

# **Goodness in an Age of Toxicity, Moral Scandal, Narcissism: What Does Healthy Canadian Church Leadership Look Like?**

Elizabeth Millar

Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research  
Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

## **Abstract**

It is no secret that the evil that exists around us also presides within us. This is especially evident in the moral scandals and stories of toxic church culture that continue to shock. When toxicity and lack of virtue surround us, it is perhaps helpful to look at models of goodness. What does goodness look like for church leadership in Canada? How can we resist the evil that is within us? This paper will explore markers of healthy church leadership among Canadian churches, gleaned from a 2024 research study of “greatness” in 31 Canadian congregations. The framework for the research project comes from business management expert Jim Collins, whose good-to-great principles have been found to highly resonate in non-business establishments such as education, healthcare, social services, arts, law enforcement, and churches. To date, no Canadian studies have examined the applicability of Collins’s framework to the church leadership context. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Collins’s leadership framework may particularly be used to identify and promote healthy church leadership within congregational settings. These findings will be put into-theological conversation with Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer’s *A Church Called Tov* and *Pivot*, which address the harm caused by unhealthy church leadership structures and narcissistic leaders. Finally, the practice of presence will be promoted as an embodied posture that exemplifies and facilitates goodness in a Canadian church leadership context.

---

## **Introduction: The Need for Healthy Church Leadership**

It is no secret that the evil that exists around us also presides within us. Church

leadership is not immune. In the last few decades, the church leadership stories that have been unearthed and publicized featuring immorality, sexism, financial greed, and more are shameful and frightening. In a conversation about evil and darkness, it is vital that the church looks inward and considers her own realities. As we become familiar with the lack of virtue that surrounds us and permeates us, it is helpful to look at practical models of goodness. When it comes to church leadership in Canada, what does goodness look like? What are some of the principles of church leadership that intentionally resist the evil that we are susceptible to and promote and facilitate goodness?

This paper will explore markers of healthy church leadership among Canadian churches, gleaned from a 2024 research study of “greatness” in 31 Canadian congregations. The framework for the research project comes from business management expert Jim Collins, whose good-to-great principles have been found to highly resonate in non-business establishments such as education, healthcare, social services, arts, law enforcement, and churches.<sup>1</sup> To date, no Canadian studies have examined the applicability of Collins’s framework to the church leadership context. Then, Collins’s leadership framework, alongside the research findings, will be used to identify and promote healthy church leadership within congregational settings. These findings will be put into theological conversation with Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer’s *A Church Called Tov and Pivot*, which address the harm caused by unhealthy church leadership structures and narcissistic leaders. Finally, the practice of presence will be promoted as an embodied posture that exemplifies and facilitates goodness in a Canadian church leadership context.

### **Brief Framework of Greatness Study (2024)**

As gleaned from a 2024 research study conducted at the Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research (Wycliffe College—University of Toronto), markers of healthy church leadership were identified within Canadian congregations.<sup>2</sup> This qualitative research study consisted of 31 semi-structured interviews with pastoral leaders across Canada, across community sizes, and across Christian faith traditions to learn what it means to be a “great” or growing church in Canada.

The framework for this project comes from the bestseller, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't*, by Jim Collins (2001). He offers insights on why some companies thrive while others do not. Later in a second book, Collins (2005) notes that, while the principles of “greatness” are

1 Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer* (Jim Collins, 2005), 3.

2 This study was part of a larger research project called “The Divine Pulse Project: Exploring Life, Death, and the Pursuit of ‘Greatness’ in Contemporary Canadian Churches.” Three key focus areas were church decline, new immigrant congregations, and church growth or “greatness.”

different for businesses compared to those in the social sector, many leaders who have embraced the good-to-great principles have found them to highly resonate in their social sector contexts, albeit with slight adaptations to each of the principles.

Collins highlights five themes to be considered when applying the framework to the social sectors.

1. Defining “Great”—Calibrating success without business metrics.
2. Level 5 Leadership—Getting things done within a diffuse power structure.
3. First Who—Getting the right people on the bus within social sector constraints.
4. The Hedgehog Concept—Rethinking the economic engine without a profit motive.
5. Turning the Flywheel—Building momentum by building the brand.

