

IF LEE KUAN YEW WERE A PASTOR:

Reflections on Lee's Relevance for Christian Leaders

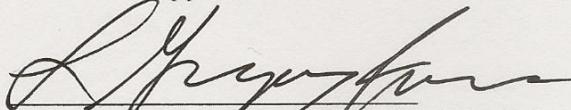
by

Joshua Shaam Sudharman

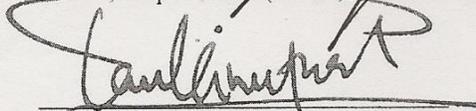
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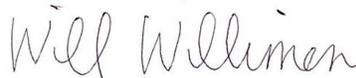
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry in the
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ABSTRACT

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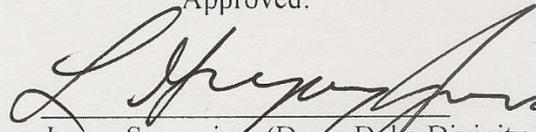
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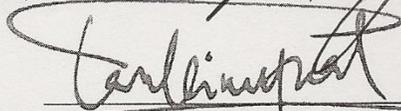
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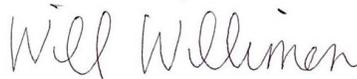
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Abstract

Pastors, especially senior pastors of churches with larger congregations and staff teams, have to provide leadership, not only in the typical pastoral sense of preaching/teaching and counseling/caring, but also in terms of direction and management. Yet pastors tend to receive inadequate equipping in this third area, and sometimes flounder when faced with the complexities of their role.

Lee Kuan Yew was an extraordinary political leader and manager, leading the severely disadvantaged fledgling nation of Singapore from Third World status to First World in a few decades. Underlying the question of what pastors can learn from Lee, given that he never professed Christian faith himself, is the principle of discernment anchored in humility and healthy skepticism: humility to realize non-Christians may be wiser than Christians in the way they manage their institutional affairs, and skepticism to know that not everything that “works” in the world is going to likewise succeed in God’s church.

The first step in discerning what aspects of Lee’s leadership have relevance for pastors was to construct a biblical/ theological grid by which to evaluate Lee’s leadership. Shaped by the data available on Lee, this grid had four components - formation, shepherding, excellence and power – and a broad theological understanding of each of these themes was outlined so as to serve as a set of criteria in evaluating the applicability of key aspects of Lee’s leadership.

Lee's life was examined both in terms of his pre-leadership years and his time in leadership. The formative experiences of Lee's life from childhood through to early adulthood evoke reflections on how one's own personal history has a shaping influence on one's leadership, and where there might be strengths yet to be harnessed, or shadows yet to be confronted. Lee's positive leadership traits - as described by himself and others - are worthy of thoughtful appropriation insofar as they are deemed compatible with Christian values as identified in the biblical grid. Some features of Lee's leadership, which were heavily critiqued by many and are at odds with the principles in the biblical grid are also identified for reflection.

To deepen and personalize the above leadership reflections, several interviews with Christians who held significant leadership roles and knew Lee first-hand were cited. A fictional narrative of an interview with Lee was also incorporated in the final chapter, which offered the space for imaginatively extending Lee's leadership in a more theological vein. In summary, Lee's complex legacy provides rich material for leadership reflections by pastors, and the overlap zone between Christian and secular leadership merits further study and exploration.

Dedication

To all Senior Pastors
who wrestle with the complexity of their role
and want to please God by serving their church well.

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I thank every member of the congregation of St John's – St Margaret's Church for the love, support and prayers I have felt from Day 1 as your Vicar. I thank the staff team, and especially the Parochial Church Council and Vicar's Office team for such great

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endow me with as I spend time on my knees listening to you. May I decrease, and may you increase, Lord!

1. Introduction

One of the questions often posed to pastors by non-pastors is, “So what do you actually do, like from Monday to Saturday?” The responsibilities of pastors are opaque to most who do not have dealings with churches. The assumption is that pastors spend their whole week preparing for a less-than-two-hour service on Sunday, and not much else. Truth be told, even many churchgoers are unsure what their pastors do outside of weekends, as summed up in this complaint once heard about a pastor, “Six days of the week he’s invisible, and on the seventh he’s incomprehensible!”

It may come as something of a surprise that the answer to the question about what a pastor does from Monday to Saturday is that a pastor leads. He or she leads the church. And if the church hires staff to assist the pastor, then the pastor leads the paid staff as well. It may be helpful to remember that the word pastor is derived from the Latin word for shepherd, and shepherds lead and look after their sheep. Wherever there is a group of people who are going somewhere, literally or metaphorically, leadership is needed. This leadership comprises many different ingredients, but they can be grouped into three interlocking categories: (1) teaching and preaching, (2) caring and helping, and (3) directing and managing. This can be represented by an adaptation of the Triquetra symbol (see Figure 1).

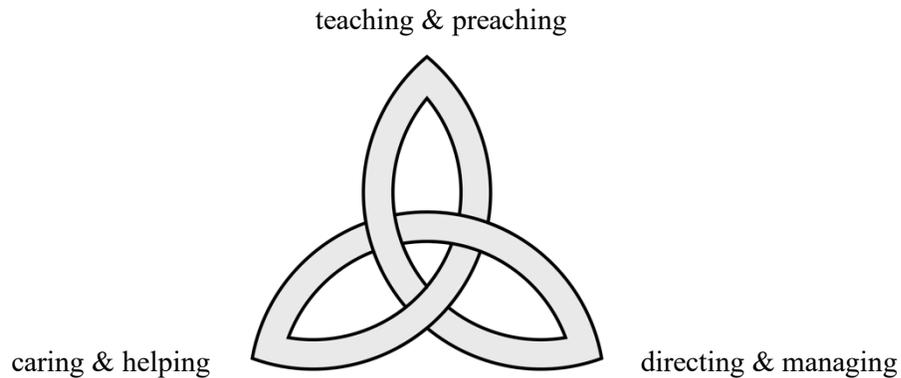


Figure 1: Three interlocking aspects of pastoral leadership

This thesis focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the third category, that of directing and managing. It is the aspect of the pastor’s role that seems, on the surface at least, to be the least “spiritual”, insofar as it shares many similarities with management in secular organisations. But such superficial similarities can be misleading. There is actually only a thin line between practical matters and pastoral matters in the church, as amply illustrated by an incident in the early church recorded in Acts 6:1-7. The fledgling church in Jerusalem had a membership of several thousand, led by a team of twelve apostles, and they undertook to supply food for the widows in their midst. However, when certain widows failed to receive their apportionment, the practical matter of improving distribution mechanisms quickly deteriorated into a pastoral problem of perceived racism, as the Hellenist church members accused the Jewish leadership of intentionally neglecting their widows (Acts 6:1). What started out as a weakness in equitable food distribution due to the challenging scale of the enterprise came to be experienced as failure to love and care, or failure to overcome Jew-Gentile prejudices.

The story proves that when directing and managing are done inadequately in the church, in some cases because of the scale and complexity of the task, leaders create unnecessary pastoral issues that could have been avoided, because they are dealing with sensitive and emotional people. The solution to the problem in Acts 6 was both practical and pastoral: the task of administering the food distribution needed to be delegated down to a new tier of leadership – the deacons – so that the apostles could focus on what they did best, namely prayer and the ministry of the word; and the criteria for selecting deacons was that they needed to be men of character, spiritual maturity, and practical competence (Acts 6:3) to ensure high levels of trust from the congregation and that the distribution system ran without hitch. Another key lesson from this story is that directing and managing, if done well, help to anticipate and pre-empt pastoral issues that could arise in the church community, thereby acting as a shield and defense to the health of relationships and trust within the community.

As one who serves as senior pastor of a church in Singapore, I find myself at a unique nexus. On the one hand my role demands a certain degree of skill and acumen in directing and managing, given the size of the congregation (around two thousand) and the substantial number of paid staff (around fifty)¹. The inclusion of an expensive building project added more layers of complexity to my governance and management responsibilities. On the other hand, I live in a nation, Singapore, that now has a global

¹ The congregation and staff strength were already at these levels when my predecessor handed the leadership of the church to me in 2012.

reputation for excellence in leadership and management, particularly in the civil service and private sector. This global reputation, which is quite an anomaly given Singapore's tiny size in comparison to other countries, is due in no small measure to the most famous Singaporean this nation has produced, Lee Kuan Yew, our late founding Prime Minister. Under his leadership, and helped by an exceptional team of ministers, Singapore rose from a newly independent Third World nation in 1965 to a First World nation (based on the World Bank's computation of per capita Gross National Income)² by the end of the 20th century. A tiny island state, beginning with no natural resources to speak of other than its small and poorly educated population, Singapore's ability to punch far above its weight on the world stage today – in commerce, education, infrastructure, governance, or crime prevention, to mention just a few areas – is no fluke. Much credit for this transformation goes to the man who loomed so large on the national and regional political stage that when he passed away in 2015, even much larger and geographically distant countries like India declared a day of national mourning for Lee on 29 March 2015³, and international brands such as Mastercard grayscaled their logos on their social media profiles to express their condolences – an unprecedented honor for a foreign statesman.⁴

² The World Bank uses Atlas method Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in U.S. dollars to classify countries for analytical purposes and to determine borrowing eligibility. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/singapore/overview>, 9 Apr 2019 (accessed on 5 Dec 2019).

³ “Remembering Lee Kuan Yew”, *The Straits Times*, 27 March 2015. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/india-declares-a-day-of-national-mourning-on-sunday-for-mr-lee-kuan-yew> (accessed on 5 Dec 2019).

⁴ Rezwana Manjur, “International brands alter social media assets for #LKY tributes”, *Marketing Interactive*, 26 March 2015. <http://www.marketing-interactive.com/international-brands-alter-social-media-assets-for-lky-tributes> (accessed on 5 Dec 2019).

It is my location at this abovementioned nexus that interests me in the lessons that Lee Kuan Yew's life and leadership hold for pastors, especially senior pastors. Over the last two decades, I have observed that there has been an explosion of interest in Christian circles about the subject of leadership, judging by the number of Christian books, conferences, seminars, training courses and YouTube videos that discuss leadership ideas. Clearly, pastors and lay people see the relevance of leadership for the church setting more than ever before. However, there has been a curious reticence to mine Lee's leadership for possible lessons for pastors.

This could be because Lee courted his fair share of controversy as a Prime Minister. By his own admission, he always tried to be correct, not politically correct. This disdain for political correctness and willingness to buck trends and conventional wisdom won him both admirers and detractors. And Lee insisted on a strict separation between religion and the state, clamping down hard on any whiff of political activity taking place within ostensibly religious organisations, such as in the much-publicised Operation Spectrum in 1987 when several people were detained for months without trial, for an alleged Marxist conspiracy involving members of the Catholic Church.⁵ Perhaps the most likely reason for the lack of serious study of Lee by the church is that Lee himself never professed to be a Christian, and therefore is not regarded by most Christians as a legitimate and meaningful model for pastors.

⁵ Barbara Crosette, "Singapore is holding 12 in 'Marxist Conspiracy'" *The New York Times*, 21 June 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/21/world/singapore-is-holding-12-in-marxist-conspiracy.html> (accessed on 5 Dec 2019).

Despite the fact that some would find it unnatural to explore Lee's political journey for leadership lessons that could be useful in church, it seemed to me that it is not that much more controversial than a church engaging an external (non-Christian) consultant to advise on matters pertinent to the church's healthy operations, such as finance, information technology or human resource management. In all such consultancy arrangements, pastors would receive the recommendations of the consultant like they would typically eat fish – consume the “meat” and leave out the “bones”. I see this study as akin to engaging Lee as a consultant – a leadership consultant – to give his thoughts on how leadership and management ideas that helped shaped Singapore's phenomenal progress might have some relevance to the healthy functioning of the church. This thesis offers broad guidelines in discerning what is relevant without aiming to be prescriptive.

While the role of political leaders of a nation cannot be mapped directly onto the role of pastors in the church, there are principles that straddle both contexts. It takes humble and skeptical discernment to work out what lies in the overlap zone between church leadership and secular leadership – humility to be teachable and acknowledge that others out there may be handling challenges better than oneself in certain regards, and healthy skepticism that not everything that produces results or simply “works” elsewhere is necessarily also good for the church.

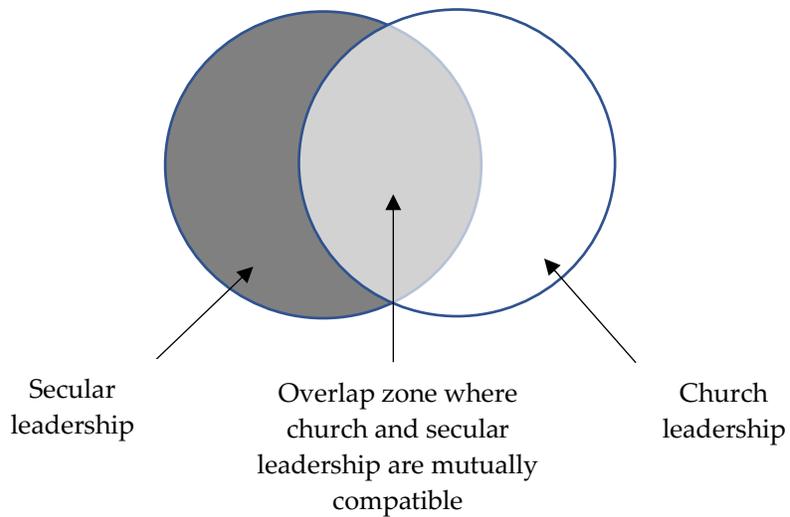


Figure 2: A Venn Diagram of Secular and Church Leadership Spheres (indicative, not to scale)

In this thesis I analyze Lee Kuan Yew’s convictions and beliefs about leadership from a Christian perspective, filtering them through a biblical grid because I want to understand what aspects of his leadership would or would not be applicable and actionable in a religious context (cf. fish and bones analogy). This is categorically not an attempt to “mix religion and politics” in the sense that the Singapore government frowns upon. Rather, this thesis is an attempt to explore and appropriate the best of Lee’s leadership ideas for more effective handling of pastors’ leadership challenges in Christian ministry.

Outline

The main body of this thesis will be in 3 parts. Chapter 2 will seek to construct a biblical grid for assessing Lee's leadership. It will look at the purpose such a grid serves and the components that go into making it up. This grid will not be one that is universally applicable for assessing all leaders, for that would be to claim too much for it. Rather it is constructed with certain particularities of Lee Kuan Yew in mind, and will seek to provide guidance in distinguishing what aspects of Lee's leadership can be meaningfully appropriated by pastors (in particular, senior pastors) and what aspects are best seen as not applicable. The four components that make up the biblical grid are *formation*, *shepherding*, *excellence* and *power*.

Chapter 3 will look in detail at Lee's life and leadership. The first section (3.1) will look at the formation that Lee underwent in the early years of his life, as a means of understanding some of the defining moments in his life that shaped his views and convictions as a leader. This will give pause for pastors to consider the multiple influences going back even to their childhood that shape who they are as leaders. The key resource for this section will be the first volume of Lee's autobiography, *The Singapore Story*.⁶ Section 3.2 will look at positives in Lee's leadership and distil principles from his leadership journey that could be applicable in a church context. There are two broad categories of sources: Lee in his own words, and Lee as analyzed by others. The former category includes the second volume of Lee's autobiography, *From Third World To*

⁶ Lee Kuan Yew. *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*.(Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998).

First,⁷ a book of interviews of Lee by journalists, *Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going*,⁸ and a comprehensive collection of Lee's public speeches given over the span of nearly 5 decades. In these books, interviews and speeches we hear Lee in his own voice reminiscing, arguing, pontificating, chastising, asserting and even joking about his time at the helm of Singapore. For Lee as analyzed by others, we will rely on articles by those who knew Lee up close, worked with and for him and shared their reminiscences of him after his death. Finally Section 3.3 considers various critiques of Lee's leadership. This section will rely on books, articles and papers analysing and critiquing various aspects of Lee's life and leadership. These include books by senior Singaporean journalists, books by Western political observers and critics, and even writings by those deemed to be dissidents who were imprisoned or who left the country because of run-ins with Lee.

Chapter 4 will feature conversations about and 'with' Lee. This chapter will be part interview, part fictional narrative. The interviews serve as windows on Lee's leadership through the eyes of four people who knew him personally, either through family or work. The interviewees, being active Christians, will also share their take on points of relevance of Lee's leadership for the church setting. Interspersing these interviews are 3 sections of narrative corresponding to three hours of a fictitious interview with Lee. The narrative portrays myself interviewing Lee around the year 2013 (he died in March 2015). It will have some similarities to the approach taken by the *The*

⁷ Lee Kuan Yew. *From Third World to First: 1965-2000*.(Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2000).

⁸ Lee Kuan Yew. *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*.(Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011).

New One Minute Manager by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson⁹, and *Leadership and Self-Deception* by the Arbinger Institute¹⁰, both of which use the device of a fictitious dialogue to convey business and leadership ideas. The dialogue will invite Lee's reflections on how senior pastors might learn from the things he did while leading the nation. Excerpts of his memoirs, speeches and previous (real) interviews will be referenced, and specific questions relating to his leadership will be asked of him. The Christian paradigm of leadership will surface in the comments and questions of the interviewer, and the conversation with Lee will explore the nexus of these two worlds.

The intent of adopting this approach is to cradle leadership concepts in a relatable real-world encounter and create the feeling of gaining privileged access into the office of this eminent leader for a private conversation. A fictional narrative offers the space for imaginatively extending Lee's leadership in a more theological vein. However, care will be taken to ensure that in his responses within the fictitious narrative, Lee will not make any major new pronouncements that he has not already said or written about somewhere else. This is to guard against the temptation of seeking legitimacy for the author's own ideas by pseudepigraphically putting words in Lee's mouth. Finally, in the Conclusion, I draw out the implications of this exploration into Lee's relevance for pastors, and propose avenues for further study of Lee.

⁹ Ken Blanchard, Spencer Johnson. *The New One Minute Manager*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015).

¹⁰ The Arbinger Institute. *Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

A final note about the consistency of language in this thesis is in order. The default language employed in this thesis is US English. However, when direct quotations are made of those who composed their material in UK English (which is the standard employed in Singapore and by Lee Kuan Yew) the original UK English spelling is retained. In Chapter 4, though, in the sections containing a fictitious interview with Lee, Lee's words will be in US English because they are composed by this author. All Scripture references throughout this thesis are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

2. A biblical grid by which to assess Lee's leadership

Leadership as a subject of interest and study has been trending for the last few decades, in diverse fields like politics, business, the military, the family, as well as religion. However not everything written by an ostensibly Christian author about leadership is automatically helpful and good for Christians, just as not everything written by an apparently non-Christian author is necessarily bad and irrelevant for Christians. To judge leadership ideas by the professed faith of the author or exemplar is to use an awfully blunt tool. So if material by Christian and non-Christian authors are potentially fair game for the Christian leader, how then do we proceed to discern what leadership ideas can be appropriated by pastors?

The phrase 'biblical grid' evokes the picture of a sieve or filter that lets through the 'right stuff' and blocks out the bad. How do we go about constructing such a grid? For starters, we can begin by acknowledging that in trying to discern what leadership ideas are compatible with Christianity, we are dealing with a highly complex issue, whether we are talking about theories and methodologies or we are looking at persons as exemplars. It is not the same as deciding whether a doctrine is orthodox or heretical. Judging the validity of leadership ideas for pastors is a far less precise exercise than evaluating the orthodoxy of a doctrinal statement, because there is no authoritative creed or definitive statement of faith that we can depend on to define Christian leadership canon. Our grid is therefore in some sense constrained to be imperfect from the get-go.

Components of the grid being proposed here are not universally applicable to all test cases. Rather they are chosen because they are pertinent to the person in question, and the data available on him. So in this part of the thesis, we will look at four components of a biblical grid for assessing Lee. As a leader, Lee had a unique backstory that holds clues to his perspectives and priorities. So to look for points of contact with Christian leadership, one component of the grid will be the place of *formation* in the life of a Christian leader. It will be instructive to explore the importance of both our ‘natural’ formation as persons from the time of our biological birth, as well as our spiritual formation as Christians from the time of our spiritual birth.

As founding Prime Minister of a newly established nation with a complex relationship with its neighbors, Lee felt he had to lead this vulnerable population through major challenges and navigate them to safety and security. To the extent that Lee’s political leadership sought to provide for and look after the basic needs of the people, he unconsciously played the role of a shepherd-leader. And as the biblical theme of *shepherding* is often cited by Christian authors as the primary paradigm for leadership within the church, it will be explored as the next component of the grid.

As a leader determined to forge a national identity for this multiracial melting pot and to win a place for this “little red dot”¹ on the world map, Lee decided that through

¹ Singapore is depicted on many maps of the world as a red dot. The term gained wide publicity when the former President of Indonesia B. J. Habibie used it to refer to Singapore in what appeared to be a disparaging manner (though this was denied by him). The term was quickly adopted by both Singaporean politicians and ordinary citizens with pride and a sense of the nation's success despite its physical limitations. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_red_dot, accessed on 2 Feb 2020.

excellence (in a competitive sense) Singapore would distinguish herself from the region and make herself relevant to the world. Hence, we will look at excellence from a biblical perspective as the third component of the grid. I turn in particular to *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* by L. Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong², to gain a vision for leadership excellence not in the marketplace or political sense of the term, but in an ecclesiastical context.

Finally, as a leader Lee was not shy about using his full range of powers to accomplish what he set out to do. This has been the most controversial aspect of his leadership, frequently drawing criticisms from locals and foreigners alike. It requires a nuanced understanding of power from a biblical perspective. And so we will discuss Andy Crouch's treatise on power entitled *Playing God: Redeeming The Gift of Power*³ which contains crucial insights into the proper exercise of power for the sake of human flourishing, and provides rich material for engaging Lee on the subject of wielding power in the church.

2.1 Formation

As Christian leaders, we have two journeys to consider: our 'natural' journey from the time of our biological birth, and our 'spiritual' journey from the time of our

² L. Gregory Jones, Kevin R. Armstrong. *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

³ Andy Crouch. *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

spiritual birth. The formation that we received in both these journeys overlap in our present lives. No two leaders are exactly alike, because leaders are people, and no two people are exactly alike. Each leader has a unique journey that shapes them into who they are. That journey incorporates both nature and nurture, and actually begins in their mother's womb where they were "knit together" (in the picturesque language of Psalm 139:13) because at conception, the DNA of the leader, which defines the physical attributes, traits and qualities they inherit from their parents, is determined. After gestation comes birth, and the way the child is cared for and taught through the early years of life, by parents, siblings, extended family, school, community etc., has a profound shaping effect on them, which tapers off as they become adults. Major life events and experiences also play their part in making the leader.

Peter Scazzero in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* argues: "We lead more out of who we are than out of what we do, strategic or otherwise. If we fail to recognize that who we are on the inside informs every aspect of our leadership, we will do damage to ourselves and to those we lead." Scazzero urges leaders to "face your shadow" which refers to gaining self-awareness about the aspects of our character and personality that we prefer to neglect, forget or deny, and the forces that made us who we are.⁴ He makes the incisive observation that "it is easier to spend your life manipulating

⁴ Peter Scazzero. *The Emotionally Healthy Leader. : How transforming your inner life will deeply transform your church, team, and the world.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 48.

an institution than dealing with your own soul”.⁵ He also humorously quipped: “Jesus may be in your heart, but Grandpa is still in your bones!”⁶

As for our spiritual formation, we need to reflect on how well we have understood what being “saved by grace through faith” (Ephesians 2:8-9) means, because a clear grasp of the Gospel (by which we become Christians and are born again) is absolutely fundamental to healthy spiritual formation. Distortion in our understanding of God as Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit – One God In Three Persons) is disastrous, as is distortion in our understanding of what the Cross of Christ accomplished. It would be a travesty if those who do not even know what it means to be properly Christian assume leadership in the church.

Spiritual formation goes beyond ensuring our theology is orthodox. It also involves the molding of our value system and convictions such that there is growing alignment with God’s values and convictions. A proper humble attitude towards the Bible is indispensable in this regard. Do we sit in judgment of the Scriptures, or do we allow the Scriptures to judge us? Paul exhorted the Christians in Rome: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2) Are our minds being transformed as we believe the “indicatives” of Scripture (i.e. the statements of truth), and obey the “imperatives” of Scripture (i.e. the commands)?

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ Peter Scazzero. “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Seminar” (held at St James’ Church, Singapore on 20 Jul 2015).

Jeffrey Greenman has helpfully proposed a comprehensively Trinitarian definition of spiritual formation which is worth unpacking. He defines spiritual formation as “our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith for the sake of the world”⁷. The six components of this definition will be expanded upon below.

Our continuing response...

Spiritual formation is first and foremost a response in that it is not humanly initiated or generated. Just as a vocation is the response to a prior call, so spiritual formation is the response of faith, trust and obedience to the prior work of God as proclaimed in the Gospel. Using the analogy of the back-and-forth dynamic of a tennis rally, spiritual formation involves a back-and-forth dynamic between the believer and God, but the one who “serves” to begin the rally is always God. Spiritual formation must therefore avoid lapsing into a kind of Pelagian self-driven proactivity, but rather should derive its impetus from God’s prior work of grace in one’s life. This response is not a one-time event but a continuous, ongoing, lifelong process. While there may be brief periods of heightened intensity and forward momentum in spiritual formation, the key focus in spiritual formation is about cultivating intimacy with the Lord over the long haul. It is therefore more akin to a life-long marathon than a 3-month sprint.⁸

⁷ Jeffrey P. Greenman, George Kalantzis. *Life In the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2010), 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

... to the reality of God's grace...

God's grace is understood to be the unmerited gift of God's love and mercy to sinners, shown supremely in Christ's life, death and resurrection. The biblical logic of divine grace is exemplified in the truth that "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19), hence spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God's grace. Because God's grace deals decisively with human sin through the cross, spiritual formation requires that we reckon seriously with issues of sin, temptation, fallenness and brokenness. "Rooted in a robust sense of sin and joyful confidence in the efficacy of the gospel, spiritual formation involves grace-based disciplines of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation." Divine grace is not opposed to the human response entailing some measure of effort and commitment, but divine grace is opposed to the notion of earning divine favor through effort and commitment.⁹

...shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ...

