2019:143) quotes Nullens (2014:113), who typifies the calling of the prophet as one of “‘holy opposition’ to the establishment’”. Aligned with God, prophets spoke God’s truth within their religious, social, economic or political circumstances. Farisani (2019:135) quotes the Old Testament scholar, Stevens (2012:26): the prophets ‘speak truth to the power of the monarchy, calling the kings to account for their greed and exploitation of the populace’. The prophets exposed violations of the covenant (e.g. 1 Ki 19:10, 14; Hs 8:1). They rebuked those who ‘trampled on the poor’ and they announced God’s judgement on the people for their sinful injustice and the lack of mercy (Am 8:4–14). Significantly, the prophets also proclaimed messages of *repentance, hope and return* that counteracted despair.

Walter Brueggemann (2011:2–7) argues that the prophets of the Old Testament *exposed false ideologies*. (Written after 9/11, Brueggemann is critical of the ideologies of exceptionalism, greed and denial in the United States of America.) In Jeremiah 28, for example, the false prophet Hananiah offered fabricated hope (see also 1 Ki 13:11–34; 22:1–40). He propounded the false ideology of the establishment, namely that God would protect Jerusalem under all circumstances (Carpenter & McCown 1992). However, Jeremiah persistently prophesied that God would allow the city to be conquered and the people of Judah carried off into exile (see also 2 Ki 25; 2 Chr 36). Prophets used *symbolic actions* and ‘... spoke in elusive, metaphorical ways as a rhetorical strategy’ to challenge false ideologies (Brueggemann 2011:1). Indirect communication – used, for example, in Nathan’s story (2 Sm 12:1–15) and Jesus’ parables (e.g. Mt 21:33–46) – is an effective means of communicating the truth (Fraser 2020:26). In a context of the ‘*practice of denial*’, ‘the prophetic antidote is *truth-telling*’ (Brueggemann 2011:6). Truthful persons stand up and speak, rather than remaining silent. Truthfulness is not only important to promote justice and compassion but it is also God-honouring, beautiful and life-giving.

The prophets were *unique*. Ancient Israel was the only nation that had prophetic leaders (Pugh 2013:131). Their awareness of history and changing events, revealed to them by God, made it possible for them to speak God’s word and to predict future events. Birch (2020:6) notes: ‘All other ancient cultures have priests, kings, and sages ... Yet, none of these parallels suggest a role of authority alongside those of priest, king and sage like the Israelite prophets ...’.

The messages of the prophets were delivered in *complex and ever-changing times*. Therefore, they are not always easy for contemporary interpreters to understand, let alone apply to modern contexts. For instance, while Isaiah predicted that Jerusalem would be protected during the Assyrian invasion in 722 (Is 37), Jeremiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem (Jr 6:1; 32:26–35), which eventually occurred in 587. In fact, Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah over a period of 40 years. His prophecies covered complex events during the reigns of five kings: Josiah (640–609), Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609–597), Jehoiachin (597) and Zedekiah (597–587) (eds. Carson et al. 1994).

Prophetic leaders *functioned alongside the leadership of kings and priests* (Nullens 2014:108; Westphal 2019:140). Westphal (2019:147) argues that these three forms of leadership must function simultaneously. Each has an important function, which must not be subsumed into the other forms. For example, the role of the priest was that of ‘a mediator and problem-solver’ (Westphal 2019:150). Furthermore, when a prophet acts as a king, ‘accountability is lost and the potential of a dictatorship becomes very real ... The focus of king-leadership is decision-making and governance; the focus of prophet-leadership is advocacy’ (Westphal 2019:145). In other words, their functions are different, but they form mutually corrective and complementary types of leadership. Each of these three forms of leadership is required for countries, churches and organisations to thrive.