The focus for this paper will be primarily on the second theme, in which Collins describes the characteristics of a “great” leader, referred to as Level 5 Leadership. Collins realizes that leadership is different in the social sector, as a leader cannot simply demand or threaten compliance with the mission of the organization. Neither can prestigious promotions nor financial rewards be generally used within the social sector, particularly the church setting. Instead, he argues that Level 5 leaders must master legislative leadership skills, rather than executive skills. Legislative leadership “relies more upon persuasion, political currency and shared interests.”<sup>3</sup> It is more than merely being well-liked or easy to get along with, as consensus building and listening are key skills. Of course, both types of leadership skills—executive and legislative—are needed, and Level 5 leadership exhibits a blend of these skills. A Level 5 leader is “ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the movement, the mission, the work—not themselves” and they have the will to make sure what needs to happen happens.<sup>4</sup> Level 5 leadership, according to Collins, is robust with humility, diplomacy, communication skills, and intentionality.

To investigate this theme, research participants were invited to respond to interview questions like the following:

- What do you love about your job? Your church?
- What are you most proud of?
- How do you think people in your congregation/community would describe you as a leader?
- In terms of living out the vision of the church, how are those decisions made?

---

3 Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 11.

4 Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 11.

Based on Collins's framework, Level 5 leadership characterizes growing organizations, like churches. Therefore, how do Collins's principles of "great" leadership align with "great" churches? What are these principles that we can recognize and intentionally seek as pastoral leaders in Canada? If "greatness" is a matter of conscious choice and intention, as Collins argues, how can we help direct church leadership towards goodness?

### **Markers of Healthy Church Leadership**

Throughout the research study, three markers of church leadership emerged from pastoral and lay leaders. The interview questions were designed to discover how they thought people might describe them as leaders or how they have heard others describe what they appreciate about them as leaders. First, "great" leadership was characterized by an obvious love for the congregation and a high priority on relationships. These leaders were often specifically called to their particular congregation. Their love was embodied through presence, which was recognized and appreciated by their congregants. Second, a "great" leader could be described as someone who is educated and direct but understandable and approachable. "Great" leaders were able and willing to have difficult conversations and approach contentious issues. Finally, the process of decision-making revealed a humble and collaborative leader.

#### *Love and Presence*

Again and again, pastoral leaders expressed their appreciation for the relationships they experience within the church and the love they feel for their congregations. When asked what they enjoy about the job, the responses primarily centered around these relationships. In fact, a couple of pastoral leaders identified their people as the greatest asset of the church. From a church in British Columbia, Sophia said this: "I love our community. I love the people. The greatest resource we have is this collection of people that have found their way to our church. They are people who are wise, deep, committed, spacious, open." When I asked Pierre what he liked about his church in Quebec, his response was "All the people particularly." This was persistently echoed by pastoral leaders. The relationships they experienced within the congregational setting were often the source of job satisfaction. When asked if she loves her congregation in Ontario, Vera responded:

I do. The hymn — "Here I am, Lord" — at the end of the chorus talks about how I will hold your people in my heart. That is how I feel about the congregation. Or when I'm coming to a new congregation. I don't know the congregants, or my congregation could necessarily

understand what that is. That's how I feel. Some of them are really hard to take sometimes. But I don't kick them out.<sup>5</sup>

Ted said that the “biggest blessing” of being a pastoral leader is “to be able to love” the people he works with and serves on the prairies. He even said that he told them he loves them, admitting that “in some cultures they say—I appreciate you or this is what I like. I can't always easily say I love you. So I guess that's another huge thing for me.”

Pastoral and lay leaders who felt a distinct calling to their churches described it as “God's grip on my heart for this community,” a feeling of finding home, a stirring in their heart, or like “something niggling” and then “everything clicked.” Often it was a persistent feeling or stirring that would not go away or they could not ignore. Other leaders described it as “God's will” and “this is where God wanted us.” One leader said, “I felt directed by God, I felt a real, you know, I don't even know how to describe it. Probably the greatest burden that I've ever experienced in my life.” The sense of calling is often described as an intimate experience with God, in which God directs and speaks in an uncommon way. In some cases, there were extraordinary stories of calling to a particular town or city. A leader said it was not just a general call to ministry, but it was ministry to a particular town in southern Ontario. Another leader had the strange experience of his son asking him one morning over breakfast if they were moving to a particular city—not knowing that his father was considering a position there. This was a little bewildering for the father, but it also helped confirm that perhaps this was the place where God was calling him. Another leader felt “very, very drawn to the core values” and that the church “won my heart.” Another pastor prayed for years about doing ministry in a particular town. Both she and her husband wondered how that would ever work. To their surprise, it all came together, and they are engaged in pastoral ministry in the town that had been on their hearts for years. The origin of the calling and the ability to live out the calling are both very much connected with an intimate experience of God. The divine sense of calling that pastoral leaders experienced seems to lay the foundation for and assist with building a loving relationship with the church.