Greenman cites three key Scriptures in support of this assertion that spiritual formation is about transformation into the image and likeness of Christ – two by Paul and the third by John:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom 8:29)

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

Indeed, becoming like Jesus is the “goal of spiritual formation” and the “eschatological destiny” of every true disciple. And because being “conformed to the image of his Son” is the ultimate purpose of God’s saving work through the cross and resurrection, spiritual formation “is an extension of the logic of the cross and is impossible apart from the reality of Christ’s atoning work”¹⁰. This requires that disciples take on Jesus’ “cruciform” way of life, marked by obedience to God’s will, self-sacrifice, and humble service for the sake of others.¹¹

...through the work of the Holy Spirit...

It is the Holy Spirit’s work to bring about Christlikeness in us, and it is our responsibility to cooperate with the Spirit in this process. J.I. Packer helpfully described this idea of cooperation with the Spirit in the context of differentiating between regeneration and sanctification:

Regeneration was a momentary monergistic act of quickening the spiritually dead. As such, it was God’s work alone. Sanctification, however, is in one sense synergistic – it is an ongoing cooperative process in which regenerate persons, alive to God and freed from sin’s dominion (Rom 6:11, 14-18), are required to exert themselves in sustained obedience. God’s method of sanctification is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

neither activism (self-reliant activity) nor apathy (God-reliant passivity), but God-dependent effort (2 Cor 7:1; Phil 3:10-14; Heb 12:14).¹²

Regeneration is monergistic in that it requires the agency of God alone. Sanctification, which is an alternative way of describing spiritual formation, is synergistic in the sense that it involves the agency of both the Holy Spirit and the believer. The distinctive virtues of the Christian faith are the fruit (product) of the Spirit working in us, namely, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).¹³

... in the community of faith...

While spiritual formation does require the acquisition of some personal disciplines (like prayer, confession, fasting, biblical meditation etc.), it cannot ultimately be a solo enterprise. Spiritual formation has to happen in the context of relationships with other believers. These relationships, which are often messy and imperfect, are the crucible of transformation in which we learn forgiveness, humility and love for our neighbour as ourselves. Engagement in the corporate life of the church, through worship, fellowship and service, also ensures that spiritual formation does not remain a cerebral exercise alone, but that the rubber actually meets the road in real-life application.¹⁴

¹² J.I. Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit: Finding fullness in our walk with God.* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1984), 7.

¹³ Greenman, Kalantzis. *Life in the Spirit*, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

... *for the sake of the world.*

The mark of genuine spiritual formation is the capacity to reflect Christ as the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt 5:13-14). Growth in Christlikeness is of one piece with participation in Christ’s mission to the world. “Spiritual formation at its best involves a reciprocal dynamic between gathering and scattering, contemplation and action, silence and speech, being and doing, receiving and giving.”¹⁵ In the words of Elizabeth O’Connor, “Just as we are committed to being on an inward journey for all of time, so we are committed to being on an outward journey, so that the inner and the outer become related to one another and one has meaning for the other and helps to make the other possible.”¹⁶

*

It is upon the primary foundation of orthodox theology and Christ-like character that we build the secondary or tertiary traits and qualities that make for good leadership. These qualities may in some cases be inborn and unchangeable, but by and large, they can be learnt and acquired through observation, imitation and intentional application. Senior pastors, especially in larger churches, need to be formed, not just as sterling disciples of Christ, but also in effective leadership principles and practices because their roles demand it.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ Elizabeth O’Connor. *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 28.

2.2 *Shepherding*

The theme of *shepherding* runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, like a seam of gold. In almost half of the 167 occurrences of the Hebrew word *ra'ah* (shepherd) in the Old Testament, it is used metaphorically to refer either to God (YHWH) or to human rulers.¹⁷ Abel the son of Adam was the earliest literal shepherd identified (Gen 4:2). The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons were also shepherds in the literal sense. In the book of Exodus, when the descendants of Jacob were plunged into slavery by the ascension to power of another Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, Moses fled from being prince in Egypt to being shepherd of Jethro's flock of sheep in the wilderness of Sinai, before being sent back to Egypt by God to metaphorically shepherd the much larger and more problematic flock of Israelites out of Egypt and towards the Promised Land. When it came time for Moses to identify a successor, he prayed, "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint *a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.*" (Num 27:16-17, emphasis added) Thus, the Scriptures considered Moses and Joshua in their national/ spiritual/ military leadership roles as shepherds, men over the congregation who go out and come in before them.¹⁸

¹⁷ Wayne Baxter, *Israel's Only Shepherd: Matthew's Shepherd Motif and His Social Setting* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 43. See footnote 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

Once settled in the land of Canaan, the period of Judges was characterized by repeated cycles of the apostasy of Israel, foreign oppression as judgment from God, repentance of Israel, followed by a military deliverance. In the days of king David, God speaking through the prophet Nathan referred back to the period of judges in this manner: “In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the *judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel*, saying “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” (2 Sam 7:7, emphasis added). These metaphorical shepherds were gifted and chosen individuals who provided national, spiritual and military leadership for Israel. And as long as they remained judges over Israel, they were able to restrain the people’s propensity to go astray from their covenantal commitments to God¹⁹, but as soon as these deliverer-shepherds died, the cycle of idolatry and apostasy would begin again. The flock regularly proved to be their own worst enemies, doing what was “right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25) and shepherds had to protect the sheep from themselves, as much as they did from external ‘predators’.

The last of the judges, Samuel, presided over the transition from judges to monarchy, and whereas the inaugural king, Saul, failed dismally as shepherd-king, the second king, David, became the high water mark of Israel’s shepherd-kings. In the words of Samuel to Saul, “But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a

¹⁹ The idea of a shepherd-leader restraining the people was made explicit in 1 Samuel where it says, “When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD told him, ‘Here is the man of whom I spoke to you! He it is who shall *restrain my people.*’” (1 Sam 9:17, emphasis added)

man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.” (1 Sam 13:14) Despite his moral failings centered around his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) and the judgments that followed, David nevertheless maintained a close relationship with the Lord to the end of his life, and was depicted glowingly in a Psalm attributed to Asaph: “He chose David his servant... to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With *upright heart* he shepherded them and guided them with his *skillful hand*.” (Psalm 78:70a, 71b, 72, emphasis added) Indeed, as Chae says, “the OT usage of shepherd imagery for human leaders finds its ideal type in David the son of Jesse (2 Sam 5:2; 7:5-7, 12-16). YHWH’s promise of an eternal throne for David’s house (2 Sam 7:12-17) coincides with YHWH entrusting David as the shepherd of Israel.”²⁰ Wayne Baxter, in his survey of the shepherd theme in the Old Testament, also observes:

The shepherd metaphor frequently extends beyond the monarchy to include other members of Israel’s leadership. Thus, Jeremiah the prophet defends himself against his accusers by asserting that he never shirked his duties as a shepherd of God’s people (Jer 17:16). Similarly Deutero-Isaiah includes prophets as members of Israel’s leadership: ‘Those watching Israel are blind! All of them do not know... they are shepherds who do not know how to discern’ (Isa 56:10a, 11b; cf. Zech 10:2-3)²¹

So in terms of the shepherd metaphor being applied to human leaders in the OT, we observe that its referents included a spectrum of roles, including military generals, judges, monarchs and prophets.

²⁰ Young S. Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd*, (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 28.

²¹ Baxter, *Israel’s Only Shepherd*, 46.

In addition to earthly rulers, God is commonly depicted as a shepherd in the OT as well. The earliest metaphorical use of the Hebrew word for shepherd, *ra'ah*, was by Jacob in Gen 48:15 as he called upon the God “who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day” to bless Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. In the Psalms, this imagery of God as shepherd is extended, and as Chae observes:

Shepherd imagery reveals one of the deepest aspects of the relationship between YHWH and his people, and that is demonstrated in the covenant formula: “For he is our God, and we are his people of his pasture, and the flock of his hand” (Ps 95:7; cf. 100:3). Several Psalms describe YHWH as the Shepherd of Israel who cares for, saves, and guides them (Pss 23; 28:8-9; 77:20; 19:13; 80:1-3; 95:6-7; 119:176), and who gathers and even heals them (Pss 147:2-3; cf. 44:11,22).²²

Although in terms of the physical grandeur of the kingdom, there seemed to be a temporary uptick from the days of David to his son Solomon (1 Ki 10:23) before it declined under the reigns of Solomon’s sons, the spiritual health of the nation entered a freefall after the death of David, from which it never fully recovered. As shepherds, the kings of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were by and large catastrophic failures, presiding over the moral and spiritual deterioration of their nations, despite repeated calls to repentance through the prophets. The exile of Israel by Assyria in 722 BC and the exile of Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BC were the inevitable result (2 Chr 36:15-21).

The references to God as Shepherd take on heightened significance and intensity in the prophets, where YHWH’s shepherding activity refers to his rescuing, gathering,

²² Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd*, 28.

and protecting his people (see Jer 31:8-11; Isa 40:11; Mic 7:14),²³ against the backdrop of judgment upon the apostate under-shepherds. In Eze 34:11-16, which is the most detailed text depicting YHWH as a shepherd, YHWH undertakes to do what the evil shepherds should have done but did not, namely attend to the lost, the strays, the injured, and the weak, and save his people from the effects and consequences of bad shepherding. He also promises to judge ‘the fat and the strong’ sheep (Eze 34:16), who represent the oppressive ruling class. The judgment upon the shepherds is comprised, negatively of removing them from the flock, and positively of providing a just and true Davidic shepherd to lead the flock.²⁴ In Micah, the vision of the eschatological Shepherd moves from the breaker who goes before the gather flock (Mic 2:12-13) to the scene of the final battle between the flock and the nations (4:11-13), and eventually to the coming Davidic Shepherd figure whose reign will extend to the ends of the earth (5:1-4).²⁵

These prophetic assurances of YHWH’s shepherding of his flock found fulfillment centuries later in Jesus the Messaiah. In John’s Gospel, Jesus self-identified as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and is known by them, and who lays down his life for the welfare and salvation of his sheep (John 10:11-16, 25-30). Matthew depicts Jesus as the true Davidic Shepherd, descended from David (Matt 1:1), who replaces Israel’s evil shepherds, and heals and saves his people.²⁶ Thus the shepherd metaphor lies at the very heart of the Christian Gospel.

²³ Baxter, *Israel’s Only Shepherd*, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

²⁵ Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd*, 37.

²⁶ Baxter, *Israel’s Only Shepherd*, 53.

This role of shepherding, Jesus later shared with and delegated to Peter and the rest of the apostles, and by extension to all future generations of pastors, beginning with the threefold command to Peter by the Sea of Galilee: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep (John 21: 15-17). This is a mandate and call that Peter took seriously, and near the end of his life he wrote to exhort the readers of his first epistle:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:² *shepherd the flock of God that is among you*, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;³ not domineering over those in your charge, *but being examples to the flock*.⁴ *And when the chief Shepherd appears*, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4, emphasis added)

The shepherding theme finds its culmination in the book of Revelation where the redeemed people of God, dressed in robes of righteousness made white by the blood of the Lamb, and having come out of the great tribulation, are reunited eternally with their Chief Shepherd:

¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
¹⁷ *For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,*
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”
(Revelation 7: 15-17, emphasis added)

It is instructive to note from this brief trace of the biblical theme of shepherding that within the theocracy that was the nation of Israel, civic and political leaders were designated shepherds, i.e. this was not a classification reserved for the religious sphere

alone, but instead overlapped with all aspects appertaining to the people's lives, whether "sacred" or "secular". We note, too, that a key mark of YHWH's shepherding was compassion for the vulnerable. Also, we observe that Jesus, as the fulfillment of the eschatological visions of the Davidic Shepherd, never relinquished or abdicated his shepherding role once Peter and the apostles were appointed. Rather, Jesus remains the Chief Shepherd. In the threefold command to Peter in John 21, the one common word in all three commands (feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep) is the possessive pronoun 'my', meaning every lamb and every sheep, referring to every member of every church, belongs to Jesus.

Peter and all others that follow in his footsteps are Jesus' co-shepherds, or more accurately, under-shepherds. Under-shepherds are not the same as hirelings who care only for themselves and not the sheep (John 10:12-13). Under-shepherds care for the sheep as a holy trust from their Chief Shepherd, never forgetting that he purchased his sheep by the blood he shed at the cross, and that they themselves are simultaneously both his under-shepherds and his sheep. The care of the under-shepherd for the sheep is therefore more akin to that of elder siblings for their younger siblings (with God as Father to all), than that of parents for their children.

This paradigm of shepherding finds support from a number of Christian authors writing on the subject of leadership. For example, Howard Snyder opines that "in the community of God's people the pastor is not the head, the pastoral director, the boss or the chief executive officer. Rather, the pastor . . . serves as coordinator, equipper, discipler, overseer and shepherd. This is leadership. But it is leadership for, with and in

the body. It is leadership on an organic community model, not on an organizational hierarchy model.”²⁷ Foremost among the voices calling for a return to the shepherding paradigm was the late Eugene Peterson in his series of books on pastoral ministry. The quintessence of Peterson’s position is that pastors are called as shepherds to guide congregations to attend to God through scripture, prayer and spiritual direction,²⁸ and that the pastor’s work involves “prayer-directing, story-making, pain-sharing, nay- saying and community-building”.²⁹ However, in taking up a polemic stance against all that he perceives to be marketplace-style leadership in the church, the question could be asked whether Peterson somewhat unfairly branded efforts at contextualizing leadership to the changing dynamics of how institutions function in today’s world as selling out to the spirit of the age.

There is no doubt that shepherding is a central defining concept in pastoral ministry. It is an extension of the Trinity’s own ministry to the flock of God that we pastors are privileged to enter into and partake of. And the authors quoted above (and many more besides) are spot-on in calling our attention to the imperative of shepherding well and guarding against uncritical importing of methodologies that the secular world uses. This is a legitimate critique, in that any leadership in the church that is cut loose from its biblical moorings of shepherding is in danger of jettisoning its basic identity as a

²⁷ Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), 246-247.

²⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

²⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 2.

spiritual entity and morphing into a human and social construct, devoid of the Spirit and the approval of God.

When Shepherding Becomes Overwhelming

The shepherding ministry is personal in nature, or as Kyle Childress put it, it is “caring about the particulars of ministry and people”. The problem, though, is that it can become overwhelming. Childress emphasized that “it is not that we no longer care about the particularity of people's lives but that we have more particularity than we can handle.”³⁰ One of the means by which shepherds stave off the feeling of being overwhelmed is by establishing a rhythm between periods of ministry and periods of solitude. The sabbath must be seen as a gracious provision towards this end, and the pastor’s practice of sabbath must not deteriorate into merely a well-deserved day off for recreation or a time to catch up on accumulated errands, but should be patterned on Jesus’ periods of solitude in which he found replenishment in the presence of the Father. Childress adds: “Jesus found space on a mountain to pray and one result of his prayer life was the ability to minister to people in particular. And if it was important for Jesus, then how much more important it must be for us to find space for prayer, worship, and other disciplines which allow us to minister over the long haul.”³¹ The words of Psalm 46:10 serve as an anchor: “Be still and know that I am God.”

³⁰ Jones, Armstrong. *Resurrecting Excellence*, Kindle location 616-618 of 2425.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 624-626 of 2425.

That shepherding can get overwhelming for under-shepherds is not only due to the lack of self-care, but more fundamentally is down to the issue of capacity. This is a key distinguishing factor between the Chief Shepherd and his under-shepherds: human under-shepherds are limited in our capacity for caring, while the Chief Shepherd, who has limitless capacity, is never overwhelmed. The pastoral load borne by shepherds is a function of at least two factors: the number of people we are directly caring for, and the complexity and intensity of their pastoral issues. The Scripture that deals most directly and practically with this issue of pastoral overload is Exodus 18 where Jethro counsels Moses not to take on the whole load of settling the nation's disputes himself, but to institute a structure where the load can be delegated and distributed across a team of leaders.

Timothy Keller builds on Jethro's logic in his excellent paper *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes With Growth*. He introduces his ideas with this opening diagnosis: "One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a 'size culture' that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and what ministers, staff, and lay leaders do."³² He also discusses how the church size and the limitations of

³² Timothy Keller. "Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes with Growth", *The Movement Newsletter* (Redeemer City to City, 2010), 1.

under-shepherds' capacities impacts the roles of everyone in the church, not least the senior pastor:

The larger the church, the less available the main preacher is to do pastoral work. In smaller churches the pastor is available at all times, for most occasions and needs, to any member or unchurched person. In the large church there are sometimes more lay ministers, staff, and leaders than the small church has people! So the large church's pastors must recognize their limits and spend more time with staff and lay shepherds and in prayer and meditation. The larger the church, the more important the minister's leadership abilities are. Preaching and pastoring are sufficient skills for pastors in smaller churches, but as a church grows other leadership skills become critical. In a large church not only administrative skills but also vision casting and strategy design are crucial gifts in the pastoral team.³³

A failure to appreciate the way church size impacts leadership dynamics is a surefire recipe for shepherd burnout. When the scale of the flock introduces additional layers of complexity in the task of shepherding and meeting the needs of the flock, there is undisputed warrant for a team approach in which certain under-shepherds specialize in direct pastoral ministry while others are set apart to oversee and bring coordination and coherence across the team.

Further Reflection

It is worth noting that shepherding is a metaphor, and while the core referent of the metaphor is not in doubt, we cannot be as dogmatic about interpretation around the edges. Metaphors are by nature inexact modes of description and explanation, proven by

³³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

the fact that it is always possible to take analogies and metaphors too far to the point where they break down and no longer convey the intended meaning.

Where exactly do the boundaries of the shepherding metaphor lie? How do agrarian metaphors function in today's much more complicated urban/ suburban environments? Is God the Shepherd only of our spiritual lives or all aspects of our lives? Is the under-shepherd's role to be limited only to the sacred realm, or should it also include what is in the civic or secular realm? Are the tools that under-shepherds utilize in their ministry to be drawn from ecclesiastical tradition alone, or is there warrant in using tools that those outside the church also find useful? There is much scope in these questions for fruitful reflection and exploration, with universal consensus among pastors and theologians on the answers being a very unlikely outcome.

2.3 Excellence

In this section, for the purpose of evaluating Lee's near obsession with excellence in his years in political leadership, I do a slightly deeper dive into Jones and Armstrong's book, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry*, for insights into the theme of excellence in Christian leadership. The book arose out of a Colloquium on Excellence in Ministry involving a diverse group of Christian leaders, both clergy and

lay³⁴. In seeking a concept of Christian leadership that would be “spacious” enough to encompass the diversity of perspectives yet be faithful to the particularities of each participant’s contributions, the colloquium settled on the theme of ‘resurrecting excellence’ in order that this summative concept place the primary accent on the hope and new life of Easter. The book is a call and an encouragement to a life of Christian leadership that is well-lived, and that engages life’s best energies.³⁵

Jones and Armstrong begin by acknowledging that “excellence” was not a comfortable choice for describing what they wanted to commend in Christian ministry, because of its common connotations of competition, achievement and the capacity to come out ahead. Nevertheless they rationalized: “The alternative to uncritical adoption of cultural standards of excellence is not to reject excellence altogether, nor is it to settle for ‘mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness’. Rather, it is an appropriately Christian understanding of excellence.”³⁶ This ‘appropriately Christian understanding of excellence’ is summed up as “the way of love patterned in Christ”, which alludes to Paul’s great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13, prefaced by the apostle as the “still more excellent way”.³⁷ This rationalization by the authors comports well with the fact that Paul was also not shy about appropriating the idea of a competitive race for discipleship: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run

³⁴ This colloquium was held in Duke Divinity School in 2001 as part of Pulpit & Pew, a research project on the lives and work of American Christian pastoral leaders.

³⁵ Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 51 of 2425.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93 of 2425. The phrase ‘mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness’ is credited to John Wimmer.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:31

that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.” (1 Cor 9:24-25) Paul enjoins the Corinthian Christians to have the commitment and intensity of a winning athlete (only one receives the prize... so run that you may obtain it) but he nuances the motivation for the race by shifting the focus away from bettering competitors to the need for strict preparation and to anticipation of the imperishable prize that awaits.

The Christian understanding of excellence could be articulated as a response to the question, "Where is the presence and power of God being manifested in this congregation's life, in this person's life, in this person's pastoral leadership?"³⁸ Clearly any meaningful response to such a question cannot be confined to the simplistically quantitative, i.e. to metrics and measurements alone. As the authors ask rhetorically, ““How do we calculate the effect of reconciling forgiveness, the value of deepened prayer life, the impact of passing on faith to a child, the quiet presence of sitting with a dying parishioner or hammering nails to help provide housing for a homeless family?”³⁹ Excellence in Christian ministry, they go on to say, “requires a capacity for measuring life by the complexity of judgment and grace as well as the more standard measures of ‘bodies, budgets, and buildings’.”⁴⁰

What does it mean for excellence to be “patterned in Christ”? In a nutshell, it means “the life, death and resurrection of Jesus form the basis and the goal of our

³⁸ Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 144 of 2425.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130 of 2425.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127 of 2425.

summons to excellence”.⁴¹ Instead of patterning ourselves on the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the President of a nation, the leadership template and paradigm for a senior pastor ultimately has to be none other than Jesus Christ. Jones and Armstrong discuss various aspects of what this looks like, of which I will focus on three: *leadership excellence patterned in Christ* originates in a calling, grows through lifelong learning, and manifests most gloriously at cruciform intersections.

Originates in a Calling

The essence of ‘vocation’ that distinguishes it from ‘job’ or ‘career’ is that it involves heeding a “voice” (note that ‘vocation’ shares the same etymological root as voice or vocalize)⁴². This ‘voice’ issues a call, and the response to and fulfilment of that call is the ‘vocation’. Jesus received his call, in one sense, prior to his Incarnation, as implied in John 17:4-5 where Jesus prayed, “I glorified you on earth, *having accomplished the work that you gave me to do*. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with *the glory that I had with you before the world existed*.” (John 17:4-5, emphasis added) And in another sense, Jesus was called (again) at his baptism, when the Spirit of God lighted like a dove upon him, and he heard the voice of his Father declare, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” This encounter, immediately followed by the temptation in the wilderness, served as Jesus’ launchpad into his public

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 109 of 2425.

⁴² Late Middle English from Old French, or from Latin *vocatio(n)-*, from *vocare* ‘to call’.
<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/vocation> (accessed on 12 Nov 19).

ministry (see Matthew 3:13 – 4:17). As Jesus was called into his Messianic ministry, so too Christian leadership is a vocation originating in a sense of God’s call. This cascading of the call from the Father to Jesus to his disciples is captured in the post-resurrection episode when Jesus declares: “Peace be with you. *As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*” (John 20:21, emphasis added)

Resurrecting excellence that is patterned in Christ’s calling is particularly concerned with the spiritual depth and maturity of pastoral leaders. “The focus is on the irreplaceable significance of the call from God, the spiritual fire and depth that come from an encounter and ongoing relationship with God.”⁴³ Christian leadership understood as calling also “provides an awareness of the Spirit’s work in challenging tendencies toward institutional rigidity and accommodation to worldly standards that are marked by sin; and it enables fresh understandings of the particular gifts with which God equips those whom God calls to pastoral leadership.”⁴⁴

All this speaks of the *agenda* that primarily drives the leader’s leadership. Excellence of leadership is tied to whose agenda is ultimately being served: the leader’s personal self-centered agenda or a higher, more noble agenda determined and defined by the origin of (or the person issuing) the call. Attentiveness to the voice of the caller is equivalent to a posture of submission to a higher agenda than one’s own. This posture of attentiveness is beautifully embodied in the third of the Servant Songs of Isaiah:

⁴ The Lord God has given me
the tongue of *those who are taught*,

⁴³ Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 1070 of 2425.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1092-94 of 2425.

that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
⁵ *The Lord God has opened my ear,*
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward. (Isaiah 50:4-5, emphasis added)

Grows Through Lifelong Learning

Luke 2:52 describes the adolescent Jesus as increasing “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man”. In other words, Jesus exemplified and embodied lifelong learning. Leadership excellence patterned in Christ is likewise characterized by lifelong learning. Many of the earliest colleges and universities in the US and in Europe were founded in order to train and cultivate a learned clergy who would be able to offer understanding and insight to congregations and to the wider society. However, over time this image of learned clergy came to be tainted by criticisms of elitism, a preoccupation with book learning, and a disempowerment of the laity. As Will Willimon put it, “claim too much theological chrism for the ordained *cleros* and the next thing you know you have damaged the baptismally bestowed ministry of the *laos*.”⁴⁵ Jones and Armstrong propose the nuance of ‘learning’ rather than ‘learned’ clergy, which strikes a note of humility, of not having arrived or knowing it all, as well as of responsiveness to an ever-

⁴⁵ William Willimon, *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 19. *Cleros* and *laos* are derived from the Greek terms for clerics and laity respectively.

changing world. This essentially involves two ingredients: disciplined practices of learning, and holy friendships.

Disciplined practices begin early in the journey of discipleship, ideally before any notions of leadership in the church are even conceived for the individual concerned. They include (but are not limited to) good patterns of catechesis that immerse people in Scripture, and develop the capacity to “read the world, and our lives, through the lens of Scripture”. It is critical that attentiveness to prayer, Scripture, Christian doctrine and spiritual direction be the means by which we are oriented early on toward friendship with God and the cultivation of right beliefs.⁴⁶

It is healthy for leaders to progress from this foundational orientation of being a student or disciple of Christ to a subsequent phase of formal theological education. Jones and Armstrong lament that because many churches are weak in their foundational catechetical processes, those they send to seminaries for formal theological studies are often ill-prepared. The seminaries are therefore forced to do “remedial catechesis”, which detracts from their primary role of shaping the seminarians’ “pastoral imagination” – the ability to “reason practically at the intersections of (theological) knowledge and the day-to-day tasks and relationships involved in pastoral ministry”.⁴⁷

The other ingredient in cultivating learning clergy is that of holy friendships in the community of the church. One specific aspect of this is what the authors refer to as

⁴⁶ Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 1463-66 of 2425.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1561 of 2425.

“apprenticing ourselves to those who are wise”. Saint Ambrose, in his fourth-century treatise on the duties of the clergy, emphasizes the shaping of character through discipleship and (notably) apprenticeship as a crucial prerequisite for shaping faithful clergy.⁴⁸ The authors highlight the similarities between the pastoral vocation and the medical profession in relation to apprenticeship:

It is instructive to consider the formation of physicians in the United States. To be sure, the analogies are not perfect. . . there are certain basic patterns of feeling, thinking, and acting that need to be learned in and through the classroom, while there are other patterns and skills that can only be learned through apprenticeship.⁴⁹

Will Willimon, drawing on his own experience as a tenured seminary professor, opines that “it’s unrealistic to expect tenured seminary faculty to train risk-taking pastoral leaders”. So in his time as United Methodist Bishop in Alabama, he instituted a residency in ministry program by “pairing new pastors with competent, proven, exemplary pastors who ask, ‘How can we equip you to do what the church needs doing now?’”⁵⁰ This is a good illustration of what Jones and Armstrong advocate as “holy friendships” for learning clergy.