Prophets in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the prophetic tradition resumes, but some new features are added. As in the Old Testament, both *prediction and proclamation* formed part of early church prophecies (Jn 1:29; Ac 13:9–10), sometimes conveyed in dreams or visions (Ac 10:9–16). John the Baptist’s task was to call the people to repent and turn back to God, but his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah was new (Mt 3:1–3; 11:7–19). Later, John’s prophetic denunciation of Herod Antipas’ marriage to his half-brother’s wife cost John his life (Mt 14:1–12). Other prophets include Agabus, Judas and Silas (Ac 11:28; 21:10–11; 15:32). In both the Old and New Testaments, women also had prophetic ministries. These included Miriam (Ex 15:20–21), Deborah, who was both a prophetess and judge (Jdg 4:4), Huldah (2 Ki 22:14), Anna (Lk 2:36–38), and Philip’s four daughters (Ac 21:9; see also Ac 2:16–21). (False prophetesses are mentioned in Ez 13:17–23 and Rv 2:20.) From the 1st century onwards, the proclamation of the gospel is central to the Christian church.

False teaching and ideologies are exposed, for example, by Jesus himself. He denounced false religion and hypocritical leaders: ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines’ (Mt 15:8–9). Jesus contrasts the true values of the kingdom of heaven to a superficial and legalistic approach to religion (see also Mt 5:17–48; 15:1–20). His words echo the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Is 1; 58), who highlighted the connection between false worship and injustice. In Matthew 23, Jesus denounces the Scribes (the teachers of the scriptures) and the Pharisees (who sought to ensure obedience to the Rabbinic laws). In the ‘seven woes’, he is critical of the leaders’ hypocrisy and unfaithfulness, and the negative effect of their false religion:

- They shut the door to God in people’s faces (v. 13).
- Their religious system makes people worse rather than better (v. 15).
- They swear meaningless oaths (vv. 16–22).
- They ‘strain out a gnat but swallow a camel’, forgetting justice, mercy and faithfulness (vv. 23–24).
- They clean the outside of the cup, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence (vv. 25–26).

- They are hypocritical ‘whitewashed tombs’ (vv. 27–28).
- They are the ‘descendants of those who murdered the prophets’ (vv. 29–36).

Earlier warnings about *false prophets* are reiterated and strengthened. New Testament believers are warned not to ‘despise the words of prophets’, to ‘hold fast to what is good’ and to ‘abstain from every form of evil’ (1 Th 5:20–22). In 1 John 4:1–6, disciples are warned to ‘test the spirits to see whether they are from God’ because of the danger of false prophets (see also 2 Pt 2:1–3; Rv 19:20–21).

How can prophets be tested and true prophecy discerned? In Deuteronomy 13, especially verses 2, 5, and 10, false prophets are defined as those who seduce people to worship other gods and fail to follow God’s commandments. In Jeremiah 23, false shepherds bring division and confusion. They ‘scatter the sheep’ (vv. 1–4), are immoral and wicked (vv. 10–14), ‘speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord’ (v. 16), proclaim a false peace (v. 17), and have false dreams (vv. 25–32). By contrast, true prophets turn the people ‘back from their evil ways’ and towards faithfulness to God (v. 22b). Jesus’ acid test was: ‘You will know them by their fruits’ (Mt 7:15–20): true prophets practise what they preach. Genuine prophets speak the truth, glorify God and strengthen the faith and unity of the church (Jn 16:13–15; 17:13–26; 1 Cor 14:3–5). Their prophecies are validated by others (1 Cor 14:29–33), and the truth of their prediction can be tested, as was the case with Abagus’ prophecies.

Paul encouraged members of the early church to ‘earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy’ (1 Cor 14:1; see also Rm 12:4–7; Eph 4:11–16). Within congregations, the purpose of prophecy is to build up the church and to encourage and console believers (1 Cor 14:26–33) (eds. Marshall et al. 1996). In addition, Christian prophets began to function outside the nation-state of the Jewish people and *within the church and her mission* to the world.

Although some have argued that the gift of prophecy ended in New Testament times, *God continues to use prophets* to ‘give particular local guidance to a church, nation or individual, or to warn or encourage by way of prediction as well as by reminders, in full accord with the written word of Scripture’, or as ‘pioneers of faith’ (eds. Marshall et al. 1996). Today, ecstatic prophecy is common not only in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches but also exists in other churches where the exercise of charismatic gifts, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing are sanctioned. However, a narrow view of prophecy needs to be rejected. Pugh (2013:142) observes that: ‘Our churches need prophets who will overturn the status quo, champion social justice issues, provide vision and call us back to the New Covenant in Christ whenever we drift’.

