

Last month I attended the seminar on “Non-Anxious Leadership Presence” through the Pastor Wellness Program at Philhaven led by Reni Weixler. The seminar touched on a broad range of themes from our internal narratives to communication to work values. I’ll highlight a few things that resonated with me.

Reni drew from James Scouller’s work on leadership presence. He describes leadership presence as, “An inner alignment of self-identity, purpose, and feelings that eventually lead to freedom from fear.” I was struck by how much leadership presence has to do with being deeply aware of what our purpose is and shaping our leadership out of that purpose as we relate to others. For me it is sometimes easy to get caught up in scurrying from one thing to the next without evaluating how decisions or actions align with what I deeply believe or what I would define as my purpose in ministry.

Reni encouraged us to think about those moments of conflict in our congregations. She encouraged us to listen underneath the words that people say to hear what is driving their fears. She also encouraged us to pay attention to what is going on inside of us as leaders. It is an important thing to stay engaged even while holding the uneasy things. She reminded us that people who disagree with us won’t remember what we say but they will remember how we made them feel. I was surprised to learn that research has shown that empathy is one of the main common denominators of strong leaders. If we can show empathy in the midst of our uneasiness, it goes a long way to building trust and respect.

Body language largely reflects our anxious or non-anxious presence. We were encouraged to pay attention to our body language when we lead, to move out of our head and into our body. Do we appear closed and shut down or adversarial (arms folded, leaning away, hands on hips)? Or do we appear relaxed and grounded (both feet planted on the ground, rooted like a tree)?

The most helpful quote for me was from Rev. Frank Thomas. He wrote, “Leadership is the spiritual process of discerning what one believes (clarity), acting on that belief in the public arena (decisiveness), and standing behind the action despite the varied responses of people (courage).” I appreciate the connection that leadership is a spiritual process of discernment. I pray for clarity, decisiveness, and courage for us all.