Manifests Most Gloriously at Cruciform Intersections

⁴⁸ Ambrose, “De officiis ministrorum”, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, cited in Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 1480 of 2425.

⁴⁹ Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 1546 of 2425.

⁵⁰ Willimon, *Bishop*, 28-29.

The chapter of the book containing the most profound and penetrating insights is the one on “Inhabiting the Intersections”⁵¹. Jones and Armstrong deploy the term ‘intersections’ to refer to the place “where spiritual journeys meet” or diverse trajectories criss-cross. They explain the essence of ‘inhabiting the intersections’ in this pregnant statement: “Patterning our lives in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ invites us to discover intersections that we often otherwise turn into false alternatives - youth and age, strength and weakness, joy and suffering, abundance and sacrifice, tragedy and hope, community and solitude, church and world.”⁵² This speaks of leaders having an eye for the ways in which church members tend to compartmentalize life with an either/or perspective, and how leaders creatively pivot members towards both/and perspectives, “seeking connections among the often paradoxical dimensions of life” thus breaking down dividing walls between the “false alternatives”. The intersections are *cruciform* in that they allude to the beams of the cross, which Simone Weil described as “the intersection between creation and Creator”.⁵³

Gregory the Great insisted that pastoral ministry, which he described as the “art of arts”, must be practiced at intersections, where human lives and God’s life intersect.⁵⁴ Leadership excellence patterned in Christ manifests most gloriously at these cruciform intersections because it is where excellence from a biblical standpoint most clearly

⁵¹ Chapter 2 of Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*.

⁵² Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 408-410 of 2425.

⁵³ Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 183. (Cited in *Resurrecting Excellence*, location 2314 of 2425.)

⁵⁴ Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis, S.J. (New York: Newman, 1950), 21.

distinguishes itself from worldly notions of excellence which are rooted in competition and one-upmanship. Of the various intersections that the authors discussed (e.g. youth and age, tragedy and hope, community and solitude) the one that perhaps pertains most directly to our study of Lee Kuan Yew is the intersection of strength and weakness.

The cross of Christ is the foremost illustration of the juxtaposition and intersection of strength and weakness. “That new life was birthed from such utter vulnerability, such awful dying, is the central mystery of Christian faith.”⁵⁵ This paradox is also seen in the way “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor 1:27). So “Christian understandings of excellence must always have at their heart a strong awareness of human frailty, brokenness, and even sin”, which runs counter to worldly notions of excellence that rely on strength, efficiency, and influence.⁵⁶

This counter-cultural nature of resurrecting excellence is further seen in the way contemporary discussions of excellence encourage us to "identify our strengths," "work from our strengths," "build on our strengths." While Scripture's teaching on spiritual gifts does acknowledge the usefulness of identifying and operating in our strengths (e.g. 1 Cor 12, Rom 12), this is not the whole picture. We are also urged to “work outside the boundaries of our strengths and interests, to cultivate the whole of who we might become by the power of the Holy Spirit.” In ministries of resurrecting

⁵⁵ Jones, Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 549-550 of 2425.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 564 of 2425.

excellence, weaknesses are not hidden or repressed; rather, they are risked in intersections where they might be taken up and transformed.⁵⁷

Jones and Armstrong illustrate this idea with an anecdote by Christine Pohl about a girl with severe disabilities who was allowed to participate in lighting the candles at the start of a worship service. There was some fumbling and the moment felt awkward and distracting for many in the congregation, especially for those with a special sensitivity to whether liturgy is done well or poorly. However when the girl was returned to her place in the congregation her eyes were shining with joy. That's when it dawned on the congregation that they had just witnessed something beautiful. In the accommodation and welcoming of her brokenness and the gifts she brings, the pastor and congregation had followed the more excellent way than if they had shunted her aside in favor of more physically able participants. In the cruciform intersection between strength and weakness, resurrecting excellence had been gloriously manifested.⁵⁸

2.4 Power

Much of today's public discourse about power, including among Christians, has been shaped by Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, perhaps more so than people realize, and the Nietzschean perspective on power can be summed up in this statement:

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 590-602 of 2425.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 573 of 2425.

My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement (“union”) with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on.⁵⁹

So according to Nietzsche, the deepest truth about the world is the dark struggle for domination and mastery. “Even the most seemingly sympathetic and moral of communities is, just under the surface, a temporary and expedient set of alliances based on sufficient similarity to justify working together, for the moment, to defeat those ‘other bodies’ who are seeking to dominate all space and time... The moment that one ‘body’ sees the opportunity, it will dissolve previous alliances and seize the opportunity to take over, even from its own closest relations.”⁶⁰ According to this set of assumptions, the statement by Lord Acton that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” becomes in most people’s minds an incontrovertible truth, and there is an abiding cynicism and suspicion about all loci of authority and power.

Andy Crouch builds a case from Scripture to advance an alternative understanding of power which he defines as follows (note this definition shares a parallel structure to the quote from Nietzsche above, as indicated by the underlined portions):

All true being strives to create room for more being and to expend its power in the creation of flourishing environments for variety and life, and to thrust back the chaos that limits true being. In doing so it creates other bodies and invites them into mutual creation and tending of the world, building relationships where there had been none: thus they then cooperate together in creating more power for more creation. And the process goes on.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Cited in Crouch, *Playing God*, 46.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

Crouch points out that the language of power is found in the Bible from beginning to end. The Biblical understanding of power that emerges from the creation account is that power is first and foremost God's gift to his creation, especially to his image-bearers. From a close reading of the grammar of Genesis 1 we find that when God creates by his spoken word, he uses the jussive form "Let there be" which, unlike the more coercive direct imperative, connotes a humble power that brings living beings into existence and creates room for them to exercise their own creative power to be fruitful and multiply.⁶²

This leads to the second aspect of a biblical understanding of power, which is that this gift of power is for the goal of the flourishing of creation, and the multiplication of flourishing environments for creation. God delights to see his creatures teeming and swarming. He enjoys order but he also enjoys wildness and unpredictability.⁶³ And the third aspect of power is that it is the servant of love. "Love without the capacity to make something of the world, without the ability to respond to and make room for the beloved's flourishing, is frustrated love."⁶⁴

Crouch observes that seeing the world as a battleground for dominance sounds admirably grown-up, sophisticated and, above all, realistic, while to suggest that the deepest truth of the world is collaboration, cooperation and ultimately love sounds laughably and dangerously naive.⁶⁵ Why does the Nietzschean view seem to ring so true

⁶² *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

for so many of us? Firstly it is because many in the world (even some Christians, it must be acknowledged) do not buy into the biblical metanarrative of God as Creator and the ultimate source of all power. Secondly, it is because the dysfunctions of this world that Nietzsche observed are absolutely real and undeniable. Where Nietzsche erred was his diagnosis of the cause behind these dysfunctions. Instead of attributing the ills of this world to power, he should have attributed them to the *distortion of the divine gift of power* (which of course he could not have done, having himself rejected the notion of God as ultimate source of power, and famously declaring, “God is dead.”).

It is indeed true that the distortion of power from its originally intended purpose can take on terrifying manifestations, as our world amply testifies, whether that be Hitler’s holocaust against the Jews, or the inhumanity of human trafficking for the sex trade, or Pol Pot’s atrocities against his own countrymen through the Khmer Rouge, or the brutality that parents can visit upon their own children, or any number of examples in history or in today’s world.⁶⁶ Conversely, power if rightly understood and stewarded, can bring about blessing and flourishing that is awe-inspiring, whether on the micro or macro levels. Crouch points to words of creativity (like the great accomplishments of architecture, music and art) and to the amazing social justice pursuits of organizations like World Vision and International Justice Mission as examples of the glory of power rightly used.

⁶⁶ Charmaine Ng, “5-year-old scalded with hot water, confined in cage before his death; parents charged with murder” *The Straits Times*, 12 Nov 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/parents-on-trial-for-murder-of-5-year-old-son-who-was-scalded-with-hot-water> (accessed on 31 Dec 2019).

Crouch argues that the “misuse and rejection of God’s gift of image bearing takes the form of idolatry and injustice, the two things God most hates. Understanding how these two distortions of image bearing relate to one another is the key to understanding what has gone so tragically wrong with the gift of power.”⁶⁷ Idolatry and injustice are more closely related than most people appreciate, not just because they are both vehemently condemned by God in Scripture⁶⁸, but because they are two sides of the same coin – they both arise from the distortion of image-bearing and the misuse of power. We tend to see idolatry as a religious matter and injustice as a political matter.⁶⁹ Crouch shows why this is a superficial division of categories:

God hates injustice and idolatry because they are the same thing: the introduction into God’s very good world of false images, images that destroy the true images God himself has placed in the world to declare his character and voice his praise. Whether making false gods (idolatry) or playing false gods (injustice) the result is identical—the true image of God is lost, and not just lost but replaced by something that purports, often very persuasively, to represent the ultimate truth about reality. The truth about God, and the truth about God’s very good world, is exchanged for a lie... What God hates, ultimately, is the loss of the true Image, the Image that can only be contained in image bearers.⁷⁰

One advantage of seeing the deep connection between the religious problem of idolatry and the political problem of injustice is that it helps us avoid the unnecessary bifurcation of churches along the lines of focusing on evangelism or social action:

Evangelism is not an end in itself. It is the means to an end: restoring the image bearers’ capacity for relationship and worship, where the true Creator God is named, known and blessed. Evangelism gives us the name of the God who made us, the Son who redeemed us and the Spirit who empowers us to be reborn in the

⁶⁷ Crouch, *Playing God*, 12.

⁶⁸ For idolatry see Exo 20:3-6; Ps 135:15-18; Isa 44:9-20; 1 Cor 10:7,14; Rev 9:20. For injustice see Deut 16:19; Mic 2:1-3; Luk 12:45-46; James 5:1-6.

⁶⁹ Crouch, *Playing God*, 71.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

image of the Son. Without evangelism, Eve's and Adam's descendants after Eden will never know the full story; they will never know the identity of the true Image Bearer... And doing justice is likewise the means to an end—shalom, that rich Hebrew word for peace, describing the conditions where every creature can be fully, truly, gloriously itself, most of all where God's own image bearers bear that image in all its fullness, variety and capacity. The work of justice is to restore the conditions that make image bearing possible.⁷¹

So evangelism and social justice are united by the common goal of restoring the image of God, filling the world with image-bearers who represent the Creator by cultivating and creating conditions for flourishing.

Institutions (which is the name that sociologists have given to any deeply and persistently organized pattern of human behavior) are how power is channeled over space and through time, and as such are key to the vision of the flourishing of creation. On this point, Crouch harmonizes with Robert Greenleaf's ideas about institutions being the primary instruments of societal flourishing⁷². However institutions have become an easy target for criticism from many anti-institutional sources inside and outside of the church. Any institution has four components: artifacts (the things the institution works with), arenas (the spaces they work in), rules (the policies and philosophies that shape behaviors), and roles (the different players that make up the team). Whenever one or more of these components becomes driven by idolatry or injustice, the institutions can become a force for destruction. However, when artifacts, arenas, rules, and roles are all in

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷² Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness*. (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1977), 62.

place and driven by a desire to honor people as bearers of God's image, power enables all parties to flourish.⁷³

Crouch also notes that “ironically, institution is a word that itself sounds boring, suggesting a place where little creativity or cultivation can be found, but in the fullest sense of the word, institutions are the environments where image bearers flourish in all their astonishing variety.”⁷⁴ Drawing on the oft-repeated group of names – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – as indicating the formation of the stable institution of Israel, he extrapolates that to suggest the four ingredients of institutions – artifacts, arenas, rules and roles – sustained over at least three generations is the hallmark of a culturally influential institution. And he addresses the instinctive aversion we have of power inequality by insisting that if the goal of institutions is to facilitate flourishing, it does not follow that power must be distributed in equal measure across all roles. Some roles require more power than others, and that is fine as long as the common aim is kept in mind and care is taken to steward all power responsibly and lovingly.

An uncritical adoption of the Nietzschean view of power by Christians results in a tendency to be blind to the power we do possess and to abdicate it rather than steward it for godly purposes. In fact Crouch seems to have aimed his book primarily at readers in that category. A biblically grounded perspective on power not only gives one the ability to think about power more clearly, but also gives one the tools to better evaluate whether

⁷³ Alan Noble, “Review of *Playing God* by Andy Crouch”, *Reformation 21*, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/playing-god.php> (accessed on 21 Nov 2019).

⁷⁴ Crouch, *Playing God*, 171.

leaders like Lee Kuan Yew, and the institutions they helped develop, are exemplars of the exercise of power, or have diverged from the divinely intended goal of flourishing.

3. Lee's formation and leadership

Having established in Chapter 2 the basic components of a biblical grid by which we better understand Christian notions of leadership, and assess the relevance of Lee Kuan Yew's leadership for senior pastors, in this chapter we look in some detail at the life of Lee. As mentioned in the Introduction, we will rely on sources by Lee himself, such as his memoirs, as well as material produced by others about Lee.

Foundational to understanding Lee is an appreciation of his *formation* into a leader, so we will begin by tracing in the first section the key events in his early years (1923 to 1959) that had a significant formative impact on his views and beliefs. The first 36 years of Lee's life had a few clear phases: his early years up to his late teens when he studied at Raffles College, the Japanese occupation that interrupted his studies and turned his world upside down, the years he spent in Britain after the war, and the years following his return from Britain to Singapore.

We then proceed in the second section to look at the years that Lee spent leading the nation of Singapore (from 1959 onwards). We will reflect on a handful of his leadership traits that have been widely admired and praised. These areas of Lee's leadership overlap to some extent with the leadership roles that senior pastors are required to exercise. With the help of the biblical grid, we will seek to ascertain what can be meaningfully appropriated by pastors from Lee's example.

And in the third section we will touch on the more delicate matter of critiques on Lee's leadership by some of his detractors. The sources from which these critiques have

been drawn were not subjected to censorship and are accessible to the public in the National Library's collections. They offer a stark counter-narrative to the more widely available material on Lee, and reveal the complexity of Lee's legacy.

3.1 Formation of Lee Kuan Yew

The first thirty-six years of Lee's life, prior to becoming prime minister of Singapore in 1959, were bisected by the onset of the Japanese occupation which began in 1941 when Lee was an 18-year-old student in Raffles College¹. The two main sources of formation prior to the war were his home and his school.

At Home

Born to Straits Chinese parents, Lee was the eldest of five children (four boys and a girl). Lee's parents named him Kuan Yew, meaning "light and brightness". A child's name often expresses the aspirations of parents for their child, and, together with the birth order, can play a shaping role in the child's sense of identity. According to his sister Monica, a soothsayer predicted at Lee's birth that he would cross the ocean and return a great man². Perhaps his parents had an inkling that he was special when they entered him in a baby show and the judges awarded him first place. And according to his brother Suan

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998), 44.

² Stephanie Yeow (ed). *Lee Kuan Yew: A Life in Pictures*. (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2013), 25.

Yew (see interview in Section 4.7) his mother realized that he outpaced the typical developmental milestones of children when she observed him once cutting up the English newspapers and arranging the alphabets in the right sequence before most other children had even learned to recognize the alphabet. It seemed he was the beneficiary of a genetically endowed high IQ.

Compared to most babies in Singapore in that era, he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, with both grandfathers being reasonably wealthy, and home was a two-story bungalow, until the Great Depression depleted the family's fortunes and they were forced to move to his maternal grandfather's house in 1929 (age 6). His paternal grandfather, who doted on Lee and whom Lee had great affection for, was an Anglophile who had been a purser aboard British ships and was mightily impressed by the order, strength and efficiency of the British³. It was he who insisted on Anglo-Saxon names for Lee (Harry) first, and then three of his four siblings (Freddie, Dennis, Monica). When Suan Yew, his youngest sibling was born, it was precocious Lee (age 10) who persuaded his parents not to give him a "Christian" name because they were not Christians.⁴

But all was not necessarily well in Lee's family. His earliest memory was a traumatic one where his life was severely threatened, and by his own father too, who flew into a blind rage over some minor misdemeanor by Lee who was only 4, dragged him outside the house and dangled him by his ears over a deep well. Lee wrote: "How could

³ Lee, *Singapore Story*, 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 and interview with Dr Lee Suan Yew (Section 4.7).

my ears have been so tough that they were not ripped off, dropping me into that well?”⁵ Was the unlikeliness of his survival possibly pointing to some higher forces at work in protecting him? At any rate, it was a close and traumatic brush with death that scarred him for life. He was never close to his father. In fact he described his father (who dropped out of school prematurely) rather dismissively as “just a rich man’s son, with little to show for himself”⁶, and a compulsive gambler who frequently came home in a foul mood and prosecuted fearful quarrels with his wife when she refused to hand over her jewelry to finance his habit. In later years his relationship with his father improved a little, and he did his part, in keeping with his Confucian values, to care for him in his old age.⁷

Lee’s respect for his mother was the converse of that for his father. He wrote of her: “She devoted her life to raising her children to be well-educated and independent professionals, and she stood up to my father to safeguard their future.”⁸ He reckoned she was canny and energetic enough to have made a successful business executive, had she been born a generation later when norms for women had shifted. He and his siblings were conscious of her sacrifices for them, and did their best to be worthy of her and to live up to her expectations.⁹ Those whom we hold in high esteem we seek to imitate, and those whom we disdain we vow never to emulate, sometimes at the risk of letting the pendulum

⁵ Lee, *Singapore Story*, 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ Thomas Plate, *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew: Citizen Singapore*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2010), 42.

⁸ Lee, *Singapore Story*, 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

swing to the opposite extreme. While only a teen, Lee began to fill the leadership vacuum left by his father and function as *de facto* head of the family, because his mother began consulting him on all important family matters, and his siblings looked up to him for advice. Lee's formation as a decision-maker had already begun.

At School

Lee confessed to not being very diligent about studies as a young boy, and one of his uncles was deputed to ensure he did his homework every day. Later during his secondary education in Raffles Institution (RI), the premier school in Singapore, he was active in many sports and as a debater, but was not selected as a prefect, which he reckoned was because he had a mischievous playful streak. He was once even given three strokes of the cane by the principal of RI for being late to school the third time.¹⁰ To those who know about Lee the leader who epitomized discipline and diligence almost to a fault, these revelations are fascinating, eye-opening and hope-inducing. They reveal that his famed personal standards of discipline were not his default mode through life but what he grew into, which suggests others who start out lacking discipline can make significant strides by dint of effort and conviction.

By his mid-teens, he began to take life and studies more seriously. At his parents' urging to pursue a professional degree, he set his sights on becoming a lawyer.

Academically he began to distinguish himself. One of his teachers wrote in his report

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

card: “Harry Lee Kuan Yew is a determined worker for a place of distinction. He is likely to attain a high position in life.”¹¹ Proving his teacher’s prescience, he topped the school for the Junior Cambridge examinations, and topped the whole of Singapore and Malaya for the Senior Cambridge examinations, and of course later went on to become Prime Minister. He was beginning to apply his gift, namely his prodigious IQ, towards achieving his goals. Much later in life in his late 50s, at his daughter’s behest he had himself tested and discovered he suffered from mild dyslexia, a form of learning disability¹². He realized that it affected his spelling and prevented him from speed-reading effectively. So academically and all through his leadership, he had been “driving with the handbrakes on” as it were, and still managed to come out tops.

Japanese Occupation

World War 2 and the Japanese occupation brought with it a very different kind of formation. Lee summed up this period this way:

The three and a half years of Japanese occupation were the most important of my life. They gave me vivid insights into the behavior of human beings and human societies, their motivations and impulses. My appreciation of governments, my understanding of power as the vehicle for revolutionary change, would not have been gained without this experience. I saw a whole social system crumble before an occupying army that was absolutely merciless... I learnt more from the three and a half years of Japanese occupation than any university could have taught me.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹² Lee Kuan Yew, *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*. (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011), 365.

¹³ Lee, *Singapore Story*, 74 & 77.

It was formation in discerning the workings of human nature, when the layers of civility and hypocrisy that usually attend human behavior were peeled back in extremis to expose humanity at its basest. He put much more store by what he had observed directly than by theories he had read. These insights were to play a big part in his career as a politician.

One major observation Lee made was the link between fear and order. In the immediate aftermath of the British surrender, and before the Japanese had truly made their presence felt, Lee observed “a Singapore with law and order in suspended animation... each man was a law unto himself” and looting was rampant. According to Lee, this “lasted for several days before the Japanese restored order; they put the fear of God into people by shooting or beheading a few looters at random and exhibiting their heads on key bridges and at main road junctions.”¹⁴ Sometime later, he observed two incidents that were eye-opening: first a Japanese soldier retaliated against a rickshaw puller (who pleaded for more money after giving the soldier a ride) by using a judo throw to fling the man high into the air and flat on his face; second, a Japanese officer used the exact same judo throw on a lower ranked Japanese soldier who had been slow to salute him. Lee drew his conclusion: “I had begun to understand that brutalisation was part of the Japanese military system, inculcated through regular beatings for minor infringements.”¹⁵ Lee concluded that human nature was such that self-restraint was rarely enough to keep a society orderly. There needed to be some externally imposed sense of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

accountability – with teeth – before people reined in their baser impulses. Lee gave an insight into how this shaped his thinking when he wrote:

The Japanese Military Administration governed by spreading fear. It put up no pretence of civilised behaviour. Punishment was so severe that crime was very rare... As a result I have never believed those who advocate a soft approach to crime and punishment, claiming that punishment does not reduce crime. That was not my experience in Singapore before the war, during the Japanese occupation or subsequently.¹⁶

An equally important aspect of Lee's "education" under Japanese occupation was the dismantling of the prevalent myth of white superiority, which had existed since Stamford Raffles founded Singapore as a trading post for the East India Company. All white men were seen as bosses, some bigger than others. It was accepted as the natural order of things that the white folk lived separately from the locals and led superior lives. But the arrival of the Japanese shattered this myth. Lee observed not only the military superiority of the Japanese over the British, but also the differing reactions of the local and expatriate civilians. He recorded: "The Asiatics were supposed to panic when the firing started, yet they were the stoical ones who took the casualties and died without hysteria. It was the white civilian bosses who ducked under tables when the bombs and shells fell... Stories of their scramble to save their skins led the Asiatics to see them as selfish and cowardly."¹⁷

The Japanese Occupation also taught Lee creativity in times of adversity. In that overwhelming climate of fear and deprivation where there was hyper-inflation of 'banana

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-53.

notes' (the currency issued by the Japanese), Lee noted how some responded creatively by barter trading on the black market, and he too joined in and became adept at it. "The key to survival," as he wrote, "was improvisation." As his mother had started several businesses to make ends meet, like selling cakes or making sweetened condensed milk from fresh milk, Lee too showed resourcefulness in starting businesses, one of which was manufacturing glue for office use. Serendipitously, it was through this business that he became acquainted with the sister-in-law of his business partner, Miss Kwa Geok Choo, who was helping to manufacture the glue – the same girl who outshone him in Raffles College. They eventually married.

While some were spurred by adversity into an entrepreneurial response, Lee observed that others were drained of hope and life became a game of chance for them, making them vulnerable to the lure of gambling, which was a "wonderful opiate" against the prospect of mass destruction. Lee was gaining an education in human psychology that no classroom could teach. Where he saw courage and enterprise, he admired it and inwardly cheered. Where he saw cowardice, especially in those he had looked up to, he felt disillusioned and disdainful. Where he encountered unbridled power with no qualms about being brutal or taking life, it had a chilling effect on him. His views on how the human psyche responded to external circumstances and perceptions were to inform his leadership approaches to no small degree.

Lee recounted several episodes where he had close encounters with Japanese soldiers. On one occasion he had to cross a bridge guarded by a Japanese sentry. As he approached, he tried to look as inconspicuous as possible, but the soldier shouted to him

and beckoned him over. When Lee reached him, he thrust the bayonet of his rifle through the brim of Lee's hat, knocking it off his head, slapped him roundly, and motioned him to kneel. He then shoved his right boot into Lee's chest and sent him sprawling on the road. Then he signaled Lee to go back the way he had come. "I got off lightly," Lee reflected.

On another occasion, an edict was issued for all Chinese to go to a certain registration center and Lee decided to comply. Tens of thousands of Chinese families were herded into that area encircled by barbed wire with Japanese military police manning all exits. When Lee decided to check out through an exit point, the soldier on duty signaled him to join a group of young Chinese. He instinctively felt this was ominous and asked the soldier for permission to return to his cubicle to collect his belongings. Had the soldier said no, he would have been among the thousands who were herded to a beach in the east, with hands tied up, and gunned down in what came to be known as the Sook Ching Massacre. Though nobody knew at the time, Singapore's destiny in a sense pivoted on that one soldier's response to Lee's appeal, which turned out to be yes. Lee hurried back to the cubicle where he hid for a day and a half, and later managed to make a stealthy exit and returned to his home unharmed. Some would see the hand of God in preserving Lee's life in these and other moments, when he had close brushes with a premature death. It is possible that these narrow misses deposited in Lee (who was never religious) a sense that he had some sort of important mission or purpose that remained unfulfilled in his life, and contributed to his astonishing drive and energy.

Post-war years in Britain and Singapore

Lee obtained a place in the London School of Economics (LSE) to read law and sailed with returning British soldiers to England after the war. After a term in LSE during which he was miserable, a place opened up for him at Cambridge which he eagerly took up. He combined his endowment of intelligence with an extraordinary capacity to concentrate his mind on achieving his academic goals. There his stellar academic performance (he obtained the only Starred First Class Honors in his final year) put him above the best and the brightest from Britain and the entire Commonwealth.¹⁸ This further dismantled any remaining vestiges of the myth that he was inferior simply because he was Asian.

Before returning to Singapore, Lee became involved with some of his Singaporean and Malayan friends (like Goh Keng Swee and Toh Chin Chye, who eventually were senior members of Lee's cabinet). They set up the Malayan Forum whose object was to build up political consciousness and press for an independent Malaya¹⁹. He also helped one of his British friends campaign as a Labor candidate in the British elections, making speeches in small school and church halls²⁰. Thus Lee began picking up valuable experience in politics while still in England.