To summarise, prophetic leadership is grounded in the example of the biblical prophets who were called by God to

live ethical lives and draw others to covenant faithfulness to God. They are truth-tellers in contexts of denial, in both religious settings and society as a whole; advocates of social justice, who proclaim messages of judgement on sin, and extend invitations to redemption.

Historical and contemporary examples of Christian prophetic leadership in society and organisations

The above-mentioned characteristics of prophetic leadership have been exemplified in various ways in different periods of and contexts in church history. A few examples of Christian prophetic leadership in society are outlined here, followed by a discussion of prophetic leadership in organisations. The link between prophetic and sustainable leadership is highlighted throughout.

Prophetic leaders in society

Liberation Theology did much to stress the centrality of the church’s prophetic witness. There are many types of Liberation Theology, but one of the earlier influential Latin American Catholic authors was Gustavo Gutiérrez. In his book, *A theology of liberation* (1974), he stresses the importance of a witness of solidarity and protest against poverty and oppression. He does not reject spiritual poverty (understood as openness and availability to God), but emphasises material poverty. He states that ‘the authenticity of the preaching of the Gospel message depends on this witness’ (1974:288). He stresses the scandalous condition of poverty – of destitution, exploitation, hunger, starvation, landlessness and unemployment. Gutiérrez reminded his contemporaries that the prophets of old denounced both the rich and powerful who exploited the poor (e.g. Is 10:1–2; Am 2:6), and the systems that drove people into poverty. These included the hoarding of land (Mi 2:1–2), unjust rule (Jr 22:13–17; Am 5:7), and crippling taxes (Am 4:1; 5:11–12) (Gutiérrez 1974:287–294). For the church today, resistance to poverty is an act of love and liberation (Gutiérrez 1974:300).

Latin American Liberation Theology became a powerful prophetic voice, calling the church back to its prophetic roots. It sought to restore the authenticity of the church, making its witness more credible and therefore sustainable. This theology has influenced many other parts of the world, including South Africa.

Especially during the 20th century, certain Christian leaders in South Africa stressed the prophetic witness of both individual prophets and the church as a whole. Early prophetic Christian leaders such as Rev. John Dube, Z.K. Matthews and Albert Luthuli spoke out against oppression and injustice (Hastings 1979:104; Khuzwayo 2012:107–110; Kretzschmar 2012:157). Later, Afrikaner prophets such as Ben Marais and Beyers Naudé spoke out against the architects of apartheid (Storey 2012:17). They were joined by priests such

as Trevor Huddleston (1971), Dennis Hurley and Desmond Tutu (see Rakoczy 2006). These and many other prophetic voices were not heeded, and South Africa entered nearly five decades of systematic discrimination and brutal oppression. Resistance to the apartheid government greatly increased, ultimately rendering it unsustainable.

After the official demise of apartheid in 1994, prophetic leadership was still needed. One of the prominent Christian prophets in recent years was the former Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela. She and her colleagues investigated fraud and maladministration in government departments and state-owned enterprises and published a series of highly influential reports (Gqubule 2017; Kretzschmar 2019:17–27). This led to the investigations of the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, which showed that mismanagement and corruption flourished on a grand scale (Zeeman 2022). At the time of writing (2022), political instability, social conflict, economic and environmental decline reveal that unethical rule suppresses truth-telling, and results in an unsustainable, failing state and immense hardship for citizens.

In any society, prophets are needed to restrain the power of the 'kings', because corrupt, self-centred, narcissistic and brutal leaders are dangerous to human and environmental well-being. While influential political, business and other leaders (or 'kings') play a very important role in our churches, societies and organisations, they need to overcome many moral dangers. Ciulla (2016:13–27) highlights '... the personal temptations and challenges such as privilege, power, success, ego, self-interest ...' Ineffectual or immoral leadership can destroy churches because of conflict and disunity; countries become failed states; and organisations can quickly become toxic and dysfunctional. Hence, for leadership to be sustainable, it must be ethical and the voices of the prophets need to be heeded.