The love for their congregations and deep sense of calling, however, does not obfuscate an awareness of the potential financial and career stability challenges. Antoine from Lavender Lane Church recognized the Lord's calling to ministry but also acknowledged that better compensation could be found in other employment. He said, “I know, for example, that my wife's salary is almost double than

---

5 As qualitative outputs, these quotations from research participants are unedited verbatim responses. Also note that pseudonyms for pastoral leaders and churches have been used for confidentiality purposes.

my salary. I will receive a better salary if I work somewhere else.” Isaiah from House of God Church was also realistic about the financial challenges associated with ministry. He referred to the stability his former career held and the assurance it gave for the future. Now, being in full-time ministry, he said, “I don’t know what I’m getting into for the next 25 years. For a young person like myself, with a young family with two kids—that’s a hard thing.” And yet, the call to ministry and the desire to love and serve their congregations persist.

A tangible expression of love for the congregation and staff was observed through the practice of presence, both in the physical and relational sense. Living life with and among the congregation was something that congregants communicated as important to their pastoral leaders. Mark indicated that, as he began work at Stonehouse Church, it was made clear to him that people wanted their pastor to live in the same town. He desired the same thing, saying “I just didn’t understand how I could be a pastor without really brushing shoulders with people in daily life. That was what they wanted, and that was very much what I wanted as well.” Other pastoral leaders also spoke about being physically available Sunday mornings and throughout the week for face-to-face interactions, phone calls, and conversation. While physical presence is highly valued, another form of presence is also referred to that indicates relational availability.

This relational way of presence is described as being easy to talk to, interested in people, and offering care. Presence seems to be marked by a quiet faithfulness, rather than a large personality or charisma. Stanley from Harbour Passage Church described it as “a steady presence” and likened it to “being more of a shepherd than this rah-rah leader.” For instance, Sophia from Wellspring Church said, “I have heard people describe me as spacious. As somebody who is present to people and makes space for them to be seen.” Garth from Big Sky Church also remarked that people appreciated him because they know that “he isn’t just doing his job but loves us and cares about us.” Loving and caring people require a sort of proximity that is inherent to the practice of presence. Even in a church that has a weekly attendance of over 1,000 congregants, Lane from Elderberry Church commits himself to being “very presence driven.” He said, “I try to be very present with people, relational ... even in a church our size, I’m in the lobby every Sunday interacting with people, meeting people, praying for people.” Similarly, at Main Street Church, Mike said that the “green room” is a “nonsense concept,” explaining that pastors cannot “just go on stage and do their thing and then disappear.” He said this:

I still go before the service. I greet all the people that I see. I talk to them at the door. I’m praying for people. I’m keeping track of what’s going on in their life. I’m talking to them. No matter how big this

church becomes, they have personal access to me. They can make appointments and come and see me personally, and I'm happy to do that. Yes, the accessibility.

Lay leader Maria described this posture of presence as “this openness to truth and holding on to each other,” indicating that even in times of disagreement or “in the midst of super hard conversations,” they were learning how to be present with one another in the presence of Christ.

Regardless of the size of church or denomination, pastoral leaders being present in a generous and genuine manner was a prominent theme that pastoral leaders identified as being important to their congregants. Relational presence is closely related to physical presence, as the proximity that physical presence requires seems to allow for relational presence and opens the door to increased love and care. The pastoral leaders demonstrate a desire and a willingness to draw close to those in their congregations.