Back in Singapore, Lee joined a law firm and took on a case for postal union workers, thus cutting his teeth in the field of industrial action and empathizing with low

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110. Lee was not daunted even though he was told by the Censor of Fitzwilliam College, "Lee, don't be disappointed if you don't (get a First Class). In Oxford and Cambridge, you need that divine spark, that something extra before you get a First."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

wage earners. He lost faith in the jury system that operated in the courts, because he successfully defended men whom he was convinced had committed a murder and got them off scot free. He felt he had thwarted justice, simply by doing his duty to defend his clients to the best of his (considerable) ability. He wrote: “I had no faith in a system that allowed the superstition, ignorance, biases, prejudices and fears of seven jurymen to determine guilt or innocence.”²¹ Instead of being gleeful at the prospect of exploiting the system’s weakness for personal gain, he resolved that the system needed to be overhauled such that judgments were made by qualified persons, not laymen.

Formation is a period of learning and conviction-developing. Even after launching the People’s Action Party (PAP), Lee continued to be a keen student of politics. He learnt from the Communists, because there were things about them that impressed him: their organization and efficiency in controlling every single group that was bubbling up against the colonial government; their masterful harnessing of the passion of the younger generation to their cause; their activist leaders winning the hearts of the masses by living lives of austerity and self-sacrifice. Speaking about campaigns he launched to clean the streets of the city or clear the beaches of debris, Lee wrote:

It was a copycat exercise borrowed from the communists – ostentatious mobilisation of everyone including ministers to toil with their hands and soil their clothes in order to serve the people. We saw no reason why the MCP (Malayan Communist Party) should have the monopoly of such techniques and organised drives to enthuse the people and involve them in setting higher standards in civic consciousness, general cleanliness and the preservation of public property.²²

²¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²² *Ibid.*, 322.

At the same time Lee eschewed the Communists' Leninist revolutionary methods of overthrowing the capital-owning class to create a classless society, where they frequently violated the law and resorted to violence. At certain points when he and the People's Action Party (PAP) constituted a clear and present threat to the Communist agenda, he knew that he was in the crosshairs of the Communists and his life was in mortal danger. As he looked back on this period, he acknowledged that it made him an aggressive fighter. Also, he used the well-known Communists tactics of subversion and violence as a foil against which to burnish his own credentials in the public's eye as a law-and-constitution-respecting activist.

As he recorded in his memoirs, the early years of the PAP involved a number of strategic successes as well as setbacks – it was not plain sailing all the way through. But Lee was committed to learning from every mistake, both of the PAP and the other parties, and to never make the same mistake twice. It seems that Lee had made a habit of turning adversity into advantage by milking every misstep for its learning potential and relentlessly sharpening his decision-making for the future.

Relevance for pastors

Because Lee was not himself a Christian as far as we can tell, any relevance to pastors that his journey of formation holds would relate to our 'natural formation', and not our spiritual formation. Lee's formation gives us pause to reflect on our own formation as leaders, and the factors that contributed to making us who we are. What traits have we inherited from our biological parents? What endowments in terms of

talents or gifts did we receive, and how well have we applied them? What impact did our given name and birth order have on our socialization process as children? Who are the people we respected or disdained, and how have they shaped our convictions and aspirations? What shifts did maturing bring to our perspectives, i.e. how did our thinking change as we grew? How did our young adult years reinforce or shatter certain beliefs we picked up in childhood?²³ What early life experiences and nurturing have imprinted themselves on our psyche? What painful or even traumatic events have we encountered? How did our years of education shape the way we think and relate to people? What new things did we experiment with and how did we cope with change?

All these are relevant questions for a leader to reflect on, because the better we understand ourselves, the better placed we are to offer good leadership. This is true of leaders in general, but all the more important when we are talking about leadership in a church context.

3.2 Positives about Lee's leadership

In this section we explore some of the leadership traits of Lee widely acknowledged as being positive and worthy of emulation. For each trait of Lee, we will

²³ The Apostle Paul wrote: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.” (1 Corinthians 13:11)

look at illustrations of the trait, the difference it made, and a reflection on the trait's usefulness to pastors.

Speaking to Persuade

Lee made it a tradition in Singapore that the Prime Minister would give a televised speech on the key issues facing the nation shortly after each year's National Day celebrations in August. In his memoirs Lee described how he prepared for and delivered these National Day Rally speeches:

With only notes, I would speak for one to two hours on the important issues of the day. But I would have read extensively on the subjects days before and mulled over how to simplify my presentation. I had learnt how to hold the audience...and get them to follow my thought processes... I had better rapport with my audience when I expressed my thoughts as they formed and flowed in my mind, whereas if I had a script, I could not get my message across with the same conviction and passion... My dominance of the public platform was my strength throughout my political life.²⁴

In contrast, he observed how some of his colleagues struggled to engage the people during their campaign speeches: “(Goh) Keng Swee was dreadful; with a first-class mind, he prepared his speeches meticulously, but delivered them in a dull monotone, mumbling, reading from a script, and looking bored... Those were the days before television, when a good voice and a strong, commanding presence were distinct advantages.”²⁵ Clearly, to Lee, public speaking was not just about good content but about presence and persuasiveness as well. Having good content alone (as Goh Keng Swee undeniably had)

²⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2000), 148.

²⁵ Lee, *Singapore Story*, 300.

was not enough. And to persuade people, he felt he had a better impact expressing his thoughts as they “formed and flowed” in his mind than reading off a prepared script.

The impact of watching Lee deliver a speech on video is significantly different from reading his speech, because you sense the larger-than-life presence that made Lee a captivating orator. He didn’t stand stiffly when he spoke, but neither did he march back and forth across the stage. He typically stood behind the rostrum, shifting his weight from time to time, using his arms for effect, glancing only briefly at his notes (if at all) so that he could maximize eye contact with his audience. He spoke with his trademark crisp British diction, pausing every now and then as he formed his thoughts, and was saddled with very few of the unconscious sounds or phrases (e.g. umm... so... like... you know...etc.) or distracting movements (e.g. adjusting spectacles, looking at a watch, rocking back and forth etc.) that many speakers tend to punctuate their speeches with.

Lee’s speeches (of which he has made thousands over the years) have mostly been transcribed, catalogued and archived for posterity. Scanning a sampling of his speeches shows that he did not have one fixed approach to every message (like always having three points each beginning with the same alphabet or using borrowed humorous anecdotes). His speeches varied greatly in style, content and approach, always taking into account his audience, the occasion, and what was happening in Singapore and the world at that time. By marshalling the findings of scientific research and statistics whenever possible, and by applying the force of logic coupled with penetrating insight into human nature, Lee was often able to convince his audience that his views made sense, even if they were at times unpalatable. An example was when he persuaded the Council of

Nanyang University (Nantah) to merge with the University of Singapore. The then chairman of the Nantah Council, Wee Cho Yaw, relates:

Objectively I had to agree with him (Lee) that drastic action was called for, but my emotional attachment to Nantah made merger tremendously difficult to accept. Looking back, I must say that Mr Lee was very patient throughout. He did not brow-beat us to accept merger. Instead, he persuaded with numbers and statistics because, as he had admitted publicly, he appreciated our position as leaders of the Chinese community.²⁶

Admittedly the above quotation pertained to closed-door meetings rather than public speeches, but the point about persuasiveness is still helpful. Whether we appeal to the heart or the mind, a key component of what it means to lead people is helping them shift from their default emotionally-invested ways of thinking about a matter to embrace a new view or perspective.

Another observation about the content of Lee's public speeches was his ability to retain an appropriate level of complexity in what he was communicating. In other words, maximizing simplicity was not always the best strategy, as some pastors tend to assume. He related the following account of his time in the US in the late 1960s:

I went down to New York to address some 800 top decision-makers at the Economic Club of New York. My hard-headed and realistic analysis of Singapore's problems and the dangers in the region, especially the war in Vietnam, was well received. I took pains to end on a sober but upbeat note, painting a silver lining on sombre clouds.²⁷

²⁶ Marshall Cavendish Editions, *Up Close With Lee Kuan Yew: Insights from Colleagues and Friends*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2016), 67-68.

²⁷ Lee, *From Third World To First*, 74.

Lee was all the more persuasive to these business leaders because he did not try to oversimplify or sugar-coat the realities of doing business in Singapore at that juncture in history. Such a naïve approach would surely have backfired. Instead, by “painting a silver lining on sombre clouds”, Lee was able to convey realism, maturity and balance in his assessment. This was a level of complexity that was suited to the occasion and audience.

Lee’s powers of persuasion began to form early in life, such as when he persuaded his grandmother and mother to move him from a Chinese-stream school to an English one, or when he convinced his parents not to give his youngest brother a “Christian” name. In Cambridge he was known to argue with the professors, which some of his classmates like Yong Pung How found audacious²⁸. By the time he was Prime Minister, his natural endowments of persuasion and a strong resonant voice had been augmented by his powerful command of the English language²⁹, his training and experience as a debater and lawyer, and the rich insights he had garnered through careful observation of how to capture and hold an audience’s attention.

Consciously or unconsciously, Lee exemplified the three modes of persuasion as articulated by Aristotle, namely *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*.³⁰ *Logos* is the appeal to logic, convincing an audience by use of reason (e.g. citing authorities, using statistics, drawing analogies etc.). *Ethos* is the ethical appeal of the speaker’s credibility and trustworthiness,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23. Yong Pung How served as Chief Justice of Singapore from 1990 to 2006.

²⁹ Lee also worked hard to learn Mandarin, Hokkien and brush up the Malay he had spoken as a child, so that he could communicate with different constituents in their “heart languages”. However English remained his forte.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric Books I & II*. ed. W.D. Ross. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

which is usually not accomplished during the speech as much as through the reputation gained prior to the speech. *Pathos* is the emotional appeal, invoking feelings in the audience that the speaker wants them to have (e.g. sympathy for a cause, or anger at an injustice etc.) through the use of testimonies, stories, and skillful rhetoric.

Pastors can take a leaf from Lee's approach to public speaking, not by trying to parrot Lee's style (which would surely come across as artificial) but by ensuring our content is sound, convincing and persuasive, taking fully into account the audience, the occasion and the wider context. We need to simplify or complicate our communication according to the maturity of our listeners. And we should not be overly predictable in the format we use for delivery. But content alone is not enough, and we need good delivery as well. When we read the great sermons in Scripture (by Moses, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Stephen etc.) we have to use our sanctified imagination to fill in the tone of voice, the body language, eye contact or the facial expressions, which surely played a part in persuading the listeners. Listening to or watching recordings of ourselves, especially together with a colleague who can offer constructive feedback on our delivery, can be quite an instructive exercise. Our congregations will thank us for this. We must strive for effectiveness in *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* in our preaching. According to the Webster Dictionary, the second meaning of "sermon" is "*a serious talk on behavior, especially a*

*long and tedious one.*³¹ Sadly, too many pastors preach in a way that lends credence to this definition.

Allergic to Ignorance

Although Lee gave many people the impression that he thought of himself as a know-it-all with nothing more to learn, primarily because of the supremely confident manner and air with which he spoke in meetings or in public, and the somewhat unnerving manner in which he interrogated contrary opinions, in fact those who worked closely with Lee observed that he had a voracious appetite for learning and gathering information in areas that he deemed relevant to his leadership. If he regarded a subject to be interesting and relevant, which usually meant it had the potential to impact Singapore positively or negatively, his capacious mind was deeply curious about the matter to such a depth that he wanted to be informed by all the available scholarly material on that subject. Due to his busyness, he relied on staff to access, compile and summarize for him the most up-to-date facts and figures including statistics. If he met someone over dinner who was an expert in a particular field, he probed them (in a friendly way) with incessant curious questions, even at times to the neglect of other guests at the table, until he was satisfied that he had grasped the core of their area of expertise. This was because he believed that one learns more through a short conversation with an expert than through

³¹ Michael Agnes (ed). *Webster's New World Dictionary (Fourth Edition)*. (New York: Pocketbooks, 2003).

hours of reading, as they are able to condense and distill the essence of what they know in concentrated form.³²

Lee travelled extensively and whenever he did, he always keenly observed how others solved problems Singapore faced, and sometimes transplanted their solutions back home. When he flew out of Boston's Logan Airport, he was impressed with the way the sound footprint of the aircraft was over water instead of land. This led to his relentless push (in the face of strong "expert opinion" to the contrary) to reposition the centrally located Paya Lebar Airport to coastal Changi, which meant less noise over the city, more space for business and residential development, and no need for height restrictions on nearby buildings. Furthermore the ample space to build more runways as needed greatly boosted the success of Singapore International Airlines, all from a keen observation while on a flight from Boston.

He based his reading of situations and the decisions he made about them on as solid a foundation of fact and truth as he could possibly muster, as if he was allergic to ignorance. This made him more confident and persuasive when debating against others, as well as less likely to have to shift his position because of some hitherto undiscovered information surfaced by his interlocutors. This was true even when he worked as a lawyer, and did a few cases together with Yong Pung How (who later became Singapore's Chief Justice). Yong relates:

If he was on a legal case, he would work through every detail and angle. When he set up the People's Action Party, he was absolutely thorough, in the same way

³² Shashi Jayakumar, Rahul Sagar. *The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew*. (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2015), 95.

he responded to questions at university or analysed cases. When we studied our cases, he always made sure he covered everything.³³

This did not mean, though, that he was closed to all new perspectives once his mind was made up. It just required people providing compelling enough rationale to convince him that this was an important angle to the issue that his personal research had not yet unearthed.

The downside of this particular trait, however, was that people around him were hesitant about offering contrary views for fear of appearing stupid when he responded with a volley of questions. In her interview, former cabinet minister Lim Hwee Hua captured this trait of Lee's and the unintended effect on others that it often had:

He was also very humble about knowledge. I think this would be something that would surprise people... He worked so fast, so sometimes the risk of bringing new information was that he would ask you ten questions in return, for which I'm sure you can't answer maybe nine of them! So, it could be quite intimidating for people who were not used to his style. But for people who were, he really meant no harm. He was just very eager to know why it was different from what he thought, or "That's a new piece of information – can you explain a bit more?" So, I've had a few instances with him when I thought, "Am I being silly to even want to contradict him or to say something to the contrary?" And he would come back really graciously, to say, "I didn't know that."³⁴

Senior pastors seeking to strengthen their leadership in the church could reflect on how much 'due diligence' they are willing to put into researching and learning about a matter before taking it through the usual decision-making process, whether that might involve other staff, the church council or the general congregation. How much curiosity

³³ Marshall Cavendish Editions, *Up Close With Lee*, 27.

³⁴ See interview with Mrs Lim Hwee Hua in Section 4.5

do we have for understanding all we can about an issue relevant to our churches? How many of our plans and proposals for the ministries of the church flounder for lack of thorough preparation? Are pastors content with cobbling together “just enough information” so as to make a reasonable-sounding argument, or are we thorough and exhaustive in our approach, leaving no stone unturned as it were, until we are satisfied that the proposal we are making is really what is best for the church? True, pastors (like all leaders) are always strapped for time, and the multiple demands on our energy and attention often mean that any form of serious research feels like a luxury. But if Lee were in our shoes, it is not hard to imagine him co-opting bright and talented lay people to do the spade work of research, and distilling their findings down to a concentrated form for his use. The drive and impetus to know would still need to come from the pastor-leader.

Trust and High Standards

The Singapore civil service is now acknowledged as one of the best in the world, but it was not always like that. In the early days, “the bureaucratic top-down culture of the service made it haughty at the top and lackadaisical and unresponsive at the bottom”.³⁵ Lee, upon discovering that light switches in a government bungalow did not work, assembled a large gathering of senior civil servants and read the riot act to them:

I want to make sure that every button works and even if you are using it only once in a while, please make sure every morning that it works. And if it doesn't when I happen to be around, then somebody is going to be in for a tough time because I do not want sloppiness... I do not ask of you more than I am prepared

³⁵ Han Fook Kwang; Warren Fernandez; Sumiko Tan. *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International Asia, 2015), 94.

to give myself. And I say it does you no harm whatsoever just to make sure that the thing works. And don't be too kind. If you want to be kind to your people, to our people, then you have got to be firm. And at times, stern to those who have a duty to perform to see that the duty is performed.³⁶

He made it clear at the outset that he would not tolerate complacency and shoddy standards of work. Laziness and indifference towards work were deemed cardinal sins in the civil service. He knew that as the leader, he was ultimately the thermostat that set the temperature for all those below him in the hierarchy, and he resolved to set the temperature high. He once warned: "The moment key leaders are less than incorruptible, less than stern in demanding high standards, from that moment the structure of administrative integrity will weaken, and eventually crumble. Singapore can survive only if ministers and senior officers are incorruptible and efficient."³⁷

Lee was conscious that people are always watching leaders and organizations and sizing them up. And they determine how much trust they are willing to put in these leaders and institutions, based on their actions more than their verbal professions and proclamations. So Lee invested huge amounts of his focus and energy on building and retaining the trust of people in his government and the civil service through consistent excellence of service, because he firmly believed trust is the true currency of leadership. In an address to senior leaders in the civil service soon after the 1959 elections that first swept the People's Action Party (PAP) into power, Lee said:

We the elected ministers have to work through you and with you to translate our plan and policies into reality... If we do not do our best, then *we have only*

³⁶ Jayakumar; Sagar, *Big Ideas*, 97-98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

ourselves to blame when the people lose faith, not just in you, the public service, and in us, the democratic political leadership, but also in the democratic system of which you and I are working parts.”³⁸ (emphasis added)

Looking back on the challenges the newly elected PAP government faced in 1959, Lee wrote: “Our greatest asset was the trust and confidence of the people. These we had earned by the fight we had put up on their behalf... We were careful not to squander this newly gained trust by misgovernment and corruption. I needed this political strength to maximise what use we could make of our few assets.”³⁹ And when surveying Singapore’s phenomenal progress, Lee went so far as to say, “If I have to choose one word to explain why Singapore succeeded, it is ‘confidence’.”⁴⁰

One of the things he had least tolerance for was excuses – he would rather a person own up to a mistake or confess ignorance than give excuses or bluff to get off the hook. He reserved his harshest dressing down for such people.⁴¹ Some would say Lee went too far in setting high standards, establishing a climate of fear, generously dishing out scoldings, rebukes and warnings to those who seemed to give less than their best. General Winston Choo, Singapore’s first Chief of Defence Force from 1974-1992, described how, as a young military officer, he perceived Lee: “He was like god, you know! I mean, everybody feared him... Initially I was trembling. But later I found that though he was very strict, very stern, he was very reasonable. If you don't know, you say

³⁸ “Speech at the opening of the Civil Service Political Study Centre on 15 Aug 1959” cited in Han et al, *The Man and His Ideas*, 318-9.

³⁹ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴¹ Marshall Cavendish Editions, *Up Close With Lee*, 191.

you don't know. You ask him, he would tell, he would explain."⁴² While this fear of Lee was a factor in getting government servants to shape up (or ship out!), there was a downside to it, which will be explored in the following section on critiques of Lee's leadership.

Lee held high standards of self-discipline, which also fed into the overall strength of his leadership. Apart from a brief period in his early years when excessive drinking and smoking caused him to almost lose his voice, Lee bounced back and developed a formidable reputation for self-restraint in terms of abstaining from excesses like food or alcohol. In fact, after giving up smoking, he became hyper-allergic to secondary smoke. He exercised fastidiously on a daily basis, although his mode of exercise evolved over the years from golf to jogging (because it was more efficient than golf) to swimming and, even in his late eighties, treadmill-walking and stationary cycling. He maintained a trim figure for most of his lifetime.

He never saw exercise as a waste of precious time, preferring to multi-task during his activities. Even in his seventies, he was known to spend his evenings exercising, with his ears peeled to the evening news or his Mandarin practice tapes.⁴³ But it was time well spent for Lee, not just because he could squeeze other "productive" activities into that time, but for its own value. This was part of his long-term vision of needing a healthy

⁴² See interview with General Winston Choo in Section 4.1

⁴³ Marshall Cavendish Editions, *Up Close With Lee*, 259.

body in order to carry out his leadership duties effectively. Good health was not a luxury option, but an absolute necessity for a leader as far as Lee was concerned.

Ng Kok Song, who was the Chief Investment Officer of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) from 2007 to 2013, and who became a friend of Lee, was chided by him when he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes: “What? You have Type 2 diabetes? Kok Song, don’t fool around, take that seriously! I have had many friends, including Goh Keng Swee, who had diabetes. It’s very serious. If you don’t take care, you will need insulin injections. Your quality of life will go down... What is your weight?” Kok Song confessed to being 80 kg. Lee retorted, “What? You are shorter than me and I am lighter than you! You have to do something about your diet and you must exercise.”⁴⁴ As Lee subjected himself to high personal standards of discipline and stewardship of the body, he likewise would voice his concern vociferously when those he cared about, especially his family, seemed to neglect their health.⁴⁵

Trust is multi-faceted and complex. Sometimes, weakness in one area of a leader’s life can hinder people’s trust in another seemingly unrelated area of that leader’s life, like physical health and spiritual leadership. For many pastors, there seems to be a disconnect between caring for their bodies and pastoring the church: to them, the former is unimportant and the latter is all-important. However, it may shock them that their members do not necessarily see these areas as unrelated. One church member once

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁵ Lee Wei Ling, *A Hakka Woman’s Singapore Stories: My life as a daughter, doctor and diehard Singaporean*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2016.

quipped, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “How can you trust a pastor to look after the church if he doesn’t look after the temple of the Spirit, right?”

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative (DCHI) was a significant study on clergy health and wellbeing within the United Methodist Church in North Carolina, undertaken under the auspices of the Duke Divinity School. In their 2014 Summary Report they concluded that:

- Clergy must be proactive in staying healthy, and they must serve as the primary stewards of their time and energy.
- The sacred nature of clergy work makes it hard for clergy to set aside time for themselves.
- Pastors cannot spread the Good News effectively when their bodies and souls are wounded. Lay and denominational leaders can and should support clergy in maintaining holistic health.⁴⁶

The DCHI found there was mounting statistical evidence that clergy health was generally on the decline, and more severely than the general non-clergy population.⁴⁷

Many pastors misunderstand self-care to mean “self-ish,” say Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell

⁴⁶ Duke Clergy Health Initiative. “2014 Summary Report – Statewide Survey of United Methodist Clergy in North Carolina”. <http://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/chi/2014> (accessed on Nov 5, 2018).

⁴⁷ In a 2008 survey by the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, depression rates among clergy were more than double the rates for the general population of the United States (11.1% versus 5.5%), and more than a third of these clergy had never sought any care.

<https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/chi.pdf> (accessed on 25 Nov 2019).

and Jason Byassee,⁴⁸ (key researchers in the DCHI) and they feel “deeply rewarded when someone praises them for going above and beyond”.⁴⁹ Pastors who were interviewed reported feelings of guilt when they engaged in self-care activities or turned down offers of food when visiting parishioners.⁵⁰

Senior pastors with a team of staff under them also need to examine whether a tendency to be too nice and accommodating may inadvertently introduce a culture of mediocrity and complacency in the way the staff approach their work. If there are no immediate consequences for corruption and sloppiness, i.e. no correction, no rebukes, no accountability systems in place, then only the most saintly of staff would continue to maintain high personal standards of integrity and conscientiousness simply “as unto the Lord” (and only some – not all – church staff are that saintly). Accountability structures need to have ‘teeth’ to truly serve their purpose. Senior pastors who are too nice are actually doing their staff a disservice by tacitly sanctioning self-indulgent attitudes, which in turn compromise the trust that the members of the church have in their full-time staff, not to mention external parties who deal with the staff.

Willimon relates how his conference requires extensive ministerial integrity training for all their pastors, but it was noted that nothing was more effective in curtailing sexual misconduct than for those at the top to deal with clergy moral lapses swiftly and

⁴⁸ Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell & Jason Byassee. *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), Location 200 of 4788.

⁴⁹Faith and Leadership. “A holistic approach to wellness”. <https://www.faithandleadership.com/holistic-approach-wellness> (accessed on Nov 5, 2018).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* (accessed on Nov 5, 2018).

openly. The ten minutes it took him as Bishop to remove two of his District Superintendents from the ministry because of their violation of their marital covenants did more for clergy integrity than weeks of workshops.⁵¹

Yong Ying-I, who serves as Permanent Secretary in the Singapore civil service, shared in relation to Lee's high standards: "If the boss cares, everybody else up and down the line cares. If the boss does not care, standards can begin to slip."⁵² So even in the church, if standards slip and people don't trust the institution and its staff, it is the leader's fault. As Jesus said, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much."⁵³ Trust must be built from "the very little" things upwards, and the leader must hold himself and his team to the exacting standards in "the very little" in order to win the trust of his constituency for the "much".

Paying the Price for Leadership Renewal

Heng Swee Keat, who served as Principal Private Secretary to Lee in the late 1990s, and is the current Deputy Prime Minister, had this to say about Lee Kuan Yew's views on leadership in early 2015: "Mr Lee believes deeply in the... importance of institutions in creating a good society. But institutions are only as good as the people who run them. Good governance needs leaders with the right values, a sense of service and

⁵¹ William Willimon, *Bishop*, 16.

⁵² Jayakumar; Sagar, *Big ideas*, 110.

⁵³ Luke 16:10

ability... They should develop future leaders and when the time comes, *they should relinquish their positions so that the next generation of leaders can take us to greater heights.*”⁵⁴ (emphasis added) Long before leadership renewal became a trendy subject worldwide, Lee was already deeply focused on it as a key priority. We will look in this section at the observations upon which his leadership renewal convictions were based, the steps he took in developing a framework for it, and the personal price he paid for his convictions.

A crucial observation Lee made was that the quality of the leader was more important than the quality of the system he was overseeing. He once said, “My experience of developments in Asia has led me to conclude that we need good men to have good government. However good the system of government, bad leaders will bring harm to their people. On the other hand, I have seen several societies well-governed in spite of poor systems of government, because good, strong leaders were in charge.”⁵⁵ While he did expend considerable effort improving the systems and structures in Singapore, as Janadas Devan (the current Chief of Government Communications in Singapore) points out, “No head of government in the modern era anywhere in the world could have spent as much time poring over resumes and interviewing people for various positions as Mr Lee did”.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Jayakumar; Sagar, *Big Ideas*, 37-8.

⁵⁵ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 735.

⁵⁶ Jayakumar; Sagar, *Big Ideas*, 140-141.