Prophetic leadership and sustainable leadership in organisations

Christian prophetic leadership is also vital today in businesses, educational institutions and non-governmental organisations. However, where a secular worldview is dominant, faith is not considered important. Hence, the term 'prophetic leadership' is seldom mentioned in texts on leadership and business ethics. Authors of books on management may not be aware of, or may be reluctant to draw on biblical or religious insights. This does not mean that a prophetic voice is absent or unnecessary. While Christian writers still stress it, some of the roles of biblical prophets in secular society have been taken up by other truth-tellers, 'fools' and whistleblowers.

Bolman and Deal (2008:367) and Nullens (2014:114) have emphasised the importance of prophetic leadership in organisations. For example, prophetic leaders are very valuable members of governing boards because they recognise:

... overlooked truths that need to be rectified, and having foresight into changing environments, make prophet-leadership valuable at the board and governance level. Board members would be better informed if they noticed the voices of organisational Prophets. (Westphal 2019:144)

Without prophets, organisations become less sustainable, because vital truths are 'overlooked, avoided, or suppressed' (Westphal 2019:144). Organisations become dysfunctional when problems are avoided or denied, rather than being solved. Thus, opportunities to resolve staff conflicts and discipline or dismiss unscrupulous managers are lost. In some instances, the guilty are not held accountable, but protected and promoted to serve the interests of the corrupt leaders to whom they report. In a climate of deepening suspicion and dissatisfaction, organisations become conflict-ridden and unstable. Without organisational ethics, trust is lost and staff members become suspicious, fearful, disgruntled and unmotivated. Furthermore, innovation and co-operation simply decline, while absenteeism increases. In academic organisations, for example, the personal results of toxic leadership are a fear of victimisation, loss of concentration, sleep disorders, low morale, physical and emotional illness, resignation and the death of collegiality (Baloyi 2020:4). In short, people do not want to work in failing, unethical and unsustainable workplaces.

Because prophetic leaders may be excluded from official positions, it is not easy to determine how they can operate in organisations. If they are part of formal structures, their independence may not be guaranteed. In some organisations, ethics officers are given some independence, but they still need to report to a senior manager. If this person is corrupt or weak, their critique may be ignored or suppressed. Unless the organisation genuinely values truth-telling, and mechanisms exist where critique can be voiced without negative repercussions, prophetic voices may be suppressed. In theory, flatter and less hierarchical organisational structures ought to make it easier for prophets to be heard, but this cannot be guaranteed.

It is striking that Kets De Vries, a psychologist and management consultant, wrote about the importance of 'fools'. Fools or jesters were part of medieval society, often found in the households of kings and nobleman or as performers at fairs. Using stories and humour, they acted as truth-tellers. The role of the fool was to expose the *hubris* (arrogance, pride or dangerous overconfidence) of the leader. The fool '... reminds the leader of the transience of power. He becomes the guardian of reality and, in a paradoxical way, prevents the pursuit of foolish action' (De Vries 1989:7). Because the dangers of the abuse of power are ever-present, such fools are needed 'to prevent the abuse of power in organizations and shield against the loss of reality-based decision making' (De Vries 1989:18–19).

Bolman and Deal (2008:208) see whistleblowers as examples of modern prophets, because they expose wrongdoing for the

sake of the organisation and the common good of society. What, then, are the similarities and differences between Christian prophets, truth-tellers, fools/jesters, and whistleblowers?