#### *Educated and Direct (But Understandable and Approachable)*

A second major theme that emerged from the data is an appreciation for both academic learning and accessible communication. Though these two competencies are often at odds with one another, pastoral leaders were able to translate their theological academic learning into accessible language for their congregants. Even in those traditions where further education is not integral to pastoral leadership, there was an appreciation for biblical knowledge and “knowing the Word.” It was not only “being educated” that was valued, but it also meant having the necessary skills to speak in such a way that people in the pew could comprehend and find meaningful. In a Mennonite Brethren church, the pastor said that people in his congregation would recognize his education credentials but would also say that he “speaks in language that I can understand,” that “he doesn’t use technical language.” The congregation appreciated that he “makes things very, very relatable and understandable when we look at Scripture and with contemporary issues,” with the goal of learning to live the faith they share. He was most appreciative of this affirmation from a congregant: “When you preach, your voice doesn’t change.” To the pastor, it felt like a compliment and was very meaningful. When I asked him what it meant to him, he replied, “Nice to hear back because they need to be able to hear me as a fellow human speaking to them as fellow humans, not something from on high.”

Meanwhile, in a Baptist church, a lay leader described the pastor by saying that he is “a man of incredible academic intelligence and has the creds to go with it but manages to communicate it in such a way that people get it.” There was an appreciation for “deep” sermons that are also understandable and relatable, as illustrated by the pastor’s story:

I don't say this publicly very often, but there's a young man in our church who I've known since he was like a teenager. He has fetal alcohol syndrome, and his parents were telling me that he comes whenever I preach. And he can follow and track it. And he can say back the main points to the parents after. And I told them I've had a few accolades in my life, but that's way up there—it's connecting with this precious young guy. You know, who works at Burger King and lives in assisted living.

The pastor confessed that this is one of the most important affirmations that he has received—that a young man with learning difficulties can understand and relate to his sermons.

There is a similar appreciation for academic learning in the Lutheran and Anglican traditions. A lay leader promptly answered the question of what she thinks the congregation appreciates about the pastor. She says, "I know what they like about him. Number one—the academic aspect of his knowledge. They really respect his education, time, thought, and application of that to his sermons. Really stimulating sermons. Really thought provoking and engaging." This is the same pastor who places a high value on living side by side with his congregants and being involved in the community. Notice that the pastoral leaders are minimizing the distance between themselves and their congregations through their communication skills and approach. It is important for them to be *with* their congregation as they worship and learn together.

Along with being educated and accessible, pastoral leaders recognized appreciation from their congregation for being approachable but also direct or straightforward. Although these two attributes are held in tension, pastoral leaders are able to present as both. For example, Andrew from Trinity Church said that he wants "to be approachable so that people can talk with [him]" and that they would know that he is willing to talk with them. Ron, a lay leader at Olive Lane Church, explained that congregants like their pastoral leader because "she's so genuine" and "there's none of that sort of fake minister sort of thing." Sylvia, the same pastoral leader, said that she is "not a titles person;" instead, she would like people to know: "I genuinely care about them."

Although "approachable" and "easy to talk to" may be descriptions that may incline a person to shy away from difficult conversations, this approachability seems to be combined with a kind but fearless directness. Antonio said, "I've always been very approachable. But people have said that I can be quite straightforward at times also. And they appreciated that." Lane echoed a similar sentiment, saying that he is "bold" and not afraid to address issues in the day from a biblical framework and perspective. In my preaching, I'm not afraid to address

hot topic issues,” going on to mention some of the controversial issues surrounding politics and gender that he has included in his sermons. Jill said that people want to see that “we’re willing to get our hands dirty. Like we’re not sitting and asking everybody else to do the thing.” Then she went on to say co-pastor Steve particularly is

quick to say—nope, this person is upset, but we’re not letting them just be upset. I’m going to their house and we’re going to have a conversation. We’re going to have a meeting about this. We’re going to talk about this. We’re going to make sure that the board, our pastor’s council, is aware and on side and just really not letting things fester.

Jill expressed the desire to bridge any gaps that may be perceived between the pastors and congregation and wanted to make it known that they were working alongside the congregation, rather than dictating what ought to be done. Co-pastor Steve demonstrated the ability to have uncomfortable conversations, while simultaneously communicating solidarity and love for the congregation. There is a proximity that the pastoral leaders practice that generates a sense of teamwork and affability, but that same proximity also seems to give permission for pastoral leaders to speak plainly and directly into people’s lives.