In his National Day Rally in 1984, Lee related that alarm bells began to ring for him when late in the previous year, three of his senior cabinet ministers (Goh Keng Swee, Hon Sui Sen and Rajaratnam) were hospitalized at the same time, with Hon passing away of a massive infarct. Hon's words to him – about the way big American corporations prepare for leadership succession years ahead of the CEO's retirement – took on added urgency and he resolved to make it a priority to prepare for the next generation of political leadership.⁵⁷

Lee described his attitude as a leader in these famous words: "I would say that I'm very determined when I set out to do something... If I decide that something is worth doing, then I'll put my heart and soul into it... If you have decided something is worth doing, you've got to remove all obstacles to get there." So when it came to attracting the brightest and best to serve the nation, Lee (true to his habit) identified two key obstacles that needed to be removed – the challenge of identifying the people with the right mix of qualities, and the challenge of motivating them to join the government. He was determined to find solutions to these challenges, even if it meant going against conventional wisdom.

In terms of the framework that Lee put together, there were three broad elements: sifting, incentivizing and exposing. The sifting process began with offering prestigious scholarships for university degrees, which attracted thousands of eighteen year old applicants. The few dozen who were finally selected each year after being assessed on

⁵⁷ Han et al, *Man and His Ideas*, 90.

their grades, service to their schools and all-round leadership qualities, would be carefully tracked through their tertiary education into their working years. Because Lee was convinced that Singapore's small population was a severe restriction to our talent pool, he cast the net as wide as he practically could so that through multiple layers of sifting, he could identify the *crème de la crème* for the cabinet, as well as find good people for the many other institutional roles the nation needed. Task forces were set up to offer scholarships to attract students and graduates from other countries, and the systematic search for talent worldwide brought in a few hundred foreign graduates each year.⁵⁸

The best performers in the civil service and private sector would be monitored as part of a databank of potential leaders, and at various junctures would be invited to consider serving the nation, and be put through rigorous tests and interviews to gauge their competence and readiness. Lee was impressed with the way NASA⁵⁹ identified astronauts, because he was gripped by the way the Apollo 13 crew responded wisely and calmly after an onboard explosion damaged their equipment and almost sent them hurtling out irretrievably into outer space. What intrigued Lee was how NASA selected those three men out of all the aspiring candidates.⁶⁰ Framing the issue in this way led Lee to eventually select and adopt the Shell system of identifying leaders, especially what they called the 'helicopter quality', as the most useful test for his purposes. Apart from psychometric tools, Lee also relied on people with high levels of discernment to serve on

⁵⁸ Lee, *Third World to First*, 166.

⁵⁹ National Aeronautics and Space Administration of the United States

⁶⁰ Han et al, *Man and his ideas*, 87.

his selection panels, such as Tan Teck Chwee whose gift of sizing people up and seeing through them Lee greatly appreciated.⁶¹

The second element of the framework was incentivizing. When the PAP⁶² first came into power, ministerial salaries were unremarkable. Over the years, as the country's economy began to improve, they were repeatedly revised upwards. However in 1995, by which time he had handed over the Prime Minister role to Goh Chok Tong and was serving as Senior Minister, Lee proposed (at the Prime Minister's behest) the most radical move any government has made in terms of ministerial pay. He based ministers' salaries on a formula pegging them to the six highest paid men in the private sector – in banking, manufacturing, accountancy, engineering, law and managing multinational corporations.⁶³ He defended his convictions in parliament as arising from a dispassionate study of the realities of people's motivations: "My generation of political leaders have become dinosaurs, an extinct breed of men who went into politics because of the passion of their convictions." Lee acknowledged that because societal conditions had changed so much over the years of peace and prosperity Singapore had enjoyed, it would be naïve to expect motivations for public service to remain the same across that time span, and that Singapore had become a victim of her own success. Unless the extremely rigorous selection process was matched with a pay scale commensurate with what people of such caliber could earn in the private sector, few if any of these ministers, even if they were

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶² People's Action Party, started by Lee

⁶³ Han et al, *Man and His Ideas*, 103.

persuaded to come on board, would stay long, because the private sector headhunters, knowing full well how thorough the search process for cabinet ministers was, would constantly be luring them away by offering much more attractive financial prospects.⁶⁴

Lee quoted a citation by the World Bank that Singapore had the region's most competent and upright bureaucracy, and paid its bureaucrats best. He followed this up with an impassioned declaration to parliament:

I am pitting my judgement after 40 years in politics – and I've been in this chamber since 1955 – against all the arguments on the other side. I say this is necessary for Singapore. I say face up to the facts, get a good generation in, get the best of this generation. When it works, the World Bank will cite us again. You don't get cited because you are conventional, you follow other people. You become a model because you went against conventional wisdom and proved that they were wrong and you were right...

The fate of a country, when it's a matter of life and death, you throw up people who put personal considerations of safety and security and wealth aside. But that's when you have a revolutionary situation, when a whole people depend on the actions of a few. Now I believe if such a situation recurred again, some Singaporeans will again emerge and rise to the occasion.

So it is crucial when you have a tranquil Singapore that you recognise that politics demands that extra of a person, a commitment to people and to ideals. You are not just doing a job. This is a vocation; not unlike a priesthood. You must feel for people, you must want to change society and make lives better... And I am saying those who do this deserve not to be penalised or you will get nobody doing this.⁶⁵

Lee's handling of this issue was a classic example of his pragmatism, and although he could agree with popular opinion that those who do public service *ought* to be unmindful

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 331-333.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

of financial rewards, his posture was always that we must deal with the world *as it is*, not *as we wish it to be*.

The third element of Lee's framework for leadership renewal, after sifting and incentivizing, was exposing or grooming. He would bring onboard and fast track young leaders through a range of responsibilities, challenges and projects to broaden their experience, test their mettle and build up their confidence. Every assignment was given with an eye to the future – that it would somehow be part of the future leader's training curriculum. One key appointment was as his own Principal Private Secretary, and many who served in that role went on to take up significant leadership appointments in the civil service or even cabinet (like Heng Swee Keat who was cited earlier, and Lim Siong Guan whose interview is recorded in Chapter 4). When Lee went on his travels, he would often select younger parliamentarians to accompany him as part of the team, to allow him interaction time with them and to give them a firsthand feel of meeting foreign dignitaries and a chance to observe the realities of life and politics beyond Singapore's shores.

All these measures Lee undertook did not come cheap. Lee absorbed a good deal of unhappiness from the older generation of leaders who were threatened by the pace at which younger leaders were being promoted, and felt they were being moved out of their leadership roles before they felt ready to relinquish them. Lee, who counted himself among the older generation of leaders and faced the fact that he was beginning to decline physically, felt that his peers were in denial.⁶⁶ One example of the difficulties Lee faced

⁶⁶ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 741-2.

in instituting leadership renewal was when he brought in a younger man to head the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC). He recounted: “This was a problem I faced each time there was a change of generation between leaders. (Lim) Chee Onn was more than 20 years younger than Devan (Nair). Union leaders of Devan’s generation were used to Devan and did not take to Chee Onn’s different work style. The basic problem was that the old leaders did not welcome a sudden infusion of young blood.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless Lee pressed on with what he described as an “emotionally difficult but necessary changeover”.⁶⁸ These measures were instrumental in attaining for Singapore the reputation she currently enjoys of being one of the most forward-looking nations in terms of leadership renewal. Reflecting back on his decision to step down as Prime Minister with several years still in the tank, he wrote in his memoirs:

When I reflected on the predicament of Suharto in 1998, when he was forced to resign and hand power over to a vice-president he considered inadequate to succeed him, I was glad that I had resigned as prime minister in November 1990. I was still in command of the political situation and of a humming economy. I was physically still vigorous. But had I not stood down, I might have found myself trapped in the financial crisis, with my faculties less acute and my energy levels down. Instead, for the past nine years I helped to ease the way for my successor, Goh Chok Tong, and his team of younger ministers to take full charge of the Singapore government. Prime Minister Goh retained me in his cabinet as senior minister. Without the pressures of daily decision-making, I was able to reflect on the bigger and longer-term issues and contribute towards more rounded solutions... The single decisive factor that made for Singapore’s development was the ability of its ministers and the high quality of the civil servants who supported them.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 743.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 735-6.

All churches and denominations could benefit from taking a more proactive long-term view of leadership renewal. We do not need to agree with the outcomes of Lee's framework (such as pegging salaries to top-earners), but the principles of sifting, incentivizing and grooming do have transferable usefulness. Perhaps the best place to begin would be to observe the realities:

- What is the age profile and median age of the church/denomination's leadership?
- What is the impact on the health of the church/denomination of abrupt leadership changes?
- What are the costs and benefits of leaders who stay on in their ecclesiastical roles for as long as possible as against making way earlier for younger leaders?
- Is there a tendency to regard leadership renewal as "important but not urgent" and as a result let it get brushed aside by the 'tyranny of the urgent'?

If churches are serious about doing better in leadership renewal, it would probably require the setting up of a team whose task would be to address questions like:

- How young should our candidates be when we first put them on our radar?
- What qualities do we need to look for to identify future leaders, and how should we identify them (psychometric tools, interviews etc.)?
- How should we attract and incentivize those we have identified to come into leadership roles?

- How should young leaders be trained and exposed so that by the time they are of a ripe age, they have already got significant experience under their belts?

It takes a team because the systematic tracking of a group of individuals with an eye to future leadership appointments is a task of such complexity that it would very likely exceed the capacity of any one individual to carry out. There should also be a readiness to face criticism from those in the church who are uncomfortable with a break from tradition – and the tradition in most churches has been that leaders are not identified proactively when they are in their youth, but that “we just trust that the Lord will provide” when leaders are needed. There will also be those who feel threatened if the pace of renewal were to pick up and require them to make way before they feel ready to do so. Clearly, unlike Lee, prayer must undergird the entire process of leadership renewal in the church, for it is the Lord who calls and appoints. What is being advocated here is not a pendulum-swing from prayerful trust to humanistic proactivity, for that would be to subscribe to a false dichotomy. Rather, what churches need is a both-and approach that combines dependence on the Lord with forward-looking intentionality in the area of leadership renewal, and the courage to weather the storms of criticism that those of a different mindset will kick up.

3.3 Critiques of Lee’s leadership

"I'm not saying that everything I did was right," he said, "but everything I did was for an honorable purpose. I had to do some nasty things, locking fellows up without trial."⁷⁰ (Lee Kuan Yew in an interview with the NY Times)

Although it will be hard for this thesis to escape the charge of being a hagiography, because the initial germ of an idea for the thesis flowed from an attitude of admiration and thankfulness towards its subject, and much of it has focused on Lee's sterling leadership that could potentially inspire and inform senior pastors like me, it would be a disservice to the legacy of Lee if he were portrayed as a flawlessly perfect saint, for this was not his view of himself (see quote above). While in his earlier years he had come across as quite intolerant of criticism, Lee seemed to have accepted in his latter years that for a literary portrait of him to be truly representative (and hence, useful), it needed to contain both light and dark brush strokes. In fact, Tom Plate in his book *Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew*, quoted Lee as saying during his interview: "Tom, the book will have to have critical and negative stuff in it. I know, don't worry about me. Just write me up exactly as you see me. Let the chips fall where they may. Tell the true story of me, as you see it. That's all I ask."⁷¹ As it turned out, Plate was more fascinated by Lee's admirable qualities than by his "warts", and his portrait of Lee was atypically complimentary for a Western journalist. In this section we look at a few key areas of

⁷⁰ Seth Mydans. "The Founder of Singapore Reflects on His Journey", *New York Times*, 11 Sep 2010. <https://archive.nytimes.com/query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage-9400EEDC1239F932A2575AC0A9669D8B63.html> (accessed on 31 Dec 2019)

⁷¹ Thomas Plate, *Conversations*, 16.

Lee's leadership that observers have identified as being problematic, namely his intimidating aura, his grip on power and control, and his over-emphasis on excellence.

As we observed in Section 3.1, Lee's experiences during the Japanese occupation taught him how fear could be effective in curbing anarchy and instilling order. In Section 3.2 we saw how Lee instilled fear in the ranks of the civil service by scoldings and threats of dismissal for poor attitude and performance. He did this primarily to wake up and shake up the bureaucracy so that it would win and retain the trust of the nation. Lee basically seemed to operate by the dictum 'No accountability, no trust', and as a corollary to that, 'No teeth, no accountability'. So he bared his teeth a good deal, dishing out harsh words and painful consequences whenever he observed less than satisfactory outcomes.

While the 'upside' of this tough approach was a marked improvement of standards across the board, and with that, a quantum leap in the trust of the people in the PAP's ability to deliver the goods, some have identified multiple downsides to Lee's intimidating aura. For example, in his interview in Section 4.4, Lim Siong Guan observed how the cooks in the Istana who prepared meals for official functions had stopped experimenting and stuck to one fixed menu, thanks to having been berated by Lee once too often. A general fear of mistakes and failure pervaded the civil service, and indeed the school system and even large proportions of the nation, thanks to Lee's perfectionistic expectations. Only much later did the government realize that creativity among

Singaporeans was stymied by this fear of failure, and set about to change approaches in the education system⁷².

Lee himself, however, seemed reluctant to acknowledge his intentional and excessive use of fear and intimidation. Tom Plate in his interview posed Lee the blunt question about whether fear was a deliberately chosen instrument of governance:

“My theory is that your temper is primarily a tool of governance, leadership. Machiavelli – in your writings you do explicitly refer to Niccolò Machiavelli – said it was always best for the leader to be loved and feared, but if you can achieve but one, it is better to be feared than loved. So is temper a character defect or a tool of government?”...

LKY seems to shift his weight a little. “If you can switch it on and off, yes, it can be a tool of government, but people with irrepressible tempers cannot switch it on and off. Now, because my father had a nasty temper, I decided that tempers are bad because it created unhappiness for my mother and for the family. So I have never, I never try to lose my temper. Maybe I have occasionally, but I try to control it.”

“You use it for effect, though, if you have to?” Frankly, this is one of the very few, if not only, times during the hours of interviewing that LKY, it seems to me, is being less than fully honest with himself.⁷³

Plate’s conclusion about Lee’s lack of acknowledgement about the climate of fear he engendered is partially in agreement with the interview of Lee by Straits Times journalists, captured in the book *Hard Truths* which was published earlier, and which contains some denial mixed with frank admission:

Q: Many people say they are intimidated by the PAP. There is the climate of fear, crackdown on dissent and so on.

⁷² In 1997, the “Thinking School, Learning Nation” (TSLN) initiative was launched, focusing on key strategies such as: (a) infusion of critical and creative thinking skills into the school curriculum, (b) reduction of subject content, and (c) revision of assessment modes, such as the introduction of project work. See National Institute of Education website. https://www.nie.edu.sg/docs/default-source/nie-working-papers/niewp2_final-for-web_v2.pdf?sfvrsn=2 (accessed on 1 Jan 2020).

⁷³ Plate, *Conversations*, 50-51.

A: No, no. Are you intimidated?

Q: Since I'm asking you this question, obviously I'm not. But the fear is very real out there, when we interview people, they say it. The perception is fairly pervasive even among the professionals.

A: Why should you, if you believe you're any good? This chap who stood up for gay rights, Siew Kum Hong, is not intimidated. We have no objections if he goes and joins the Workers' Party. He takes us on, we'll take him on. That's part of politics...

Q: But there had been instances in the past where you have felt that it was necessary to demolish the men, such as Jeyaretnam.

A: Well yes, Jeyaretnam to begin with, Chee Soon Juan is another. I think they deserve to be demolished. I have no regrets. Jeyaretnam went nutty... No, it's his personal ambition to knock me down. I mean, I just laughed him off and brushed him aside, which annoyed him. No, I have no regrets. Chee Soon Juan, also no regrets.

Q: Do you ever have any idea of the chilling effect that has on others who may be interested in politics but are frightened off?

A: Well, if you do the same thing then you must expect the same treatment. Therefore you behave in a more civilized way, more political, like Low Thia Khiang or even Chiam. I've never been rough with Chiam. He's gentle, I'm gentle. He's a decent man and I respect him for that.⁷⁴

In Goh Chok Tong's biography, *Tall Order*, Goh (Lee's successor as Prime Minister in 1990) relates that before the handover of leadership had been completed, Lee was uncomfortable with Goh's pledges of a "kinder and gentler" mode of government, and urged him to read Machiavelli's book, *The Prince*, in which the philosophy of "it is better to be feared than loved" was promulgated. Goh read it and found it distasteful, and decided it was not for him. But he opted not to raise the matter for discussion with Lee in

⁷⁴ Lee, *Hard Truths*, 71 & 82-83.

order to avoid a clash. Goh acknowledged the reality of the climate of fear in Singapore and sought to change things under his watch.⁷⁵

Lee's justification of his stern and heavy-handed style of leadership and management, especially in the early years after separation from Malaysia, would have been the urgency of establishing high standards of efficiency and effectiveness for the sake of attracting job-creating investments, as well as the need to weed out antisocial elements through stringent law enforcement. He was perpetually mindful that Singapore did not have the ingredients of success that most successful nations have, and therefore it would require supreme cleverness, effort, courage and organization to make it in the world. Furthermore, Singapore could never afford to rest on its laurels, because its continued success could never depend on its past track record, but only upon unflinching vigilance and responsiveness to evolving challenges.

Even though many Singaporeans may have resented him at first for his perceived fierceness, he eventually won over their trust because of the undeniable economic and social benefits those approaches produced: high employment, rising salaries, increased home ownership, reduced crime, clean and green streets etc. One clear evidence of his success in winning the hearts of the majority of Singaporeans was the massive outpouring of grief at his death in March 2015, and the thousands of sincere, heartfelt and emotional tributes that flowed through the various media. What eroded trust, however, was his use

⁷⁵ Peh Shing Hwei. *Tall Order: The Goh Chok Tong Story*. (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2018), xxi.

of intimidation in demolishing potential political opponents and perpetuating the PAP's perceived monopoly on power.

A dark chapter in Singapore's (and Lee's) history was the arrest and detention without trial of 22 Singaporeans for an alleged Marxist conspiracy under the Internal Security Act. Eventually all were released - some were held for months, a few for years. Many of those arrested claimed (in written as well as video testimonies) that their signed confessions were the result of brutal physical abuse and psychological torture like sleep deprivation, exposure to cold and frenzied verbal bullying – claims the Internal Security Department (ISD) has strenuously denied. Some lawyers who were engaged to represent the accused also found themselves being placed under arrest and interrogated. Many global organizations, including Amnesty International, lodged their protests with the Singapore government for what they perceived to be unjust actions against innocent citizens. At one point, after the Singapore Court of Appeal ruled that four of the detainees be released, a rare occasion when the government lost its case in court, the detainees were (in compliance with the court order) driven out of the detention center by police cars, only for the cars to do a U-turn outside the gates and return to the detention center where they were re-arrested and re-detained. The technicality that the Court of Appeal felt rendered the previous detention order invalid was promptly rectified and the detention order re-issued. Soon after, Lee led Parliament to pass an amendment to the Internal

Security Act that precluded judicial review of the sufficiency of grounds to justify ISA detentions, and abolished appeals to the Privy Council.⁷⁶

One of the lawyers who got arrested in connection with Operation Spectrum was Francis Seow, who had formerly served as Attorney General in the government. He alleged in his book, *To Catch a Tartar*, that he was arrested, imprisoned and, in the first of many “sessions”, interrogated in an icy cold room for almost 17 hours continuously, resulting in detriment to his heart functions. He also related how his refusal to admit to the allegation of plans to contest the upcoming general elections aided by secret funding from the Americans (a narrative that the ISD seemed to have already decided was the truth) infuriated his captors and brought upon him deafening tirades of profanities and threats. He deduced that these accusations (which he denied and found bizarre) originated from the insecurity and paranoia of the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who may have perceived Seow as a threat to the dominance of the PAP, which to Lee was the only viable party able to govern Singapore towards a bright future.⁷⁷

Michael Barr, who traced Lee’s ideological roots to Confucian conceptions of society and state, offered this analysis of Lee:

Lee’s masterful use of power... is an essential element in his political praxis which calls for further consideration. Not only did his upbringing make him comfortable with hierarchies of power, but he has learnt how to use power prudently: to achieve a result without unnecessarily fanning flames of dissent or discontent...

⁷⁶ S.T. Chng; Y.L. Low; S.L. Teo (eds.), *1987: Singapore’s Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On (Second Edition)*. (Singapore: Function 8, 2017), 97-108.

⁷⁷ Francis T. Seow, *To Catch A Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew’s Prison*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1994), 121-145.

The ISD is, however, merely the bluntest of Lee's control mechanisms. His full armoury of coercive tools includes the selective use of taxation investigations, selective scrutiny of the work practices of troublemakers who also happen to be in government-related employment, the ruthless pursuit of libel and other actions in the courts, and at times an almost arbitrary use of the law. By the 1980s, Lee had every arm of government and most arms of society at his disposal in the exercise of power. One of the strongest, most all-pervasive, yet subtlest of these weapons was the government's almost unfettered control of land usage... it has also provided Lee's single greatest tool for creating social and economic vassalage.⁷⁸

In Section 2.4 we discussed the biblical understanding of Power, according to Andy Crouch – that it is fundamentally a gift from God to be exercised by people made in the image of God, for the flourishing of the world. It is worth recalling the definition of power Crouch offered:

All true being strives to create room for more being and to expend its power in the creation of flourishing environments for variety and life, and to thrust back the chaos that limits true being. In doing so it creates other bodies and invites them into mutual creation and tending of the world, building relationships where there had been none: thus they then cooperate together in creating more power for more creation. And the process goes on.⁷⁹

In terms of this biblical framework of power, Lee's exercise of power falls short, not in the sense that there was nobody who flourished or benefited from his exercise of power (for he did bring much good to the nation), but in the sense that he did not sufficiently make room for others at the highest levels of political power. He seemed convinced that viable alternatives to himself did not exist in Singapore's political scene,

⁷⁸ Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind The Man*. (Malaysia: New Asian Library, 2009), 215.

⁷⁹ Andy Crouch. *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 51.

and therefore it would be to Singapore's benefit and advantage that he eliminated unworthy aspirants. Because he was more mindful and cognizant of the "honorable purpose" behind the "nasty things" he did (see quote at the start of this section), perhaps he did not realize the extent to which his actions manifested to the public as paranoia and insecurity, and in spiritual terms may have crossed a fine line into idolatry and injustice. His use of fear to establish "order and law" is also clearly beyond the pale for pastors. True, pastors are not required to be overly soft and indulgent 'nice-guy' types, but there must be a sense in which the sheep find their shepherd a refuge of safety, not a terror to be avoided.

Related to his aura of intimidation and iron grip on power is the issue of Lee's over-emphasis on excellence, to the point of perfectionism. Because the economic imperative was paramount in Lee's priorities, weaknesses which compromised performance were generally frowned upon. The dark side of the system of meritocracy and the relentless push for quality and excellence in Singapore was that those who did not measure up felt inferior, unworthy and unimportant. As we saw in Section 2.3 in the discussion on 'resurrecting excellence', one of the features of a Christian conception of excellence is that it "manifests most gloriously at cruciform intersections", such as the intersection of strength and weakness. While the Bible does encourage us to identify and operate from our strengths, talents and divine endowments, we are also urged to discern

the paradox of God's power made perfect in our weakness (see 2 Corinthians 12:9)⁸⁰. In the church, the imperative to humanize and dignify should dominate over any sort of economic, performance-based imperative. As Paul taught in his metaphor of the body:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, *the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty*, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12: 21-26, emphasis added)

A final note worth making is that most of the books, articles and videos referenced in this thesis that have sought to point out unsavory aspects of Lee's leadership, were accessed in the National Library of Singapore. This may surprise some people who are convinced that the Singapore government continues to censor all criticism against it, and ban all books that speak negatively of the government. Some may take the cynical view that such reluctant openness to dissenting viewpoints is only possible now that LKY is no longer around. However I believe it is a continuation of the shift that Lee himself began to undergo, as highlighted by his aforementioned comments to Tom Plate at the start of this section.

⁸⁰ See Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (SNTSMS 86; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

4. Conversations about and ‘with’ Lee

Having considered in Chapter 2 the biblical grid by which we could assess Lee’s leadership for relevance to the church setting, and in Chapter 3 an analysis of Lee’s formation, strengths and weaknesses, in this chapter we will consider Lee’s impact from a personal standpoint. What was it like to work for this man? What was it like to share a home with him? And what was it like to sit down and talk leadership with him?

The sections in this chapter will feature interviews with four respected leaders who are Christians, and who had positive relationships with Lee Kuan Yew. Retired General Winston Choo gave his take on Lee, first as a young officer serving President Yusof Ishak, then as the top leader of Singapore’s military, and later as ambassador to Australia. Former Permanent Secretary and Head of the Civil Service Mr Lim Siong Guan reflected on his time working closely with Lee as his Principal Private Secretary. Mrs Lim Hwee Hua looked back on her time with Lee in the Cabinet (she was the first woman to be appointed a full minister in Singapore). And finally Dr Lee Suan Yew, the youngest of Lee Kuan Yew’s siblings, shared insights into life at home with Lee, and how he viewed his brother’s impact on the nation.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the sections interspersing the interviews will feature three parts of a fictitious interview with Lee. A fictional narrative offers the space for imaginatively extending Lee’s leadership in a more theological vein, and fleshing out the emotional impact Lee could have on a pastor through a real-life encounter. These

sections were composed with the autobiographical and analytical data on Lee clearly in view.

4.1 Interview with Retired General Winston Choo

What are your recollections of your encounters with Lee Kuan Yew and what kind of impression did he make on you?

There were 3 stages in my encounters with LKY. The first was when I became aide-de-camp (ADC) to President Yusof Ishak in 1965¹. Then the second time around was when I was Chief of Defence Force (CDF)². Most of the work in this period was done with Goh Keng Swee³, but whenever LKY, the Prime Minister (PM) wanted things, I got involved: he chaired DEFCO (Defence Committee) and I had to attend; if he visited the units, I would have to go with him, and so on. And the third stage was when I was Ambassador to Australia.

A very close encounter was when I was High Commissioner to Australia. Within a week of my taking office, I hadn't even presented my credentials, I hadn't unpacked my bag... LKY came as Senior Minister (SM) and I spent close to 10 days with him around Australia. SM was interviewed at my encouragement by the Australian media, ostensibly

¹ Singapore became a fully independent sovereign nation on 9 August 1965, and her first President was Mr Yusof Ishak.