They are similar in that they all 'speak truth to power' and their messages are often unpopular. However, there are also differences. Probably the major difference is that Christian prophets are inspired and motivated by God; God is the source of their proclamations. Secondly, they are guided, or certainly ought to be, by God's love (Gill & Negrov 2021) and justice (Nullens 2016). 'Love in organizational leadership results in naturally courageous passion to stand in the face of wrong and challenge the status quo with great honesty and compassion' (Gill & Negrov 2021:36). Thirdly, Christian prophets do not simply 'name and shame'; they call all people towards God's truth and goodness. Truth-tellers who are not believers may not claim to be prophets in the biblical sense, but they certainly expose *hubris*, injustice, corruption, denial and deceit (Pauw 2017). Fourthly, whereas 'fools' at court were often protected by their official positions, this is often less so for modern prophets, truth-tellers and whistleblowers, who often pay the price for their actions. (We return to this point in the next section.)

The dangers of prophetic leadership

One risk or danger, occurs when the functions of the prophet and king are merged. This, says Westphal (2019:145), makes an individual too powerful, as no critical voices are permitted. This is an all too common reality in some churches where, contrary to Jesus' teaching about leaders as servants (Mk 10:42–45), the leader becomes a self-serving dictator. While this phenomenon occurs in many places, the following has been said of its African occurrence:

... the core of the problem lies with the rapid rise and media visibility of 'dodgy' (i.e. dubious) pastors, who are the false prophets of our day ... I do not know of any other ministry that has damaged the image of the church in the African public square today more than that of the self-proclaimed prophets ... (Owojaiye 2019:1)

A second danger is that, 'Because prophets lead with their vision of a better future, visionary prophet-leaders can become misleading, manipulative, and disconnected from reality' (Westphal 2019:144). Self-deception and the ability to deceive and manipulate others, characteristic of false prophets and often linked to charismatic personalities, can lead churches, societies and organisations into calamity and ruin.

A third danger is that false prophets, rather than exercising a genuine prophetic ministry, may simply be power-seekers and troublemakers. Under the guise of standing up for the truth, or fighting for justice for others, they seek power for themselves. Once installed, they immediately begin to abuse their positions. Venality and corruption are often accompanying characteristics.

A fourth danger is when the powerful news and other media (including social media) fail to be truth-tellers. It is problematic when what is regarded as 'the news' is merely someone's opinion, and malicious opinion, at that. The 'news' may also be a means of promoting the interests of political groups or powerful corporations. These false prophets become practitioners of deception and peddlers of 'fake news', suppressing alternative views.

The cost of prophetic leadership

Biblical prophets often paid a price for their faithfulness. For instance, Jeremiah was persecuted during his ministry (Jr 15:15). He was the subject of plots (11:18–23), placed in the stocks (20:1–6), thrown into a muddy well (38:1–13), and his writings were destroyed (36:1–32). Nevertheless, God protected him from those who wanted to kill him. However, John the Baptist was not delivered from death. Nor did God save Stephen's life after his prophetic interpretation of the scriptures and proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah (Ac 7:1–60). In Matthew 5:10–12, Jesus warned his disciples that they would be 'persecuted for righteousness' sake', reviled and falsely accused. Jesus himself was rejected and crucified (e.g. Lk 9:22; 17:25) and many believers were persecuted in the early church (Ac 8:1–3; 22:4–5; 26:9–11).

In the history of the church and in our day, prophets and whistleblowers continue to act as truth-tellers, even though their communications often make others feel uncomfortable, irritated or angry. Speaking about truth-tellers in organisations, De Vries (1989:21–22) says: 'Dealing with highly sensitive material, and saying how things really are, can be dangerous activities for career advancement'.

Drawing on the writings of another Liberation Theologian, Boff (1979:171–172), Le Bruyns (2012) says this about contemporary prophets:

Courageous engagement is cognisant of the painful hardships and serious consequences that historically come about as a result of this prophetic mode. By the grace of God, nevertheless, we '... can endure obstacles, persecutions, and even physical liquidation' as this divine strength 'leads us to brave danger, to assume the consequences of boldness, to overcome inhibiting fear, and to speak out boldly'. (p. 69)

Those in power respond to the messages of the prophets in different ways. The first, and rarest, response is that of *listening, repenting and changing* their actions. A second response is simply to ignore what the prophet is saying. In essence, the *message* of the prophet is disregarded. This is an all too common experience for prophets, what I call 'leadership by omission'. The powerful simply fail to respond. They use tactics such as confusion and delay, hoping the prophet will become exhausted and desist.