### *“Confront the Brutal Facts”*

One of Jim Collins’s markers of a “great” leader is the willingness to “confront the brutal facts,” referring to Admiral Jim Stockdale who was captured during the Vietnam War. Stockdale was imprisoned and tortured for 8 years, while never losing faith that he would eventually be free. However, he noticed that the men who did not make it out were the optimists who died of a broken heart, believing that they would be free by Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter, and then being disappointed. Stockdale said, “you must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”<sup>6</sup> Stockdale would say—“we’re not getting out by Christmas; deal with it!”<sup>7</sup>

Some leaders were able to articulate their specific challenges and describe how they are addressing those challenges. For example, Ethan honestly acknowledged that a missional focus is lacking at his church: “I think we haven’t created the presence in our community where people, if the question often is that if the church wasn’t there, would people miss you? And I would honestly say, I don’t think they would miss us. I don’t think so.” He went on to say, “I think we can do

6 Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 85.

7 Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies*, 85.

better” and then listed several initiatives that they have undertaken to address this issue. Sonja noted the “real sense of pessimism and loss after COVID” and the fact that people were just not returning to church as part of the “big resignation.” Her response was to celebrate the “little wins” and to fan the flames of the things that were going well. She said that this turned the tide of hopelessness as the church started to gain traction again. Recognizing the negative historic reputation of his church is the challenge that Seth is facing, and he is countering it with regular, faithful involvement at the local school. These leaders not only recognized the difficulty they were encountering (which requires an intimate knowledge of their church story, the life situations of their congregants, and their community), but they were able to respond with appropriate corrective action.

### *Decision-Making: Humble & Collaborative*

Level 5 leadership is explicitly displayed through decision-making. Asking how decisions are made, who makes the decisions, and paying attention to the postures held surrounding decision-making reveal how pastoral leaders were or were not humble and collaborative, which are key characteristics of Level 5 leaders.

As lead pastor of Caragana Street Church, Ben did not insist on unilateral decisions. Instead, he referenced his wife, who sometimes accuses him of asking too many people for help or for directions. He said, “Well, why not? If I don’t know the way, why wouldn’t I ask someone who knows the way?” He saw no shame in asking for help and listed a number of people he has gone to for help over the years—other pastors, his superintendent, counselors, lawyers, etc. Referring to her congregation, Trish, pastor of Cinnamon Spring Church, said that they “recognise that the minister isn’t the boss” and that working collaboratively is what she prefers. Jim from Riverside Church acknowledged that this sort of leadership is not always easy because as a leader, he wants to be liked, and he wants them to act and think in certain ways. It is a struggle, but, in his words, the ideal heart posture of a church leader is “Sorry, Lord. It’s not about me. Right. Let me make this about you.” Pastoral leaders often defer and submit to an overarching divine leadership that recognizes God as their higher authority.

A couple of pastors noted that it was important to establish this understanding of leadership and authority at the beginning. When Brian first arrived at Hilltop Church, congregants started to tell him that he needed to stop coming out to everything and encouraged him to spend more time at home with his family. His response was “but I never wanted anybody to think that I was not willing to wash the dishes, you know, or anything like that.” He intentionally wanted to communicate that he does not wield positional authority but wanted to establish relational authority. Antoine also said that when he came to Lavender Lane Church, he did not arrive and want to change everything, which would have indicated

that “everything you did in the past is wrong.” Instead, he adapted first and took a learning posture because, most importantly, people need to be cared for. Trust needed to be established first and occurs when people know that their pastor is somebody who will “help them and guide them in the Lord” and that “the Lord will provide,” as he put it.

Mack, an elder at Sugar Maple Church, commented that this was the thing that convinced them to hire their new pastor, Johnny. He sums up Level 5 leadership nicely:

One thing that really came across to us was a humility. It wasn't always there with all the candidates because I was on the search committee there as well. There's a real humility there, which was something that we valued. We weren't necessarily looking for someone that was going to come in and tell us a hundred percent how to do everything. It's my way or the highway. We were first really looking for someone that had a more shepherding mindset as opposed to a leader mindset. A shepherd says—come on with me. A leader says—hey, get in line behind me. And so that was something that our church was looking for.