² The top ranking position in the Singapore Armed Forces.

³ Then Minister for Defence and Deputy Prime Minister.

for them to find out about the economics of Singapore and South East Asia. But within two sentences, they asked him about his court case, where he made some remarks about Johor⁴.

Then the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) wanted to publicize the interview. That was when I had almost daily phone calls from him. I'll give you an example. At 3 am Australian time one morning the phone rang. I answered the phone. It was his security officer. He said, "General Choo, Mr Lee wants to speak to you." I said, "Wait, wait, don't put him on, let me wash my face." (laughs) So I got on the phone, and Lee said, "Ah Winston, what time is it?" I said, "About 3:30 am." He said, "Anyway, I take it you should be awake." (Laughs) I mean, that was the man! Then he went on and on.

In another conversation, I was sitting in my office on the phone with him. He was trying to tell me that he wanted to call up the editor of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. I said, "No, that's my job, that's not your job. If I do anything, if things go wrong, you can say it was my fault. But if you do it, you can't get away with it." Then he said, "You've got a point." My first secretary, who was sitting in front of me, said, "HC (High Commissioner), who was that on the phone?" I said, "LKY." "You mean you talk to him like that?" the Secretary exclaimed. (Laughs) And when I came back to Singapore

⁴ In March 1997, in an affidavit as part of a libel case against a Singaporean who had fled to neighboring Johor state, Lee made derogatory comments about Johor, sparking strong protests against him in Malaysia. He later issued a public apology for the comments. See *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/14/news/lee-kuan-yew-apologizes-for-remarks-that-angered-malaysia.html> (accessed on 10 Nov 19).

shortly after that, he saw me at a function, and he came to me and said, “Winston, thank you. You did right.” I never expected that from him.

In the first part when I was ADC, he was like god, you know! I mean, everybody feared him. If you asked anybody in Singapore to deal with LKY, they’d say, ‘No!’ But I had no choice! I was 24 years old. He was that sort of man. He tells you something, you do it. But he would explain to you. That was what I found when I had to deal with him. Initially I was trembling. But later I found that though he was very strict, very stern, he was very reasonable. If you don't know, you say you don't know. You ask him, he would tell, he would explain.

He checked all the time. Like the Istana grounds, when he played golf. The reason why I stayed back was that he would suddenly call me up and say, “At hole number 5, there’s a bunch of weeds. What wasn’t it pulled out?” One day he said to me, “Come down.” So I went down. He pointed to the ground and said, “This is elephantopus. It’s a weed. Why is it called elephantopus?” I said I’d never heard of it. He said, “It’s because it’s like the feet of an elephant. It will grow bigger and bigger and consume all the grass. I want this removed. But you cannot cut it, you have to dig it out. I tell you what you do. Get the workers brigade.” You see, in the early period of our independence, we had lots of unemployment. So they formed a thing called the workers brigade. These were young men taken from the streets. They were sent to various places to do work and given some money.

So I got the workers brigade, and they were weeding. He watched from one of the windows somewhere. Then he came down, he lined them all up, and said, “You people

want work? You work like that? You! Where are you from?” “Malaysia.” He said, “Go back! You want to work, you work properly!” Then he told me, “Get me 2 RSMs (Regimental Sergeant Majors) from the SAF (Singapore Armed Forces). I want the 2 RSMs to supervise them to weed.” He was that type of no-nonsense person. So that’s how we removed the elephantopus. He stood for no nonsense. “We help you get a job, you do your job properly,” he told them. He believed the military RSMs would be able to get hold of these people, and they did.

Another time he asked me, “Do you play golf?” I said I didn’t. He said, “I want you to build an additional 2 holes in the Istana’s golf course.” I thought, “I don’t even play golf, and here you want me to build part of a golf course?!” He said, “Here’s what I want you to do. You bring white tapes.” He pegged the tapes. “This is where this green is going to be, and that is where the other green is going to be. Now you go and get the curator from Singapore Island Country Club (a premier golf club in Singapore), and ask them to build a nursery of grass for the greens, and tell them to come here and show our own gardeners how to do it.” So the Istana had 5 holes. I made 2 more, so they had 7 holes. Then he said, “Look, how beautiful!” So it was 99.6 acres. I used to jog every morning around there so I could spot all the problems before he came around.

Looking at Singapore's phenomenal progress from where we were in 1965, how much of the credit do you think goes to Lee Kuan Yew?

I think the driving force was him. Though he had a good team of people around him, first at the cabinet level: Goh Keng Swee, Toh Chin Chye... these were the people,

especially Goh Keng Swee who was the man responsible for defence and for the economy. But LKY was the driving force. The heads of the civil service, the perm secs (permanent secretaries) were great people, but they could get their work done because he was there to stand behind them.

I remembered, for instance, during the period I was ADC (aide de camp), he called up all the civil servants to Victoria Memorial Hall, and he read them the riot act! “If we want to be independent, this is the way we work? If you don’t work properly, then leave! And if you don’t work properly and you don’t leave, I will remove you!” Can you imagine, he assembled all the senior civil servants soon after independence! I was telling President Yusof Ishak I didn’t need to go. He said, “No, you go.” I said, “But I’m not a civil servant.” He said, “You’d better go and listen to what he tells them, then you come and tell me.” So he read the riot act to the civil servants, and that set the purpose, the standard, the pace upon which he wanted to see things done. He would say, “If I put on a switch and if the light doesn’t come on, then somebody’s head will roll. If I turn on the tap and no water comes out, somebody’s head will roll.” He meant what he said. When he drove in his car, if he saw something not right on the road, or some fences with overgrown trees or things like that, immediately he would tell the security officer, “Call up so and so, tell them to get something done.” So if you ask me about Singapore’s development, I would say that he was fundamentally, principally responsible, because he was the driving force behind it. He set the rules, he set the standards.

Would you see any traits of LKY that could potentially be relevant in a church setting?

(Longer pause) I think the institutions that he built were specifically with a purpose, designed to achieve something. In a church you have groups of people doing something, like music ministry for instance. You set it up, you make sure that the music ministry has an aim towards achieving something, and somebody must drive that. First you define the mission, then you drive that. And they must be given guidance and support.

For him, support was very important. For example, he wanted the Singapore River cleaned up in ten years, so that fish could survive there and people could swim there. He set that aim, then he supported it. Laws had to be passed, and he went to parliament and supported the laws. He'd given the department a mission to do, but he provided them with the legal framework, the people, the finance.

He was not unreasonable. If he wanted you to do something, he made sure that you had all the things you needed to do it. If you didn't have, you could ask him. He gave very clear instructions about what he wanted. Communication was very important. (Pauses) Sometimes I would get one-liner messages from him... one sentence... then he signs off LKY. You sit down for three days thinking what he wants!

Is that right? That doesn't sound like he was very clear.

No, he wants you to think, then you go back to him. Goh Keng Swee was just like that also. Provoked you to think, then you go to him and ask. If you think you can do it, then he'll know you're just shooting from the hip. So this trait about him... he tests you out. When I was CDF, I had to go to Malaysia and talk to my counterparts. He would tell

me things that I should pass on to them. So when I came back and debriefed with him, he would say, “You should have said this to him, and you should have said that!” (Laughs) So after a few of those sessions, I got back to him and said, “PM, if I can think like that, I would be PM!” (Laughs) Then he looked at me and he laughed, and he said, “I suppose so. I suppose so.”

He was so fast and so sharp. But he would quiz you. In DEFECO, if the SAF (Singapore Armed Forces) put up a paper to get something done, he would ask you, “Why is it that you have decided on this option and not that option? That option seems to be better than the one you chose.” He provoked you, and got you to explain to him, until he was sure that your thinking and rationale was right to arrive at the decision that you’re recommending him to take.

Could you share how his antennae seemed to be up looking for good people all the time?

He spent time and found occasions to talk to people. For example, there was this young man who was studying abroad. He did an attachment with one of the big corporations and came back. LKY heard about him and called him up to speak to him. I was going to Australia, so he called me up to join him as he was having lunch with this guy... and he got an MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) officer to take notes! (Laughs) Can you imagine, lunch... he takes notes! That guy had some understanding about things that were going on in Australia, so he engaged this person and found out about him, and eventually he used this man for a job that he thought he’d be good at. So if somebody told him about somebody else, he made it a point to get interested in that person. Just like

getting candidates for the PAP – the same thing. His big recruiter in those days was Lim Kim San.⁵ LKY himself would find time to interview and speak to the person. So he reached out. That’s how he found people, people who were tested. Tan Teck Khim was a good example. He was the first director of general staff when in 1965 we became independent and wanted to start the SAF. Tan Teck Khim came from the police. LKY saw Teck Khim as somebody who could help set up the SAF. Teck Khim had only ‘O’ levels⁶, but he was a marvellous man, he was able to get things done. Teck Khim did it by getting good people working around him. LKY didn’t look at Teck Khim’s educational qualifications but his performance – trusted, proven performance – and used him. His Principal Private Secretaries... all of them, the good ones, became perm secs. Some became ministers, like Heng Swee Keat. So that was a testing ground. He would ask around and speak to people about other people.

So he sized people up. And even the business community, he would go round and reach out to them. Quietly he would bring them in, have lunch with them, find out about the economy, find out whether they had nationalistic feelings to want to do something for Singapore, and he would give them a chairmanship of something or other. So he chose people, sized them up. But if you were not up to the mark in his eyes, you were gone, in

⁵ Lim Kim San was the first chairman of the Housing Development Board. He was credited for leading the successful public housing program in Singapore and went on to serve as Minister in several ministries including Education, Finance and National Development.

⁶ The General Certificate of Education (GCE) is a subject-specific family of academic qualifications that awarding bodies in Commonwealth countries, including Singapore, confer on students. It is composed of three levels, the lowest being the Ordinary Level ("O Level"). (Wikipedia, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Certificate_of_Education, accessed on 10 Nov)

the sense that you would never progress in the civil service or Armed Forces or wherever. He and Goh Keng Swee were exactly the same in that sense, though I think Goh Keng Swee was a bit more brutal. If Goh Keng Swee calls you a fool, you're dead, you're gone. Don't let him call you a fool.

So would you say there was a certain streak of ruthlessness in them?

Yes. I think that's something that's probably not very applicable for your purposes. But this was the beginning of a nation. And early days, that's why he had that aura, that reputation, that people feared him. But later on, when I was in Australia, when he was no more Prime Minister, he mellowed tremendously. Throughout the trip in Australia, I saw the change in him.

How would you describe his presence, body language, tone of voice, facial expression etc?

Most of the time, depending on the situation, but most of the time, fierce, forceful, stands for no nonsense. That's the way he was. Later on, still the same but not as fierce. He did not give you the body language of being threatening. I mean, in the early days, when you stood before him, you trembled. His style used to pervade in the civil service among the perm secs. Some of them took that style, you know. But, like I said, over time he felt he did not need to do that anymore. I think it was the zeal, the drive to get things done, that made him that way. Later on, he took more time explaining.

In Australia, he was trying to put the seat belt of the car on, but it couldn't go in. So he looked at me and said, "Winston, the Australian technology is not as good as the Germans'. You see the Mercedes, you just put in your seatbelt, but this Holden, you can't even put it in!" (Laughs) I remember earlier days, if something in the car didn't work, somebody's head would roll!

Do you think a non-Christian's leadership could be relevant for Christians?

Well, I think so. I think there are many non-Christians who have very moral behavior, and their approach to life is sometimes better than some of the Christians we have. And I believe that Christians can learn from non-Christians who have led their lives in a way that is upright and moral. I think we can learn from him – the way he conducted himself, the way he stood against corruption, don't tell him a lie ever, and the way he wants people to be upright. So in that sense we can learn from him. And I think he had lots of courage. He took on the communists, he had death threats, people were after him... he took on the Malaysians... so in that sense he was very courageous. But he took his security very seriously. I knew all the security people working for him. Because he said: "I cannot afford to go at this stage because Singapore needs me" or "I have a mission to do that's not finished." Singapore would not be what Singapore is if not for him. He knew what he wanted, what he had to do. He made sure that people did what needed to get done – the right people in the right place. (End of interview)

4.2 Interview with Lee: The first hour

“You can go in now, Reverend. Follow me, please.” Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s secretary’s voice snapped me out of my silent prayers. I jumped up and mumbled my thanks to her as I trailed her into Mr Lee’s office, unconscious that I was clutching my haversack with both hands in front of me, as though it were some sort of shield. My anxiety levels had been mounting as the day of my scheduled 3-hour appointment with Lee drew nearer, and now, moments before my first face-to-face meeting with the man, I was having kittens! *What stupidity possessed me to request for this interview? Am I a glutton for humiliation? Which pastor in their right mind...* Too late! There he was. “Umm... good morning... I mean, good afternoon, Sir,” I said in a husky voice, my throat as parched as a post-apocalyptic desert. I swung my haversack aside and we shook hands. *For an almost ninety-year-old man, he still had a firm grip.* He beckoned me towards a chair and said, “Please have a seat,” as he positioned himself across from me, with a coffee table between us. On the table was a glass of cold water for me (as I had requested when asked by the secretary earlier), placed on a coaster, and in front of Lee a cup of warm water on a saucer. Two of his aides were seated some distance away from us in the corner of the expansive office, within earshot.

Grateful for the sip of water, I opened the conversation, “Mr Lee, thank you for granting me this interview. I was rather surprised that you would agree to see me, especially given the fact that of the hundreds of interviews you’ve given over the years, hardly any were by pastors.” He smiled and replied, “Maybe that’s why I thought this

might be an interesting conversation. I was curious why a pastor might want to interview me.”

“I’m grateful that you have made time out of your busy schedule, and despite your recent bout of hospitalisation. May I ask, how are you, Sir?” Lee sighed and shrugged his stooped shoulders slightly as he said, “Well, time and tide wait for no man. We all deteriorate with age. We all have an expiry date,” he philosophised. “I do the best I can to stay healthy and fit, through diet, exercise and sleep, and keeping my mind active, but the immunity just isn’t what it used to be, so when I catch an infection, it hits me harder these days.” I nodded, my expression and posture one of pastoral concern. Lee began to cough a deep, prolonged chesty cough, covering his mouth with a closed left fist, and I caught myself feeling a measure of surprise that this man I had been so intimidated by a moment ago actually seemed vulnerable in his state of weakening health. When the coughing subsided, Lee held up his right hand in apology and reached for his cup of water, and I assured him no apology was needed.

Blinking away my momentary lapse into sympathy, I resumed the posture of eager interviewer of a political superstar, even as I slid my voice recorder out of my haversack and set it up on the coffee table, prior permission having already been obtained for the conversation to be recorded. “The main reason for which I requested this interview, Mr Lee, was to look for points of connection between your leadership, and the leadership we exercise as pastors, especially as senior pastors of larger churches with multiple staff.” Lee let out a light chuckle, and said, “What for? I don’t... I can’t see how there can be any learning value for you in my experience of leadership. Don’t your

training institutions, what do you call them... your seminaries, prepare you for your role?" Unprepared for this question, I felt a little defensive as I replied, "Yes, they do a great job of preparing us to teach and preach the Scriptures, and to minister to and counsel members facing difficulties. But senior pastors have this additional overlay of directing and managing the congregation and staff, which is something the seminaries have yet to adequately equip us for, in my opinion. To be fair, not every seminary student ends up as a senior pastor, so they have to teach what's relevant to all."

"Then you should persuade the seminaries and work with them to offer special courses that address the needs of the senior pastors more directly. If you see a problem or deficit somewhere in your system, don't expect somebody else to solve it for you. See to it that the need is met, and the gap is plugged. That's basic common sense." Feeling slightly chastised, I regretted having voiced my unrehearsed opinion about seminaries equipping senior pastors and decided to divert the discussion away to more positive territory, but before I could, Lee interjected, "I don't think I have much to offer you. I am not a spiritual person. I don't steep myself in the sacred writings of any faith."

"Mr Lee, do you ever pray?" I spontaneously asked in response to his last statement. "No, that is not part of my experience," he replied. I continued, "That's interesting. Recently, you caused some ripples of excitement in the Christian community when the newspapers reported that you practiced meditation and used the biblical word 'Maranatha' in your daily routines." Lee raised his eyebrows and quizzically enquired, "Ripples of excitement? Why?" With genuine surprise at his question, I responded,

“Surely you knew! People were wondering if you were finally shifting from your personal stance of extreme caution and neutrality on spiritual matters.”

“Look,” he said, “repeating ‘Maranatha’ as a mantra is not the same as praying, and it does not mean I saw myself as a Christian. I did it for relaxation. I could have used a Buddhist phrase, but I was somehow more comfortable with ‘Maranatha’. It’s important for a person who holds the strain of leadership responsibility to find some way to counter the negative effects of stress. My friend Ng Kok Song, who showed great strength when his wife passed away from cancer, recommended I try meditation. I tried it and it helped. So, I continued.”

“Well, Sir,” I said, summoning my courage to share a personal assessment of my interviewee, “I guess that’s perfectly consistent with your widely recognised commitment to pragmatism over ideology. But as you know, ‘Maranatha’ is actually a prayer, albeit a brief one. It means, ‘Come to me, Lord Jesus.’” Lee nodded and said, “Yes, I’m aware of that. I suppose *if* I meant it, it would count as a prayer.” I felt he stressed the word *if* just a little too strongly for my liking. I tried to ensure my forehead didn’t register a frown as I continued, “I guess one of the many differences between a pastor like me and a political leader like you is that I pray all the time. I mean, I have a conversational relationship with God in which I’m talking to him through the day, sometimes unvocalized, and sometimes out loud. A lot of the time I pray alone, but I also pray a good deal in the company of others.”

Lee’s expression seemed to indicate a twinge of curiosity. “I imagine that’s quite typical for a pastor. And what do you pray for most often?” he asked. “Wisdom,” I

answered. “Why?” countered Lee. I responded, “Because I realise wisdom is the difference between making a situation better or worse. In the Bible, in the book of James, there’s a promise that ‘if any man lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives freely and without reproach, and it will be given him’.” Lee’s interest seemed further piqued, “Promise? Who made this promise?”

“Well, we Christians believe God made the promise, through the writer of that portion of Scripture, James.” Lee nodded and said, “I see. Well, *if* what you believe is true...” (again, I didn’t appreciate the way he stressed his *if*) “then you have access to a *much* greater intelligence than I have ever had access to. You see, I can only access my own intelligence and the intelligence of other people... (he shot a glance at me and smiled, somewhat unnervingly) real people... that I speak to or read about. But you supposedly have access to the supreme intelligence that put this entire universe together!”

I tried to disguise my gulp and mumbled, “I... um... yes, you’re right.” I was beginning to feel like a deer in the headlights. Lee, leaning forward, continued in a serious tone, “Then you shouldn’t have to consult anybody like me about anything. Just talk to your God, and he will give you all the answers, right?” His sharpening and penetrating gaze made me avert my eyes. “Umm... well it’s not so straightforward,” I weakly objected. *O God, what have I gotten myself into? Please give me wisdom to answer this question!*

Lee pressed his line of inquiry (which felt more like attack) further, “I should be learning from you, not the other way around.” He then leaned back in his chair,

continuing to observe me intently. The pause was awkward in the extreme. Then an idea came to me.

“You see, Mr Lee, when an author writes a book, at the beginning he acknowledges all those who have contributed to producing the book, in ways big and small. He credits others for whatever in the book is commendable and praiseworthy. This is an appropriate demonstration of humility. And typically, after thanking and acknowledging everyone who has helped, the author states, ‘Any errors or imperfections that remain are my own.’” I paused to return Lee’s eye contact briefly before continuing, “I believe you wrote something similar in the Acknowledgement section of your own memoirs?” Lee answered, “Yes I did. And your point is...?”

“My point, Sir, is that just as an author has access to the help of others, a prayerful person does have access to the help of God. And for whatever we do right, we ought to humbly attribute the credit to God’s wisdom and help. But we also take ownership of any deficits and mistakes that remain. That’s an admission that we have not been capable of fully appropriating the help that’s available to us. That also means we don’t stop needing help and advice from others, like yourself, because we believe all truth is in some sense God’s truth, and he can guide us through the counsel of others, even those who may not themselves profess to be followers of the faith.” I looked for signs in Lee’s expression that my response made some sense. He smiled but said nothing further in reply. I recalled one of Lee’s critics describing Lee’s smile like that of a crocodile tenderly anticipating its next meal! I brushed that thought off and interpreted his smile to mean, “Alright, I’ll let you off the hook this time.” I breathed a silent prayer. *Thank you, God!*

*

“Mr Lee, as I read your memoirs and interviews, I discerned a few, broad themes that are general enough that they possibly relate to leaders in any domain. Let’s begin with the theme of purpose. Could you share why you became a political leader?” I asked. Without much hesitation, he responded, “Because I had a strong sense of mission, to bring about much needed change in Singapore.” He paused. I invited him to say more, and he continued with a slightly faraway look in his eyes, “Growing up, I was doing well in school. And with the encouragement of my parents, I set my sights on becoming a professional, a lawyer, primarily because it was a respectable job that paid better than if you were a regular employee. But the sudden onset of the Japanese Occupation exposed me to some very dark sides of human nature. The brutalities the Japanese soldiers perpetrated on Singaporeans in those three years sickened me, aroused my nationalism and self-respect, and my resentment at being lorded over. And the myth of the white man’s superiority over Asians, which had gone unchallenged from the time of Stamford Raffles until the Japanese arrived in 1942, disintegrated further during my years as a student in Britain after the war, and this strengthened my determination to get rid of British colonial rule in Singapore.”

I offered a paraphrase of his idea, “It sounds like your sense of purpose was proportional to your pain. Would that be true?” Lee nodded in agreement, “Not just personal or individual pain, but the collective pain I sensed. It was pain that could not be pushed down and suppressed so that one could just get on with other aspects of life, but was constantly at the surface, etched on people’s faces, and keenly felt.” I probed further,

“So did you undergo a shift in your ambition – from lawyer to political leader – prompted by this pain that you and others around you were feeling?” Lee replied, “When I had completed my first year in Cambridge, my wife-to-be, Choo⁷... now my late wife...” Lee paused momentarily, as if to picture his wife in his mind’s eye, and sighed before continuing, “she obtained a Queen’s scholarship and was able to join me. Within a few weeks of arriving in England, she said she detected a change in my personality, that I had somehow become less cheerful and optimistic, and more anti-British and determined to end the colonial regime in Malaya and Singapore. I guess that first year alone in England before she arrived was when the shift in ambition, as you put it, began in earnest. From that time on, people around me detected a growing impatience to alter the status quo in Singapore.”

“Sir, firstly, I think I speak for many Singaporeans when I say I am very sorry for your immense loss in the passing of Mrs Lee.” Lee gave a slight nod in acknowledgement. Mulling over the implications of Lee’s words for myself I said, “When I was first called to full-time ministry in the church, I was not conscious of any significant pain that I was trying to put right. And later on, when I was appointed to be senior pastor, it was likewise not a step undertaken to right any wrongs as such. There was no frustration or anger in me. In fact, the overriding emotion I felt was one of reluctance and fear at not being equal to the institutional demands placed upon me. Do you think that puts me at a disadvantage in terms of my sense of purpose in leadership?”

⁷ Kwa Geok Choo, who passed away in 2010.

Lee gave a sagely smile and responded, “I can’t answer that question, because I don’t know what makes someone want to be a pastor or a senior pastor. Nor am I insisting that every true leader’s motivation has to be birthed in pain. But what I have observed is that the most effective leaders are compelled by some inner passion and drive that makes them game changers, and pain can have a strong motivational effect on a person.”

“I have often wished I had more drive, more energy and more passion in ministry... like you did in politics. Maybe I’m an overly reluctant senior pastor. That’s why I think your point about pain is intriguing and worth double-clicking.” Lee chuckled slightly and said, “I like your digital analogy, ” and lifted his right hand slightly to mimic the action of double-clicking a computer mouse with his index finger. I smiled and continued, “Perhaps if my sense of calling to ministry were rooted more in pain I’d...”

Lee interrupted me, “But you can’t go back and change your past!” He shifted his weight in his seat and continued, “You see, by the late 70s and early 80s when Singapore had become more stable and prosperous, I realised we were becoming victims of our own success in some ways. It was getting harder to motivate good people to come forward and serve in politics, because the former climate my generation experienced was no longer the reality. Life was better all round. What could we do? We knew we couldn’t replicate the Japanese Occupation just to ignite passion in the younger generation. You know, Mao Zedong tried to recreate the conditions of the Long March by unleashing the Cultural Revolution, but with disastrous results for China!”

I countered, “No, Mr Lee, that’s not what I mean. My sense of calling, and that of many other pastors, is rooted primarily in love and loyalty. I sensed that God’s will for

my life was to serve His people as a pastor, and my response should be to trust Him, that He knows what's best for me, and obey Him out of a sense of love for Him and loyalty to Him. But, if I'm brutally honest..." I let out a long sigh and continued, "my love and loyalty to God are not as intense and strong as they should be. Self-love competes with my love for God. Therein lies my problem. I'm just wondering aloud if it might make a difference if I reframed my sense of calling to factor in the dimension of pain."

"That's very honest of you, but how would you do that?" enquired Lee, seeming genuinely interested to follow my train of thought, which encouraged me. "I guess, it might mean reframing my sense of calling in terms of God's pain, and the pain of people He cares about." Lee clarified, "You mean you try to feel pain vicariously?" I nodded, "Yes, I guess so. A couple of Old Testament characters come to mind. When the kingdom of Judah was exiled in Babylon, two of their outstanding leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, were recorded as spending an extended time in weeping, mourning, fasting and praying – Nehemiah over the destruction and desolation of Jerusalem, and Ezra over the continued faithlessness of the remnant of Jews⁸. If I were to reflect more deeply on how my ministry relieves pain in the heart of God over lost people, and relieves pain in people who are bereft of His love, perhaps it could unlock some as yet untapped drive and passion within me."

"That sounds quite difficult," said Lee. "When we were blooding the second generation of leaders, by my observation and their own admission, they lacked that same

⁸ Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 1.

fire in the belly that the old guard had. They were more like technocrats than politicians. But by and by, as they grew more acquainted with the people in their wards and the issues gripping the nation, that sense of passion grew, albeit gradually. So if you're looking for an analogy, if passion and drive were likened to the temperature of water, I suppose the older generation's experience was like heating that water in the microwave oven of pain, whereas the younger generation's experience was like heating that water over the low flame of gradual exposure to problems in the nation." I smiled at the irony of the clever analogy, which reversed the direction of the progress of technology backwards in time.