A third response to prophetic leadership is an attack on the *position* held by the truth-teller. Prophets are marginalised by excluding them from decision-making positions, for example, through a process of 'restructuring' or dismissing them.

A fourth, much more brutal, response is an act of deliberate persecution of the *person* of the prophet or whistleblower. This is because insecure, unethical and dictatorial leaders seek to eliminate those who are critical of their actions. This persecution could take the form of slander or even assassination. Slander and false accusations malign and marginalise the prophets and their colleagues fear to be associated with them. Slander also serves the purpose of misdirection. By maligning the prophets, their messages can be brushed aside. Assassination is a brutal, irrevocable step. The lives of many truth-tellers have been taken. For example, in 1980, the pastor and civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr, was assassinated in Memphis. Also in 1980, the 'champion of the poor', Archbishop Óscar Romero, was assassinated in El Salvador.

In South Africa, assassination has certainly been employed against truth-tellers. During the apartheid years, these included Bantu Stephen Biko (1977), Griffiths Mlungisi Mxenge (1981) and Neil Hudson Aggett (1982), among many others. Nor has this weapon been abandoned since 1994. There have been numerous instances of civic violence and politically motivated killings aimed at silencing the anti-corruption efforts of whistleblowers. According to Bruce (2014:3): 'Some political killings may target politicians who are involved in attempts to expose corruption perhaps authorised by other politicians who are threatened by these efforts'. A recent example is that of the whistleblower, Babita Deokaran, who was shot down outside her home in August 2021 for exposing corruption in the Department of Health (Cruywagen 2021).

When the messages of prophets are ignored or when the positions or persons of the prophets are attacked, churches, societies and organisations do not flourish. Instead, deceit and false ideologies replace truth, resulting in unethical or unwise decision-making. Furthermore, when leaders lack moral character and suspicion replaces constructive working relationships, organisations and countries become conflict-ridden and unsustainable. Westphal (2019) quotes Janis (1982):

When prophet-leadership is missing [or resisted], the necessary critical challenges to the status quo are lacking. Injustice and abuse of power may develop unchallenged. Unquestioned harmony may be a sign that the uncomfortable voices of prophet-leaders have either been suppressed by king-leaders, or were unwelcome by the community. Groupthink is more likely to develop when prophet-leadership is absent, leading to a deterioration in decision-making quality. (pp. 144–145)

By way of contrast, when the critique of the prophets is heeded, what emerges is ethical, sustainable leadership that benefits individuals, organisations and society – including churches.

Utilising and nurturing prophetic leadership

As observed here, prophetic leadership is vital and demanding. Therefore, churches and theological colleges need to be more open to utilising it, and find ways to nurture

and sustain the person and the ministry of prophets in order to avoid burnout and compromising the gospel.

Valuing and utilising prophetic leadership in churches and theological colleges

Local pastors need to learn how to respond honestly, without being defensive, to prophetic proclamations and insights. They further need to value the prophets in their churches and support those lay leaders who have a prophetic ministry in their organisations and societies (Kretzschmar 2016). Prophetic leaders need to be utilised by local, national and global churches and Christian organisations, for example, by ensuring that leadership teams include those who have a prophetic ministry. According to Pugh (2013):

Prophets should be nurtured and released to bring truth when it hurts, hope when there is despair, memory when we have lost our way and vision when we need to move on. (p. 135)

In this way, rather than the prophets being ignored, marginalised, or actively persecuted, Christians can champion them and their God-inspired message. This enables the church to make a contribution to the creation of a more truthful, just and compassionate world.