A pastoral leader's approach to decision-making often reveals what sort of leader they are and what they value. From the interviews, it was noted that pastoral leaders and lay leaders appreciated collaborative decision-making, which depends upon mutual respect. Humility and good interpersonal skills are required to navigate these situations. Although this way of decision-making is somewhat more cumbersome, it seems to produce increased trust and a healthy relationship between pastoral leaders, lay leaders, and congregants.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

Referring back to the research question, what do church leaders and lay leaders believe about their leadership role? Quite simply, they believe that God often calls them to particular congregations in order to serve and love that group of people and that community. At their best, humility and collaboration mark their decision-making specifically and leadership in general. They are leaders who are present, understand deep spiritual truths but can communicate them in an accessible manner, and are both approachable and direct. They are not afraid of the hard facts and can face uncomfortable or unflattering truths and then respond appropriately. “Great” church leaders place a high importance on relationships and exhibit a deep love for their congregations.

Collins notes that, while we often look to the business world for models of leadership skills, he suspects that we are more likely to “find more true leadership

in the social sectors than the business sectors.”<sup>8</sup> Church leadership is not so much about the exercise of power as people in church settings have the freedom not to follow. As Collins says, “perhaps tomorrow’s great business leaders will come from the social sectors, not the other way around.”<sup>9</sup> This means that Canadian pastoral leaders have leadership expertise that could benefit other leaders in various settings, including the business sector.

### **Theological Conversation with Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer**

The research findings reveal leadership principles that can be considered theologically. *A Church Called Tov* and *Pivot* are two books born out of the unfortunate events in the late 2010s at Willow Creek Church in Chicago involving pastor Bill Hybels.<sup>10</sup> Theologians Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer responded to these events with a constructive love for the church. Their critique of unhealthy leadership helps to identify toxicity, along with offering practical instruction as to the nurturing of a thriving and robust church culture that honours God and each other. They advocate for a *tov* culture, which is characterized by empathy, grace, a people-first culture, truth, justice, service, and Christlikeness.<sup>11</sup> A *tov* culture actively resists evil. According to McKnight and Barringer, a good leader has authority due to their character and leadership or relational abilities. They are approachable. They show appreciation for those around them. People trust them. Their power is not derived from fear but born out of respect and admiration. As a result, “people thrive when they feel appreciated by their supervisors and colleagues.”<sup>12</sup> There is a sense of working together towards a common goal, not for the approval of a leader. People are not afraid to talk to a good leader. If a culture of fear develops within a church, rather than a culture of trust, leaders can wield their authority effectively and achieve desired results for a while.<sup>13</sup> As McKnight and Barringer say, “power and fear are close companions,” and if combined with narcissism, “a toxic culture is sure to form.”<sup>14</sup> An expert on dysfunctional churches and pastors, Ronald Enroth argues that “authoritarian leaders are ecclesiastical loners” and that “they are fiercely independent and refuse to be part of a structure of accountability.

8 Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 12.

9 Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 13.

10 In 2018, Bill Hybels, the founder of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, was accused of sexual assault and misconduct.

11 *Tov* is a Hebrew word for “good” or “goodness.” God is *tov* or goodness and *tov* is God’s design for all creation, including our moral virtues. For a further exploration of *tov*, see McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called Tov* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020), 83–97.

12 McKnight and Barringer, *Pivot* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2023), 69.

13 McKnight and Barringer explore the false narratives that arise in a toxic culture, such as discrediting the critics, demonizing the critics, spinning the story, gaslighting the critics, making the perpetrator the victim, silencing the truth, suppressing the truth, and issuing a fake apology. McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called Tov*, 55–80.

14 McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called Tov*, 31.

Rather than moving towards connection, they seek to separate themselves. To put it crudely, they operate a one-man (or one-woman) spiritual show.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to add that these leaders often cultivate a “faithful inner circle of clones that implicitly accepts all that the leader sets forth,” creating distance from the lay leaders and congregation.<sup>16</sup> This often works for a while. Eventually, however, the abuse of power destroys the faith community and causes serious harm to many of its members.

Essentially, according to McKnight and Barringer, good leadership does not rely upon fear or power. This echoes Collins’s principle of Level 5 leadership that depends upon legislative skills, rather than executive skills. Rather than demanding, Level 5 leaders know how to initiate action, generate conversation, listen well, and adjust as needed. They know how to handle differences of opinion in a way that does not alienate people or create conflict. Level 5 leaders know how to move forward in a way that does not leave people left out, unheard, or afraid. Instead, others want to come along because there is mutual respect and appreciation.