"Mr Lee, that reminds me of something Robert Greenleaf wrote in his seminal book, *Servant Leadership*." Lee recognised the name and asked, "Yes, I'm aware that book has been quite influential in corporate circles, but how does it relate?" I continued, "Although in the eyes of many, Robert Greenleaf was the first to coin the idea of Servant Leadership, it is actually an idea that is as old as the Bible. Greenleaf put modern clothing on an ancient principle, and it gained great traction and admiration among even secular thinkers in the field of leadership and management." Lee asked for examples of how the Bible teaches servant leadership, and I pointed out examples such as Moses reluctantly but obediently leading Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land in the Old Testament, and the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13) and his declaration that 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45) in the New Testament.

“In a nutshell, Greenleaf’s thesis was that institutions are the stuff society is made of, and are the main means through which people are enabled to flourish. But he observed that they were on the whole ossifying and failing in their roles, in the US at least. So the only way forward for society is for servant leaders to rise up from within these institutions – be they schools, governments, businesses, churches etc. – and become agents of change and transformation. Servant leaders are servants first, in that their first priority is to serve and care for the needs of others. It is only subsequently that conscious choice and necessity bring them to aspire to lead.”

Lee, interacting with what I had just said, responded, “I think he’s right. And that ‘conscious choice and necessity’ Greenleaf cites must be compelling enough to energize the leader, whether it’s the personal pain of injustice, or vicarious pain of a deity, or a sense of duty to shore up a weakening institution. I suppose if you find yourself, like I did, in a situation of grave injustice, let that fire your imagination and propel you to lead the change. But if, instead of that, you find yourself in a situation of institutional stagnation, where your church is falling below her potential for doing good, then transforming that can be your sense of mission.”

Enjoying the fact that we were more or less on the same frequency, I added, “Interestingly, Greenleaf also wrote that the litmus test of servant leadership is that the least privileged in the institution are looked after, and those who are served grow as persons, becoming healthier and more likely themselves to become servant leaders too. Looking around Singapore today, I think we have many more servant leaders actively helping the less fortunate than we did a generation ago. And that reminds me of

something you said in your 1984 National Day Rally speech, where you summed up the unswerving objective of your government as doing the highest good to the most people. You also set out from the beginning to hold yourselves to high standards of probity and accountability, with a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption. Sounds like servant leadership to me.” Lee replied, “We never applied that term to ourselves... but come to think of it, ‘civil servants’ are ‘servants of civilians’, and I believe when the word ‘minister’ is used in church circles it means ‘to serve’?” I nodded my agreement and he continued, “So all the cabinet ministers are in some sense servants of the state... which makes the Prime Minister...” I jumped in, “The Super Servant!” We both chuckled as we reached for our water, and the conversation turned for a while to small talk.

4.3 Interview with Retired Permanent Secretary Mr Lim Siong Guan

Mr Lee Kuan Yew had a way of bringing about a massive mindset shift. Could you comment?

Yes, I agree with you. He was very farsighted. I would say that he was truly wonderful as a communicator. And his basic approach has never been about “I want you to follow my directions”, but it's always been about sensitivity and consideration about what is of interest to the audience he is speaking to. Why is what he's proposing good for that audience? This enormous capacity for communication, communication with a view of not saying just what you want to say, but communication with a view of convincing people, that this is the way things are and this is what we need to do... I think he was a

master communicator. And, sometimes, if I look in terms of what we can learn from him, I think of his capacity always to think of what is in the interests of the audience, why they should bother to hear what you say, and why it is good for them.

I can see this is the challenge of the church. People come to church and sort of say that it's not about 'this is what the Bible says, and so you'd better just do it' but to be able to rise above that, and sort of say, "This is why it's good, this is why the God who is all love thinks it's good for his creation".

You mean, to explain things from the point of reference of the person?

Of the person, right. It's not simply about well, out of fear of God, you just obey, otherwise you get zapped (laughs). And sometimes we don't know why it is good. All we know is that this is a God who knows everything from eternity to eternity. And therefore you live upon his wisdom, and, not just his wisdom, you live upon his love.

And this communication aspect was also when Lee dealt with foreign leaders. When he met a foreign leader, invariably his question was about 'So what's of interest to him?' rather than start on the basis of 'Please, I'm a small guy around the place. Could you please just do these things for me as a favor?' Why should he do that to you? Think about him. And just a little illustration of that: we have with China, you know, this Singapore-Suzhou industrial park, the first government-to-government project. Think about it: how does a little place like Singapore have any relevance to this big country of China? Large landmass, everything is so different between China and Singapore. And yet, if you think deeper about it, you say, 'Well, you know, we can't do anything about

teaching the government in Beijing what to do and how to govern. But if you want to talk in terms of how you design an estate so that you have jobs, you have homes, you build a whole community...'

Technology transfer in some sense?

Yeah. But a lot more than that. A lot of people don't realize this part, that maybe just drawing up the plans for industrial park, having all the roads and making sure the water supply's there, electricity supply's there, the factory buildings are there... no, that's not the most important thing about the industrial park. The most critical thing about the industrial park is how to get people to invest in the place. And so this comes to the other aspect about Mr Lee Kuan Yew, that it's not just hard numbers; a lot of it is software, it's about trustworthiness: why people should trust you, whether you keep your promises, even if it may turn out to be a lot more difficult than you had imagined when you made your promise. It is trustworthiness that's carried Singapore.

Could you comment on Mr Lee's very pragmatic approach to leadership?

Well, if we just adopted the principle of life that says 'So long as it works it's okay', you run into enormous problems about ethics and morality. And right here, I would say that his theory about pragmatism is really based on the sense of realism. You need to have the capacity to see life and to see your situation as it is, rather than say, 'if only this' or 'if only that'. That means that you don't work on the theories, you work on the realities of life. And you figure out ways by which you deal with the situation within

those realities, but don't feel bound by those realities in terms of how you meet those challenges.

Probably the most important lesson I learned in the three years I served directly with Lee Kuan Yew was to recognize that leadership of a nation is different from leadership of a company. When you lead a company, you can say, 'Well, we've got the bottom 5% of workers and the company would be better off if we let them go and replace them with better people.' But when you run a country, you cannot do that. A government needs to cater for the needs of everyone, whether top or bottom. There's no such thing as saying the bottom 5% you can ignore or you can get rid of.

What did you observe about Mr Lee's exercise of power?

Well, let me first start by making some remarks about what I think is the nature of politics in Singapore as you know it. The politics of expedience simply means that political leaders and the government will only do what is expedient what is convenient, what is easy to do, like going only for the 'low-hanging fruits'. But Lee and the PAP have always proudly said that they don't believe in the politics of expedience. Instead, they believe in the politics of explanation, in which you say to people, "This is what we are going to do. And this is why we believe this is the right thing for us to do." I believe the politics of explanation only works on a foundation of trust. If you had not built the trust, it's not enough to have politics of explanation.

And then, there's a thing called the politics of involvement, which is that it's no longer simply a matter of the leadership doing things for the people, but it is that people

say “I want to be involved in thinking about what is good for my future, thinking what is good for the country, how the country can serve me.” Definitely, my view is that Singaporeans are moving away from this Confucian idea of putting nation before self. I think probably too many people these days believe ‘the nation exists for me’. And the only question is whether it’s ‘me in the long term’ or ‘me in the short term’.

Sometimes people don’t understand. I know what they see in Lee Kuan Yew is coercive power, mostly. But fundamentally it’s a question of whether people trust you or not. And do they trust that you are just serving yourself or you’re serving them? Because people can even accept that, okay, there are things called secrets, there are things called ‘national interest’. So you can’t explain everything. But where you don’t build up that intrinsic trust, then you have a big problem, and people are not going to follow you and people will get even more cynical.

Some people say if the government will be more transparent, they can build trust. But I like this BBC program I heard which basically said you have to understand one thing – that transparency is the management of distrust. The reason you need transparency is because you don’t have trust. Transparency doesn’t build trust. Trust and confidence are related. Confidence is mostly in the institution. Whereas trust is really in the person. Having looked deeply into what your heart is like, do I trust you?

With the demands that were upon him, how did Mr Lee manage his time?

I think the way to manage time is just be clear about your priorities and ignore everything else. Just like in the three years that I was with Lee Kuan Yew, he was totally

into this whole idea about clean and green, the greening of Singapore was so critical for him. He spent enormous amounts of time pushing the people, not accepting 'no' as an easy answer or 'not possible'. He went into details about how we plant trees on the roadside. How do we water the plants or trees? How do we collect rainwater to feed their roots? So all I'm saying is that your time management is an issue of getting your priorities right, and not to go chase after everything.

Would part of his time management strategy have been to delegate to good people?

He absolutely believed in talent, both for the cabinet as well as the civil service. He decided straight off that no matter how bright his minister may be, no matter what bright ideas his ministers may propose, they come to nothing if they cannot be executed properly. And this is why he was the biggest supporter of the civil service. Because to him, the civil service is the executive arm of government. And therefore he needs a strong civil service that was, in his words, 'competent and effective'.

I know, when I was serving under him, there were some things he asked me to do where he took enormous effort to sit me down and to describe exactly what he wants done and exactly why. Now, this was one thing very good about him. He took enormous effort to describe why because I believe he intuitively understood that if I went along to do something, I needed to understand why in order to be able to make adjustments to the proposition as I found necessary. When you have people who simply say, 'I got this brilliant idea, go do it exactly this way,' people can't exercise any initiative anymore. So describing why is very important.

How did Mr Lee approach leadership succession?

Even though he stepped down as PM, he became Senior Minister, then became Minister Mentor. He was in the cabinet meetings such that during every cabinet meeting, the last one to one-and-a-half hours was just storytelling by Lee Kuan Yew. That's how we get transmitted values. We all know that so much of what we want to teach goes through by stories. The problem lies in how to codify the wisdom of the ages so that this gets passed on.

Too many people come on to a job (and this applies to business as much as it applies to the church, I think) with this idea that the leader is the guy with a vision. And so everybody sits askance, looking for what vision he has. And then the pastor goes on to say, 'This is my vision, I want it done this way.' And he ends up in a problem. Sometimes people quit the church. I think this is a fundamental problem because I think the whole idea about a leader coming in with a vision and so you follow his direction is not a good construction. But the reason is that I think it's a lot more important to have principles and values and culture as the driving paradigm, rather than particular actions, and particular visions. And too many people have been taught and come with this idea that the leader is the one with the vision.

So if you talk in terms of succession in the church, if the church deliberately works at putting your successor as part of the pastoral team, let's say you have at least two or three years to take him through, then you wouldn't get the kind of dramatic disconnect. That's because the next guy taking over from you is totally familiar with what

to do. If you had a feeling that this person on your team could possibly be the next senior pastor after you, then you would know that each time you think of an idea, you would spend a lot of time consulting them, so that by the time things happen, it becomes their idea, not your idea.

Were there downsides to Lee's leadership?

One of the things that struck me was that when I attended his lunches and dinners when he had foreign visitors, the menu was the same all the time. So I asked the secretary who fixes all these meals how come the menu is the same all the time. "Oh," he said, "we used to experiment with different things, and we got scolding from him for this, for that, bad choice of menu, bad cook, whatever it is. This one, he didn't complain. So we keep feeding him the same stuff!" Now, this is one thing for us to watch. This is the way people end up when you lead on the basis of being perfectionist and just scolding people all the time. You really want people to be responsive, or to know how to handle situations as they find them, rather than say there's only one solution. Because one time we were on a visit in Washington DC and I think Mrs Lee asked him to try something on the menu. So he did, and he enjoyed it. And he said, "How is it they don't do these things back in Singapore?" See, he didn't understand the reason they didn't do these things was because he scolded people too much.

Some say he mellowed over the years. Would that be true?

Yes, I would say probably because the urgency of the situation got less over time. In the initial years you need to urgently do this and do that and fix things very fast. Whereas once he put Singapore on a reasonable foundation for growth, then he could begin to concentrate his mind on the long term. I mean, this is why thinking ahead becomes so important. When you think ahead, you have plenty of time. We are not surprised by developments that come along. Whereas if you don't think ahead, then everything becomes urgent. Stephen Covey's 7 Habits pointed out that the key is to not ignore the Important But Not Urgent category of tasks. That's a critical dimension which is actually related to succession. Obviously, if you don't work on succession, you say 'Yes it's important but not urgent', then you keep procrastinating until it becomes urgent. Then there's a scramble. (End of interview)

4.4 Interview with Lee: The second hour

After our drink and brief chat, I reached into my bag and pulled out a copy of Lee's memoirs entitled *Third World To First*, and turning to a page marked with a protruding post-it label, I said, "Mr Lee, it's been helpful to discuss your sense of purpose as Singapore's leader, and to trace the part that pain played in motivating you to uplift the lives of Singaporeans. I wonder if we could talk next about how a leader deals with mindsets in the people he or she leads. I see one prime example of how you addressed Singaporean mindsets in the establishment of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). To quote from your memoirs... (I lifted the book slightly and placed it back on my lap) you

said, ‘Ours was no easy task. We had to reorientate people’s minds to accept the need for a people’s army and overcome their traditional dislike for soldiering.’ Could you share how you went about this difficult task of reorientating people’s minds to accept the need for a people’s army?”

“The first thing to appreciate,” said Lee, “was the context – that as a newly independent nation, we were in a highly vulnerable position. This vulnerability was only partially understood by the general population, but as a cabinet, we knew to a greater degree just how easily we could have collapsed in the face of aggression. We were aware of incidents that were not and could not be publicised in the press, such as the high-handed manner in which Alsagoff (the Malaysian brigadier with his brigade still stationed in Singapore after Separation) insisted on providing a military escort for me to our opening session of Parliament. This was one of many indications of Malaysia’s intentions, I felt, to show newly independent Singapore they were still really in charge. I was of a mind to tell him off but thought better of it, given our vulnerability, and maintained a quiet, non-challenging posture. Meanwhile Goh Keng Swee who was Defence Minister worked feverishly to build up our own defence capabilities and remove this uncomfortable reliance upon Malaysia for our security needs. The cabinet’s and my situational awareness convinced us that security was our top priority in that it underpinned our ability to pursue all other priorities.”

I nodded to show I was following, and he continued, “As a multiracial nation, we needed an army that approximated our racial mix, unlike during the British period when the vast majority of soldiers and policemen were Malays. This was due to the different

ethnic inclinations: the Malays were far keener on soldiering than the Chinese or Indians, which was down to cultural values and assumptions deeply embedded in people's psyche. The Chinese shunned soldiering because of the historical legacy of the predatory habits of soldiers in China during the years of rebellions and warlords." I interjected by asking, "I would imagine that most leaders in your position would have shrugged their shoulders and concluded that such historically ingrained attitudes could never be changed, so why try? What made you think changing such mindsets was doable?"

He replied forcefully, "Getting a multiracial army for a multiracial society was a national imperative! There was no way around it. It was an issue of survival and stability. We had to bite the bullet and find a way forward." I mentally noted that Lee's reading of the situation – that there was no viable alternative – was instrumental in stiffening his resolve to address the mindset issue. He continued, "Changing mindsets required a multi-pronged approach. We set up the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC) as uniformed extra-curricular activities in all secondary schools, which taught the students marching drills, how to handle rifles and so on, so that parents would identify the army and police with their sons and daughters. We wanted to change the old perceptions, where army and police uniforms previously aroused fear and resentment, to one where soldiers and policemen would be regarded as protectors. We also arranged send-off ceremonies for the national service recruits from our community centres, during which members of parliament, ministers and community leaders would make short speeches before the recruits mounted the military trucks that took them to their basic training camps. And on every anniversary of our independence, we put on a parade where

soldiers and community groups fielded marching contingents, and in later years we also paraded our military hardware like tanks before the cheering crowds. All this built morale and gradually shifted people's perceptions.

“And knowing that when it came to changing biases, making speeches and holding parades were not enough, we set about forming well-organised, well-staffed institutions to follow up the verbal exhortations. So, there needed to be a structured and sustained process that built upon the catalytic effect of the stirring speeches about our nation's security. For example, we set a long-term goal of improving the physical robustness of our youngsters by encouraging sports and various physical activities, including those with an element of danger. The Ministry of Education ensured this was done.”

“Mr Lee, may I just say that what you've shared does strike me as having relevance for senior pastors. The use of a multi-prong approach, the need for catalytic speeches and events which share the rationale and stir the emotions, complemented by structured processes that ensure systematic and thorough follow-through... all these are strategies that could apply to changing mindsets in a church context too,” I offered by way of affirmation in relation to the doubts Lee had expressed about the usefulness of his experiences for pastors. “What was equally interesting was your management of sensitive information in the midst of this process of mindset change: that there were incidents that informed your judgments as a cabinet, but you could not publicise them so as to likewise inform the judgment of the public. Sounds to me like a Catch-22 situation.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Lee responded, “it might seem like it could simplify the process of convincing the people, but it could end up creating many other unwanted complications. Timing is also everything in these matters of information management. By the time I wrote about these matters in my memoirs in the year 2000, Singapore was no longer in the vulnerable position it was in immediately after Separation. But had I gone public about Alsagoff’s actions immediately, while my focus would have been on persuading the Singaporean population of our need to build up our military, the unintended consequences might have been to precipitate some sort of aggressive reaction from some leaders in Malaysia.”

“Could you comment on how you managed public perception of our engaging the Israelis to help us build up our military?” I asked. Lee replied, “As you would be aware, the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, which continues to this day, meant there was significant antipathy towards Israel on the part of large swathes of the Muslim world, including our region. So, cognizant of our vulnerability and the lack of alternative sources of help... because I had written to India and Egypt for help in building our military but did not receive what I was hoping for... I told Goh Keng Swee to proceed with the Israelis, but to keep it from becoming public knowledge for as long as possible, so as not to provoke grassroots antipathy from Malay Muslims in Malaysia and Singapore. So to disguise their presence, we called the Israelis ‘Mexicans’.” Lee smiled as he said, “I know what you must be thinking... that that’s dishonesty, right?” I smiled back and said I was not there to judge him. He continued, “Well, you pastors may have to operate on the basis of complete transparency in all matters, but as a Prime Minister, if I

felt that releasing some information could spark riots and lead to loss of lives, I had to make a tough call which was more important – absolute honesty or saving lives.”

I was not sure if I detected a hint of defensiveness in his last statement and decided to offer my take on such moral dilemmas. “Mr Lee, the Christian position on truth is that it should always be upheld, even at great cost to oneself. But there are morally ambiguous situations where others’ lives are at stake, where the Bible does not seem to condemn a bending of the truth.” I gave the example of the Israelite midwives in Egypt who saved Jewish babies from death, contrary to Pharaoh’s commands, and offered Pharaoh a false account of the reason why, and yet were blessed by God (Exodus 1). Likewise, Rahab the prostitute in Jericho harbored and hid the Israelite spies and sent their pursuers off with a lie, yet was commended for her act, and ultimately joined herself to the Israelite nation and was spared when Israel attacked Jericho (Joshua 2). She was even given the honor of being included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1). In the last century, there were stories of Christians who harbored Jews during the holocaust and lied to German soldiers who were seeking to kill them, and these Christians were generally honored for their courage and compassion rather than vilified for telling lies.⁹ “For pastors, unlike Prime Ministers, we don’t often face dilemmas where we have to choose between telling the truth and saving human lives. Deception for the purpose of expediency or even conversion is simply not an option for us.”

⁹ For a scholarly discussion on the Christian position on truthfulness, see David Sussman, “On the Supposed Duty of Truthfulness: Kant on Lying in Self-Defense,” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 225-43; see also Allen W. Wood, “Lies,” in *Kantian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 240-58.

Lee seemed amenable to my position, and said, “We anticipated that we could not keep the lid on this fact forever, and that the truth about the ‘Mexicans’ would inevitably leak out. Meanwhile the Israelis were repeatedly asking for quid pro quo for helping us, that Singapore recognize Israel officially and exchange ambassadors. We waited until the Israeli presence in Singapore more or less became public knowledge before we allowed them a diplomatic mission, which we later allowed them to upgrade to an embassy.” I reflected back to Lee, and he concurred, that what he just described sounded like a phased approach in managing perceptions: an untidy period of rumors increasingly contradicting the official position, followed by public acknowledgement and measured increases in the implementation of the sensitive policy, in tandem with gradually shifting public opinion.

“But people’s mindsets were not just there to be changed, from what I read of your memoirs. It seems that sometimes they were to be accepted and harnessed, such as when you observed how differently people felt about their homes depending on whether they rented or owned the properties. Could you give some insight into your thinking on this?” I enquired. “As I wrote in my memoirs, after observing how much more committed people were to maintaining their own apartments as opposed to rented ones, I came to the conclusion that a deep sense of property was instinctive in a person. In addition, I observed a global trend that urban dwellers were quick to grow cynical and turn against the ruling government and I didn’t think that Singapore was immune to this trend. So when I pondered how to put Singapore on a stable political footing, and how to meet the complex housing needs of the nation, I realized that the way forward was to give every

family solid assets which I was confident they would protect and defend, especially their home. We needed to find a way to make owning HDB¹⁰ houses affordable for the majority, and to do that we made changes to the Central Provident Fund (CPF) scheme¹¹ that was started by the British, so that Singaporeans were saving a higher proportion of their salaries, and when we amended the laws to allow them to use their CPF funds to pay for their homes, ownership went from being ‘pie in the sky’ to something attainable for the majority.”

“So you were vindicated in harnessing the ‘home ownership’ mindset in solving several problems at once – giving Singaporeans a roof over their heads, giving them a stake in the country by owning an appreciating asset, and securing their support for the government for the longer term?” I summed up. “Yes, that’s right. Now you tell me how you think this can have relevance for you.”

“Well, one of the statements of the Apostle Paul to the church was, ‘Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of the mind...’ in Romans chapter 12. That indicates that there is no life transformation without the mind first being renewed, because who we are and what we do flows from how we think. Also, Jesus critiqued the rigid mindsets of the Jewish Pharisees by likening them to old wineskins which were incapable of containing new wine.” “Is that because of the fermentation of the wine which gives off gases?” Lee enquired with a degree of curiosity

¹⁰ Housing and Development Board, the body in charge of public housing in Singapore.

¹¹ A compulsory saving scheme for Singaporeans, involving regular contributions to a ring-fenced account from a portion of each person’s salary.

few people his age show. “That’s right, Sir. New wine, if put in old, pre-stretched wineskins would only cause those wineskins to burst. Only fresh wineskins are flexible and supple enough to cope with the expansion of new wine,” I explained. “So as senior pastor of the church, one of the abiding challenges is introducing change when members are comfortable with the status quo. In fact there’s a riddle that goes, ‘How many mainline church members does it take to change a lightbulb?’ And the answer is, ‘Change?’” Lee let out a chuckle, and I continued, “So what you shared about addressing mindsets, whether it needs to be changed through sustained communication and effort, or harnessed to the institution’s advantage, are issues that give me plenty of food for thought. Thank you.” Lee smiled and responded, “I’m glad that’s of some help. Perhaps it’s time for a short break. I need to check on some emails and visit the loo.” I rose from my seat as he took his leave, and noticed that one of his aides (who had been silent witnesses of our conversation) stood to accompany him, while the other remained seated, maybe to keep an eye on me... just in case. As I sat back down, I took the opportunity to look round the office while pondering how to proceed with the next part of the interview.

4.5 Interview with former Cabinet Minister Lim Hwee Hua

Mrs Lim, could you share your early impressions of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, and how those impressions evolved or changed over time?

There were two series of episodes, in terms of my having close dealings with Mr Lee Kuan Yew. The first was before I went into politics, because I was part of this

team that he had commissioned in terms of women's issues in relation to the Great Marriage Debate¹². I was part of the team that did all the analysis and the feedback-gathering in the lead up to the reports and policies that were formulated. Obviously Mr Lee was known for having some pretty well-constructed views himself, but what struck me was a very little incident that happened, which shed a different light on him. I recall one of the team members was late for our meeting with him. He had wanted to hear from us, and one of these ladies, she was just late for some reason. And so when she came in, I'm thinking, "Oh, gosh, I wouldn't want to be in her shoes. I mean, you made Mr Lee wait, and the whole room full of people are just looking at you." And she was panting, because she had run all the way in. And he very gently said, "Just sit down and take your time." So that in a way contrasted with what I had understood of him. To me it revealed a very different side of him that is probably not so well known. And I just thought, "Well, if there was going to be a leader whom I would be very comfortable about confiding my thoughts in, and be brave enough to suggest anything to, he would be that sort of leader, who is humane and genuine."

And then you fast-forward to when I joined parliament. The interactions were not so frequent, because I was a back-bencher, not quite dealing with him first-hand. However after I joined the cabinet, I had pretty regular interactions with him. And I

¹² Lenore T. Lyons-Lee, "The Graduate Woman Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore", *University of Wollongong Research Online*, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1099&context=artspapers> (accessed on 1 Jan 2020).

would say that there were various aspects of him that struck me as very ideal qualities of leadership, that I would want to emulate and learn from.

Obviously, I think some of these are not so new nor surprising to people, like the fact that he was very strongly motivated by his wish to always think about what's good for Singapore. And he was a really courageous leader. He was not afraid to set the long term vision that he would share with everyone. And he would be the first to stand and fight courageously for it. So through all the different historical events where we teamed up with Malaysia and then when we left, I think what stood out was his courage through it all. And even when there was despair... because when we separated from Malaysia and after the British had left Singapore, there was nothing. So there was great despair all around, and really very little hope... but yet, against the odds, you need a leader who will rise up and say, "Well, this is what we will fight for and I'll be the first to lead the charge." And I think he really exemplified that well.

Now the second is around his personal attitudes towards leadership. He was obviously very selfless, even if he sometimes came across as someone who's just hard, stern or even heavy-handed in the minds of some... but you can't fault him for not thinking about Singapore. So everything he did, when you drill it down, it's always about the greater public good. It's always about the greater good of Singapore, and of course, Singaporeans by extension.

And he had such a great appetite for knowledge, always wanting to find out more. I remember this little incident about the cheesecake on a flight. I was with him on one of those official trips in China and happened to be seated with him and Mrs Lee for dinner

on board the flight. When I got to my dessert, which was cheesecake, I just stuck my fork into it and put it in my mouth. His question was, “Do they know how to make cheesecake?” And you can imagine the questions that went through my mind, like “What's the real intention of asking? What are the follow-on questions that I should be prepared to answer?” etc. And the funny thing was, Mrs Lee sensed that, and she said, “Oh, he's just wanting to know whether the Chinese can make good cheesecake.” (Laughs) This must have been in the late 90s. I think he was very curious about how China was adapting to the world. So in something so mundane like cheesecake, we would eat it and not think very much about it, right? But he would be thinking, “So, do they make cheesecake that is of international standard?” I mean, there are so many questions behind that simple query; that was to me very good training, because sometimes through different little things, you learn more about the greater picture.