Nascent prophetic leaders ought to be assisted by theological educators to discover this gift in themselves and others. Theological colleges also need to expose students to the different types of leadership to understand them, their interaction and how they function in contemporary churches and society. Even though much has changed since biblical times, it is argued here that 'kings' (e.g. leaders, rulers, managers, CEOs) still need to be exposed to prophetic voices. In their churches and communities, contemporary priests/pastors need to develop their ministries as mediators, problem-solvers and shepherds and be equipped to work alongside others in the service professions. Lay Christians who have pastoral gifts are often drawn to these professions – medical doctors, nurses, psychologists, therapists, social workers and life coaches. These ministry roles need to be recognised and nurtured, but not at the expense of the often more controversial prophetic ministries.

What sustains the person of the leader and makes their leadership sustainable?

Prophetic leaders are sustained by their relationship with God, moral integrity, sound relationships, commitment to the well-being of people and the planet, and by being both engaged and detached.

Firstly, *to sustain their relationship with God*, it is essential for Christian prophets to respond to God's love and to cultivate listening to God. If prophets proclaim God's word authentically, in all honesty, dedication and humility, they can more easily cope with being criticised. True prophets are not self-satisfied, but aware of their faults and limitations. Nevertheless, it is their conviction of being called by God that gives prophets their courage to speak out, knowing that they may not be heeded and are likely to face fierce resistance.

Hence, prophets need to be deeply convinced that God preserves their souls, even when they are tired, despairing and threatened. One psalm articulates this:

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. ... Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. (Ps 116:1, 6–8, NRSV. See also Phlp 4:12–13, 19)

In his book, *Life without lack* (2018), Dallas Willard provides a reflection on Psalm 23. He discusses God's self-sustaining nature, being mindful of God's grace and provision, the purpose of humanity, the defeat of the power of Satan, and trust in God's goodness. Tellingly, he states:

... this world is a perfectly good and safe place for anyone to be, no matter the circumstances, if they have placed their lives in the hands of Jesus and his Father. In such a world we never have to do what we know to be wrong, and we never have to be afraid. Jesus practiced what he preached, even as he was tortured and killed. And multitudes of his followers have chosen to do the same. (Willard 2018:86)

There are many practical means of drawing on God's guidance and strength and deepening spiritual discernment (Kretzschmar 2012, 2015), including exposing students to narratives that reveal the muddle and complexity of reality, the cut and thrust of life (Ellsberg 1997). Drawing on Ignatian spirituality, Nullens (2019:194–200) emphasises prayer, the study of and mediation on the scriptures, solitude, silence, detachment and discerning 'the motions of the soul'. The practice of these and other spiritual disciplines fosters spiritual discernment (Kretzschmar 2020). Discernment further requires creative, contextual adherence to biblical prophecy, the spiritual insights of church history, and contemporary life experiences. As spiritual discernment is crucial in helping prophets to hear the voice of the Spirit, Blackie (2013) explains the Ignatian terms of 'consolation' and 'desolation' as follows:

Consolation ... is both an experience of the presence of God and those movements that lead us towards God. ... Desolation is the feeling of being separated from God and those movements that lead us away from God. Consolation is not necessarily a 'good' feeling. It is possible to be in the midst of intense pain and still feel close to God ... Likewise, it is possible to feel contented and yet be moving away from God ... Consolation and desolation primarily describe our orientation with respect to God rather than the feeling of being consoled or desolate in the way that we would usually understand those words. (pp. 113–114)

Secondly, bearing in mind what was said earlier about biblical prophetic leadership, *living a life of moral integrity* (righteousness) is a means of sustaining prophetic leadership. Prophets need to avoid falling into the trap of Pharisaic self-righteousness and the moral entanglements that result from all forms of wrongdoing. In his book, *Renovation of the heart* (2002, rev. 2022), Willard discusses the formation of Christian character in detail. He explains how the transformation of the following six dimensions takes place: the mind (thoughts and feelings); the will

(heart or spirit); the body; the social dimensions we live in; and the soul (see also his perceptive discussion of Mt 5–7 in Willard 1998:111–296).

Thirdly, *good and supportive relationships* with others, also within the Christian community, provide vital sounding boards and solace for prophets. Jeremiah was supported by Baruch, his disciple (Jr 36). Contemporary prophets can benefit from the insights of other truth-tellers, such as wise and trustworthy friends, colleagues, pastors and spiritual directors. Such relationships will assist prophets to become more resistant to both the malevolence of their enemies and the false praise of sycophants.