McKnight and Barringer also note that in a toxic culture, leaders are very much concerned with their own success. A toxic leader “makes himself the center of attention,” and the ministry becomes a way to garner “praise for himself—his vision, his ministry, his success, his glory.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, in a *toiv* church, leaders are more interested in empowering others in order to pursue God’s mission. McKnight and Barringer acknowledge that it is not always initially apparent in a toxic church culture, but if you “scratch beneath the surface, you’ll find that people don’t matter, the institution matters; power and fear dominate the culture; the only narratives told are those that prop up the pastor’s vision and success; and loyalty is the supreme virtue.”<sup>18</sup> However, Collins’s description of a Level 5 leader, as quoted earlier, that a Level 5 leader is “ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the movement, the mission, the work—not themselves” and they have the will to make sure what needs to happen happens.<sup>19</sup> It is no coincident that the “great” pastors in the research study were able to articulate the mission of their church and to contextualize God’s mission for their own community. The focus was clearly oriented towards God. There was a genuine love for their congregants and often for their communities. There was sometimes confession about the things that they were not doing well and there was an honesty about the challenges they were facing. Their own glory or success was not central.

---

15 Ronald M. Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 202–203.

16 Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*, 202–203.

17 McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called Toiv*, 175.

18 McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called Toiv*, 176.

19 Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 11.

## Conclusion: The Practice of Presence as an Embodiment of Goodness

The practice of presence for leaders is a thread that runs throughout the research study. It is implicitly embedded within Collins's framework of "greatness," and is supported by McKnight and Barringer's urgings of a *tov* church culture. In terms of pastoral leadership, the practice of presence can be understood as an embodiment of goodness. It is a way of being that God inhabits and demonstrates for us throughout Scripture. In the early chapters of Genesis, evil enters the world and separation is the natural result. Instead of a deep sense of togetherness and unity, Adam and Eve experience aloneness and discord. Rather than friendship with God in the garden, they experience separation in the wilderness. In the New Testament, the Incarnation is the outrageous act of God coming near. God is purposefully breaking the separation between the divine and human as God becomes one of us. While evil separates and disconnects, God, as the ultimate picture of goodness, comes close and is present with us. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, we see Jesus *with* humanity. In essence, the Incarnation is about the practice of presence in the wildest way possible. The newly established church draws people together into close, loving community and sends them out to serve others.

The Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen names this the ministry of presence. While discerning his possible vocation in Nicaragua, he discovered the power of simply being with people. He says the desire to walk with people, greet people, be in their homes, sit on their doorsteps, and to be known as someone who wants to live with them grows. He counts it a privilege "to practice this simple ministry of presence."<sup>20</sup> The ministry of presence, according to Nouwen, is an embodiment of the love of God. Nouwen says that

ministry happens when you participate in the mystery of being with. The whole incarnation, God-with-us, Emmanuel, is first of all being with people.... Jesus is first of all God-with-us.... The mystery is that he shared our lives.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the research interviews, "great" *tov* pastoral leaders seek proximity to others and desire the same for their congregants. Welcome and hospitality are valued highly. Pastoral leaders find ways to bridge gaps between themselves and their congregants, increasing connection and understanding, as compared to power-hungry and narcissistic leaders who seek to distance themselves from others and limit or distort communication. Through their actions and their communication, with a posture of humility, they are fostering goodness by the ministry of presence.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Gracias: A Latin American Journal* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Returning to God* (St. Louis, All Saints Press, 2014), 21–22.

*There Is Hope*

Upon completion of the research project, there is a double reason for hope. First, the pastoral leaders from the research study are revealed to be people who are devoted to God, obedient to their callings, and committed to loving their congregations. They are missionally minded and care for their communities. The conversations that occurred sparked hope as the study discovered godly and passionate pastoral leaders across Canada and across Christian faith traditions. Second, in order for the Canadian church to grow in both numbers and goodness, there needs to be a path to follow. Collins's principles, as affirmed by the research project and McKnight and Barringer, offer a picture of leadership defined by specific approaches and postures. A practical way forward is also hopeful because there is a road map of sorts with distinct leadership principles to emulate. Something can be done. *Tov* or goodness can characterize Canadian pastoral leadership and vitalize churches across our country. There is hope.