Fourthly, being *committed to the well-being of others and the planet*. As observed here, truth-telling, justice and social advocacy are vital (Stassen & Gushee 2003:345–388). Prophets are passionate, caring people who can help those in need of material, emotional and spiritual support. Practical involvement with people enables prophets to avoid despair, as they see the fruits of their labour in the lives of others. This provides them with encouragement in the midst of negativity and resistance. We see this in the life of Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), the Anglican prophet and intellectual who called her generation to a deeper spirituality. She was the first woman to be appointed to teach theology at Oxford University. Although brilliant, she suffered a breakdown after the trauma of World War One. Her spiritual director, Friedrich Von Hügel:

... convinced her to recognize the historical nature of Christianity, to move out of her intellectual world and into the world of the poor, and to relate to God through Jesus Christ ... she became an Anglican Christian visitor to the poor, a retreat leader, spiritual director and author. (ed. Mursell 2001:327)

In this way, she recovered her health and her ministry flourished.

Fifthly, it is essential to *maintain a sound balance* by being both *engaged and detached*. Often, the importance of engagement is stressed. While it is true that prophets are called to speak the truth and call others back to God, some degree of detachment is essential. This is because in preaching God's word and pursuing social justice, prophets can become lonely, disillusioned, distracted and weary. The prophet is called to be compassionate and to speak on behalf of those who are oppressed, but because prophetic announcements are often disregarded, prophets cannot expect 'success'. Hence, they need to detach themselves from the responses to their proclamation. Their focus needs to be on how faithfully they deliver the message, not on the positive results that may or may not ensue. Westphal (2019:144, 149) is correct to point out that it is the 'kings', not the prophets who are responsible to implement the message. Hence, it is vital that prophets have the wisdom to understand this, retain some detachment and choose their battles carefully. Otherwise they will exhaust themselves by taking on far too much responsibility.

Conclusion

Modern prophets can make leadership more ethical, grounded in reality and, hence, more sustainable by drawing on the legacy of the biblical prophets. Biblical prophets were called by God to live lives of integrity and draw others back to covenant faithfulness through their symbolic actions, predictions and proclamations. Prophets call people to be righteous and to have God's law engraved on their hearts or inner being (Jr 31:31–34; Ezk 18:30–32). Prophets are truth-tellers and advocates of social justice. They remind God's people that this is God's world and believers ought to act in accordance with God's character and purposes. Prophets proclaim messages of judgement on sin and warnings against pending disaster. Importantly, prophetic leadership invites repentance which, in turn, opens up a path to redemption, return and belonging.

In modern terms, Christians are called to a life of integrity, not a narrow or legalistic self-righteousness. Prophets speak God's truth in a context of denial, both inside and outside religious settings. Truth-telling in a changing society is multifaceted, sometimes dangerous, but it is important to warn people not to put their trust in idols, such as money and social position. Truth-telling also involves the critique of false ideologies, religion and hypocrisy.

This article also outlines the importance, dangers and cost of prophetic leadership in the church, organisations and society, both historically and in the present day. Heeding the prophets makes leadership more sustainable, because it is based on reality and truth, not false ideologies and lies. Sustainable leadership is further stable and fair; it causes churches, organisations and countries to flourish and serve the genuine needs of people and the planet. Moral prophetic leaders are incorruptible. They are not afraid of those who are inept or unethical, but boldly (and wisely) speak God's word in many different situations. They seek to support what is right, just, good and true in churches, organisations and society.

In the 'Conclusion' section, we paid some attention to the issue of how prophetic leadership can be utilised and nurtured in contemporary churches and theological education. Important elements include the prophet's relationship with God, moral integrity, sound relationships, commitment to the well-being of others and the planet, and being both engaged and detached.

In short, Christians are called to exemplify prophetic and sustainable leadership within their churches as well as in their organisational and social settings. Above all, leadership needs to reflect God's love, because God is love and it is God who created and sustains the universe. As Paul put it: 'So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13:13).

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