For example, I think a lot of us Singaporeans like to travel abroad, and we go to shopping malls a lot. But now I do it with a purpose and it's second nature, I don't think about it very much. It's just to gauge the consumption patterns: are people buying a lot? Are they buying the cheap stuff? And then from there, I can gauge how strong the underlying economy is. That's partly because of my work now. But it's through very ordinary everyday incidents or episodes that I think one can learn a lot. And so that inquisitiveness, or whatever you call it, I learned from him.

So a great leadership trait would be this inquisitiveness and asking lots of good questions?

Yes. Then the other thing is that as a leader, you always have to work back to the people that you are leading or that you have been given the responsibility for. So in a way, if you think about what's happening in Hong Kong, and the unhappiness about the lack of public housing and so on, he had thought about similar issues decades ago¹³. So whether it's very Confucian, or the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, he understood that you need a roof over your head, you need good jobs so that you have money, and you need a very peaceful, safe and harmonious environment. Back in the 60s, or even now, we were completely multiracial, multi-religious. And he understood that for as long as you don't address the fault-lines that might otherwise appear, you will always have problems in the future. So he set out to do the public housing plan, because that would take years just to roll out. I think even as he thought about what was important to us, he always put himself in the shoes of the person he was leading to ask, "What will you be happy with? Or what will you be most unhappy about?" And then he would try to find something in between to keep you happy and motivated to want to do your best as well.

Do you think that's a very extraordinary capacity that he had, to be able to think at such a high level of abstraction, as well as in such practical, man-on-the-street terms?

¹³ At the time of the interview in October 2019, Hong Kong had been experiencing months of massive street protests.

I would say it's very unusual to find a leader who has all the attributes that I talked about, because there are many leaders who are very visionary about what the country or the organization can do, but then they could be the worst people to handle other people... they're not good with people skills and so on. On the other hand, you have people who are very well-meaning who understand completely what others might be unhappy about, but then they don't have long term vision or the ability to plan long term. I would say he had a combination that's very rare.

I should also add that I was struck by his emphasis on values, particularly on integrity. In terms of the context of Singapore, because we don't have our own big market, we don't have natural resources, if we don't have anything that's worth the while for people to deal with us, why would people want to work with Singapore? Hence his conviction of a trusted hub, being a place of high integrity, high standards, and the rule of law. While others might think that that's just being very pragmatic about finding a niche for us to excel in, I do think that he had seen enough of what corruption has done elsewhere for him to conclude that for a society to be sustainable, you just have to do things the right and honest and upright way. That's a moral standard that I think most religions would subscribe to.

Would you see any traits of Mr Lee that you think pastors could particularly benefit from?

Especially in adverse situations, the courage to really stand up. The courage to stand up for your beliefs, and to discharge your role fully. To be humble, to receive feedback, that you may not be right, or may not be accurate, and to consciously learn from others, just being open to the fact that there's a whole lot more that you can learn.

Would you say it was one of Mr Lee's outstanding traits that he was a forward thinker?

It was almost like a gift of being able to predict certain trends, even before it becomes obvious. A lot of it revolves around his understanding of human nature. I think he had a great gift for that. And a lot of his thoughts were predicated on his understanding of how human character would act in certain situations. It helped that he was, of course, very familiar with the history of different civilizations, and so on. But he would be able to read, let's say, the British like a book, whereas the rest of us could still occasionally be surprised by some things that are happening. But he had a deep insight into human behavior and character. And I'm almost tempted to think that's genetic. It's that hunch and the feel that I think he was really born with, and the rest of us will just have to make up by doing a lot more reading and learning.

One other point that he was always concerned about was continuity, especially in leadership. So leadership succession was important to him. He didn't want his name to be on anything. The only exception was the LKY School of Public Policy, and that's only because he was persuaded that a school on public policy with his name would allow us to attract more people. And the whole mindshare will be useful to us in terms of our position in the world.

You can imagine there were any number of ideas about where to put his name, and he just wouldn't have it. I would say that's pretty astounding for someone who's achieved so much. But he didn't want to because he wanted good governance to survive him, whoever the Prime Ministers were after him. And so, leadership succession was extremely important to him.

I will say we are almost like a country that's always under siege, we are paranoid about our own existence. So to me, I think strong leadership is an absolute must. We just cannot afford not to have good leaders. And leadership will not be just in one person, but it will be like a team of people who can work together. But you still need one person to rise above the team to take some form of leadership at the top.

Could you comment a little about Mr Lee and his reading and exercise of power?

He was certainly not shy about exercising the full weight of his power when he thought it was absolutely critical. So you will notice that his harshest actions were against people whom he thought could cause harm to Singapore, like terrorists or foreign interference, and so on. For such opponents there was absolutely no exception, no negotiation. He was just going to be hard and tell them that he meant business, and that was it.

In this day and age, sometimes it might be difficult for modern day leaders to do likewise. These days, leaders are meant to be a little more sociable and not so hard. But I

do think that we might have to continue doing that to protect Singapore's interests. Because when it's down to the red line, we just have to say, "No, that's it, we're not crossing over, and you can't cross over as well." But first of all, it takes longevity in politics for you to be able to do that. And most governments unfortunately are living from term to term. So if I'm here for four years, I'll see what people would be happy with, I try and negotiate my way around it. If I become very harsh about certain rules, I may have protests on the streets. So I think it is harder to do that, but maybe a true leader will continue to hold fast to a very firm stand. And I think that he will be respected for it as well.

How did Lee come across in personal interactions?

I suppose, if you had spoken to someone who is a generation older, it would have been a different set of answers. But in my case, because he was old enough to be my father, he came across as someone who was always very fatherly. Maybe sometimes a little stern, but yet with all the good intentions and wishes. And his mentoring of the cabinet ministers was really as one who was a guide. We knew his strong views and the issues that he felt very passionate about, and we would always go and get his advice. So it was that very paternal feeling that came across. (End of interview)

4.6 Interview with Lee: The third hour

I stood again and smiled as Lee returned to his seat, and noticed that his gaze this time seemed to be directed toward my midriff. “How much do you weigh?” Lee asked once seated, leaving me discombobulated for a good few seconds. “Sorry?” I replied, while slowly lowering myself into my seat. Lee rephrased his question: “How heavy are you?” I winced, and with an embarrassed smile confessed, “Umm, I’m actually... err... more than a hundred kilos.” “How much more?” he pressed. “I’d prefer not to say, Sir,” I said, chuckling in an effort to mask the fact that I was trying to cling on to whatever shred of self-esteem I had left in that moment. “Why are you more than twenty kilograms overweight for someone of your height?” “Well, Sir, I guess it’s an occupational hazard.” Lee furrowed his brow, his lame-excuse-detector seemingly kicking into high gear, and probed, “What does that mean?” I explained that many pastors are in a similar predicament of being more than a little tubby, and it probably had something to do with the fact that a lot of our individual or family ministry happens in the context of meals, and many church members express their affection for their pastors by feeding them. We also work long and irregular hours and are hard-pressed to find consistent time slots for exercise.

Lee did not seem convinced. Once I had finished spouting my self-justifying spiel, he sighed and said, “Young man, you are about half my age. Given your weight, I would presume that you are probably pre-diabetic, if not already diabetic.” *He was spot on! Must have done some background checks on me beforehand!* “I’m sure you realise that being overweight puts you at risk for a number of serious conditions that can dramatically affect your ability to function as a pastor and a family man. You really

should stop giving yourself all these excuses and start taking your diet and exercise seriously. And don't tell me you're too busy. Surely you can't claim you have more work to do as a pastor than I had as a Prime Minister! And yet, I made it a point to exercise every day. It's all about your priorities. Everyone makes time for whatever is really important to them."

I wanted to end the interview then and there. I felt so embarrassed and ashamed. *I knew I was an idiot for setting up this interview!* But my better sense somehow prevailed, and I tried to gently steer the conversation back to where I had intended. Looking up at Lee I said, "Thank you, Mr Lee, for your concern. I will take note of your advice. I wonder if we could return to the subject of leadership..." "This *is* about leadership!" he snapped. I froze and lowered my gaze. He proceeded in a more even tone: "This is self-leadership, and self-leadership must precede institutional leadership. Without getting this principle right, any leadership you try to exercise in the church will seem hollow." I felt shaken, and yet strangely in that moment, I started to feel strengthened. It was as if some internal realignment was taking place in my soul. *Could God be using this non-Christian man to wake me up to a glaring blind spot in my life? Didn't Lee sound a lot like Paul when he said, "An overseer must manage his own household well... for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?"*¹⁴ *Was I hiding behind excuses all this time, instead of owning my responsibility to steward this temple of the Holy Spirit? Here I was, wanting to learn some tips on how to lead the*

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 3:4-5

church more efficiently and effectively, while ignoring the deeper, more fundamental aspect of self-leadership and discipline.

I straightened up in my seat, looked squarely at Lee, and said, “Thank you, Sir. I needed to hear that. I will make it a point to sort out my health and the disciplines surrounding my diet and exercise. And I appreciate you pointing out that self-leadership must precede church-leadership. Point taken.” Lee nodded. Leaning back in my chair, I continued, “Building on the point you made about how you managed to exercise daily despite your enormous workload, could you say something about your approach to time management?” Lee looked upward for a few seconds, as he processed my question, and then said, “Effective time management is not a luxury but an absolute imperative for a leader. There is always more to do than there is time available in which to do it, so you have to make strategic choices on what you will spend your available time on. You must move from reactive mode, just responding to emergencies, to proactive mode where you take control of where your time goes, and you do advance planning and budgeting.” I raised my eyebrows and responded, “Budgeting? You mean financial?” Lee shook his head and shifted his weight forward to explain. “Just as any responsible organization draws up an annual financial budget to guide its expenditure of financial resources according to its institutional priorities, by analogy every responsible leader needs to draw up a periodic *time budget* to guide his or her expenditure of time resources based on leadership priorities. This could be on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis.” I nodded to show that I grasped the analogy and was now following.

“You need to work out your priorities, taking into account that your 24 hours a day and 7 days a week must be distributed across *all* aspects of your life, not just work alone. You must see the big picture and determine what are the areas of importance and complexity, as well as the areas of urgency. The more urgent the task, the sooner you schedule it. The more important or complex the task, the more time you allocate for it. But remember, not all urgent tasks are important, and the big picture includes not just the range of concerns in your life at this moment, but the long term picture of where everything is headed.”

“Mr Lee, this is helpful, and it does sound similar to Stephen Covey’s advice on time management, where he advocates differentiating priorities according to a two-by-two matrix: quadrant one is urgent and important; quadrant two is important but not urgent; quadrant three, urgent but not important; and finally quadrant four, neither urgent nor important.” Lee responded, “Yes, and Covey insists that the quadrant that tends to get overlooked is the important but not urgent. In my view this quadrant is what differentiates the long term thinkers from the short term. Long term thinkers size up future issues and allocate time in the present to tackle important problems early, by nipping them in the bud before they become emergencies.” *This guy is making so much sense! Note to self: think longer term.* “But Mr Lee, responding to pastoral emergencies is quite a big part of the pastor’s role. So it seems like there’s always some sort of fire to put out, and we keep lurching from crisis to crisis. How would a person in that situation carve out enough time to ponder the future?”

“How big is your church?” *There he goes again, firing unexpected probing questions at me. I thought I’m supposed to be asking the questions!* I replied, “About two thousand members.” “And you are not the only pastor, I presume?” “Yes... uhh I mean no... I mean we have a team of staff, both pastoral and administrative staff... around 40 altogether.” “Obviously, you as the senior pastor are not able to respond to every individual member’s needs or crises, and that’s why you have staff to delegate some responsibilities to, right?” I nodded. Lee continued, “You need good people on your team that you can delegate to. The quality and caliber of your team will determine how much burden they shift away from you. If you have a reliable and responsible staff to delegate to, you can give them directions and instructions and they will get things done. That is a great time management strategy. If they are unreliable, you will have constant headaches checking on them and compensating for their mistakes.” Recalling something I’d read, I reached for Lee’s memoirs on the table, flipped to a tagged page and said, “Sir, permit me to read a paragraph from your memoir which resonates with what you just said: ‘Whenever I had a lesser minister in charge, I invariably had to push and prod him, and later to review problems and clear roadblocks for him. The end result was never what could have been achieved. When I had the right man in charge, a burden was off my shoulders. I needed only to make clear the objectives to be achieved, the time-frame within which he must try to do it, and he would find a way to get it done.’”¹⁵ Lee nodded.

¹⁵ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 736.

“Many pastors complain that there are too many meetings and they interfere with the real work. What would you say to that?” Lee scoffed slightly and said, “What makes them think that meetings are not real work? Now you see, every encounter with another human being is a meeting, and there are meetings, and then there are meetings, you know what I mean? Whether you spend your time in meetings that are a waste of time or meetings that add value depends on a few disciplines.” I invited Lee to expand on these disciplines. He obliged: “Number one, discern. Discern if the meeting should happen at all or not. Is there something worth meeting over. Are you clear about the agenda, and is the agenda meaningful... I mean does it in some clear way serve your priorities? If not, don’t waste time on it. Number two, prepare. Get all the information you need and process it so that you maximize the value of the discussion time. Meetings should not be for transferring information verbally that could have been transferred just as effectively and much more efficiently in writing beforehand. Meetings should be about discussions and collective decision-making. Number three, control. Don’t let the discussion ramble. The chairman serves everybody’s good time management by keeping the discussion on point and cutting in when somebody is going on too long.”

I tried imagining myself interrupting some long-winded people in meetings and winced as I visualized the withering looks they’d give me. *I think I’m too much of a nice guy (or too much of a coward) to assert tighter control over long-winded people.*

“Number four, notes that capture the discussion in adequate detail and yet are concise. Good note-takers need to be trained, and expectations must be made clear. If a person has bad grammar, for goodness’ sake don’t assign them the job of note-taker. And number 5,

capture your personal reflections immediately after each meeting.” I probed what Lee meant by this last point, and he explained that immediately after every meeting, whether it was a formal or informal meeting, small or large meeting, while his memory of the discussion was still fresh, he would summarize his reflections in a voice recorder, which would then be transcribed by one of his assistants and filed for future reference. I was impressed by this simple but brilliant hack, and reflected to Lee, “That makes such good sense! How many times have I gone through five, six, seven meetings back to back, and by the end of the day my mind is so tired and in such a blur that I can’t recall some of the important thoughts I had during the meetings. And since I don’t recall what I intended to do, my follow-up from the meeting is weak and it takes much longer for things to move forwards. And now with virtually all smartphones coming with voice recording capabilities, none of us has a reason not to incorporate such a helpful hack. Thank you.” Lee smiled in acceptance of my thanks.

“So, Mr Lee, to go back to your point about delegation, are you saying that the more reactive work should be delegated downward to reliable staff, so that as senior pastor I have more proactive control over my time and can be more future-focused?” I clarified. Lee nodded his confirmation and added, “You see, time management is not an isolated skill. It ties in with delegation, which connects with the quality of talent you recruit, which ties in with how attractive your organization is for talented individuals, which in turn depends on your culture and values etc.” “It sounds like you’re saying it’s a systems approach. Everything is connected to everything else. But that’s so complicated and confusing!” I blurted. “Of course it’s complicated!” Lee retorted. “Who said

leadership is supposed to be simple? If you can't cope with complexity, don't lead!"

Once again I felt duly chastised, and wondered with slight resentment if Lee took pleasure in making every interviewer he met feel as small as I did. I tried to stiffen my facial muscles so that my mildly offended feelings would not show.

"Mr Lee, clearly you placed enormous importance in seeking out talent, which you just said is tied to time management and to *everything else*," I said with a hint of sarcasm, my ego still smarting. "What advice could you give on how churches could also improve in this area?" "Start young," he replied without hesitation. I nodded and held my gaze in his direction, not saying anything in anticipation that he would continue, and he did: "After the early years of desperate fire-fighting to ensure our survival, when Singapore began to stabilize, I began to pay more and more attention to the issue of succession, and my main worry was succession in the Cabinet, because we were the ones making the most crucial decisions for the nation. And I knew that it takes not just years but decades to groom a solid cabinet minister. So I had to start my talent-search not among the professionals or the grassroots party volunteers, but even further upstream among the youngsters."

I realised he was referring to the government scholarships for students heading to universities, where successful applicants were chosen not just on the basis of their Advanced Level examination scores, but after school principal recommendations, a grueling series of personality and IQ tests, and interviews by screening panels. Those who completed their studies had to serve out a bond of six to eight years working in the civil service, or repay the government the cost of the scholarship, which was typically

valued at a few hundred thousand Singapore dollars. He continued, “I only needed a handful of cabinet ministers, but I extended my search across a base of hundreds of top students every year. For those scholars who don’t ultimately become ministers, it doesn’t mean the efforts and money spent on them are wasted. You channel them to other important leadership roles in the civil service or they move to the private sector and bring their expertise there. The millions we invested in all these scholarships was money well spent because they provided a pipeline of leadership right across the many national institutions and ultimately for the Cabinet.”

I mulled over this piece of advice and made a mental note that the task of identifying future senior pastors and even bishops and denominational leaders ought to begin not among the ordained clergy – which is too late – but among the youth in the youth ministry, because it takes decades to groom them. A system needs to be put in place that identifies outstanding youth with leadership potential and incentivizes them to serve and acquire the necessary training that could ultimately groom them for top level leadership in the church.

“Mr Lee, you may or may not recall this, but back in 1967 you addressed the East Asia Christian Conference on the subject of leadership.” Lee shrugged his shoulders and said, “Not really. Too many speeches over the years.” I continued, “I have a printout of that speech transcript right here...” (fishing it out of my bag) “and in it you talked about the need for a system to identify and prepare leaders. I quote: ‘Can we talent-scout? Can we, in fact, prejudge 20 or 30 years before a man matures, that he is likely to make a more than above average contribution? Somewhere in the church hierarchy... some

people are demonstrating more than above average activity, intelligence, verve, drive, ambition, civic consciousness.’ You went on to talk about the importance of character, ‘whether our melting point is low or high, whether we believe enough and fervently in what we have to do, to go through a great deal of trial and tribulation’. You ended by saying that through harnessing and maturing the idealism of youth, strong leaders could be raised who would lead the church to make a significant contribution to our society. It just struck me that your thinking on this matter hasn’t changed much in almost fifty years!” Lee smiled and replied, “Thank you for reminding me of this speech. I am glad the church has been a positive force in Singapore, and if you keep a clear focus on nurturing the younger generation, I can see it continuing for a long time to come.”

Just then, one of the aides sitting in the far end of the office, the same one who had accompanied Lee out of the room earlier, stood and looked at his watch, a signal that was impossible to mistake. I glanced at my own watch and saw that my time was almost completely up. I was amazed at how the time had seemingly flown by. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should proceed to wrap up the interview in the manner in which I had planned, and then decided to go ahead. *God, give me the words!* “Mr Lee, our time is almost up. I can’t believe how quickly it has flown! I want to thank you so much for the gift of your company these past three hours, and for the opportunity to discuss leadership with you.” Lee smiled and replied, “I found it an interesting conversation too.”

I continued, “When we began, we talked about how you are not a man of prayer, but I am, and I would like to ask if you would mind if I ended our time together with me saying a short prayer?” Lee shrugged his shoulders and said with a smile, “Alright, I

suppose, but you have to mean it sufficiently strongly for the both of us!” He chuckled, and I assured him I would. And with that I invited him to close his eyes as I prayed, “Heavenly Father, I thank you for Mr Lee. I thank you for his life’s journey, and how you protected him at several junctures when his life was under threat. I thank you for the wisdom, strength and courage you gave him to lead this nation, and to play such a key role in effecting the astonishing transformation that we have witnessed in Singapore. I thank you for his family, most especially his wife and the years of loving companionship they shared until recently. Please comfort Mr Lee in his sense of loss and loneliness. Grant him peace, and help him find much fulfillment in the love of his family and friends, and may he know your favor. May your grace be granted to him, the grace of unmerited favor that you poured out upon this world through your Son Jesus Christ and your Holy Spirit... Now Mr Lee, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his beautiful countenance towards you and grant you peace. Amen.”

We both opened our eyes. He reached with his left index finger for the outer corner of his left eye. I couldn’t tell if it was to wipe away a tear. Anyhow I hurriedly packed my things into my bag, stood and extended my hand toward him. He rose slowly to his feet and shook my hand. We both nodded. As I exited the office, I turned around for one last look at Lee. He was walking slowly towards his desk, with his aide walking beside him. It would be the last glance I would have of this man who made such a difference to my life, to so many of my fellow Singaporeans, and indeed to many beyond

the shores of this tiny island. *Thank you, Lord, for this opportunity. Thank you for this man's life. Bless him!* And with that, my encounter was over.

4.7 Interview with Lee's brother, Dr Lee Suan Yew

What would be some of the outstanding qualities of your brother that struck you?

The most outstanding trait was that he was determined to uplift the quality of life in Singapore. His main concern was to improve people's education, that people have good health, and improving the welfare of workers because many of them came from poor families. The religious people do the same – they always want to help the poor, the needy, right? So in a way his 'religious' approach – which was not religious but rather political – was to uplift the standard of living, especially among the poor. He had a passion for that. He was not worried about the rich, as he always said the rich will take care of themselves. But he wanted to take care of the poor.

He would go to the kampongs¹⁶, he went to Chinatown, he went to Little India and he would learn how they were living, under what conditions. And when he saw the way they lived, especially in Chinatown, they were very crowded, they were living in poor conditions, unhealthy conditions, he therefore said he must start building houses for them. So that's how the Housing and Development Board (HDB) got started. He got Lim

¹⁶ Rural villages with poorly constructed houses.

Kim San and a few others... he couldn't do it alone, he had to get a team of people... that's part of leadership – you must bring in the right people, intelligent people, people with know-how... and that's how he built up the HDB. When he saw what we call shantytowns those days, the slums, and some people were living in the streets as well, he was very moved. That's the social way of uplifting the people.

He knew that long term you must educate the children. And if you pay teachers well then you get good teaching. And so our schools improved tremendously, to the point that now our syllabus for Maths is adopted even in parts of California. And now you can see our two universities (NUS and NTU) are ranked very high in the world. So all this planning is very important.

Healthcare is amazing. He planned to make sure we have proper medical care. When he found that a lot of children were not well taken care of, no proper vaccination, he had the Maternal and Child Care Clinic in the early stages (you don't hear of it now – at that time they built quickly) to make sure the children got their vaccinations to prevent diseases in them. Then we upgraded the hospitals.

Leadership means you must lead with integrity, with certain sternness – he was very stern, many people found him very stern, because he took no nonsense... so people misunderstood that as being proud. Actually, he wasn't a proud person, he was a humble person, but he was very stern in that he would not stand for any dishonesty. People dealing with him, if they were dishonest, he would just write them off. He wanted absolute integrity. All those who worked with him had to be honest. If they didn't know

how to answer him, they must say they didn't know. If they tried to bluff their way through, they would be in trouble. That was him, you know.

The other thing was that he inspired people. You've got to inspire people. By inspiring people you will get them to support you and lead in various ways. Because he couldn't do it alone, he needed their commitment. That's why he got Dr Goh Keng Swee. He was a fantastic financial person, and that's how we built our industry. Jurong is partly Dr Goh Keng Swee as well. And he got people like Rajaratnam, who was a journalist, who wrote and spoke very well, and he became our foreign minister. So you must get the right people, that's the skill.

So in the church as well, as senior pastor, or as a leader, you must choose the right people because you can't do it all alone. But you must choose the right people, people with integrity and also leadership quality and put them in the right place, and they report to you, and you see how it goes. Then you'll find it'll grow.

Since you mentioned sternness, do you think there's a place for that in the church?

Church? No. You must be very careful. Because the congregation may interpret sternness as being arrogant and it's not easy to accept. And yet Jesus himself was very stern. And he would stand no nonsense. You remember he went to the temple and there were traders there selling things, money changers and all that. Very clearly, he lost his temper. Who'd say that Jesus did not have a temper?! He got mad at them, he was very stern. But in the church one has to be a little bit careful about being stern. In other words, you may have to change that word: rather than calling it 'stern', you may say that the

senior pastor must not stand for any nonsense, any dishonesty. I think that's very important. You must have workers who are upright. If they've done anything wrong in their department they must come back to you and apologize and see how you can correct it, rather than to cover it up. And the senior pastor will have to be a bit firm. Well, you can forgive the person for doing wrong, you don't have to punish the person.

In politics you can be a bit stern... you have to. Like in his speeches you will see, he was very fierce in his words sometimes... that I will not stand nonsense, I will not have corruption, and all that... but in the church it's accepted that if you go to church you must not tell lies, you must be honest, so there's a slightly different context, because there's a certain norm in church already.

You've got to have high ideals. You want to keep a high standard, so people look up to that organization. All the time one has to improve. So that's how Singapore grows. We are all the time improving. We are not perfect. We had traffic jams, especially morning traffic, and that's how we started the gantry points for the Restricted Zone. The gantry was started because of the heavy traffic. He wanted to make sure that people who work in the city would not be late for their meetings, so therefore you charge a fee and you prevent people who just want to go into the city for fun or to shop, so you make sure that you charge a certain fee. It mustn't be too high, then the traffic will flow correctly and smoothly, and executive and business people attend their meetings on time. So you keep making changes to improve.

He mentioned you in his memoirs as the only sibling with no Christian name.

I want to correct that. He used the word 'Christian' name, but actually it's 'Anglo-Saxon' name. Harry, Dennis, Freddie, Monica, they are all Anglo-Saxon names. They're not in the Bible, right? He didn't want us his siblings to use Anglo-Saxon names. He was very much a Singaporean. We were subjects of the British colonial system, and he was dead against that. That's why he removed his own Anglo-Saxon name Harry. He went for a deed poll. So the word Harry is not in his IC card, it's only Lee Kuan Yew. But amongst family and close friends he would answer you if you called him Harry. The funny part was that I became a Christian. And I didn't have a Christian name. You don't have to, right? So, I just kept my name as it is. I was baptised in the UK.

Did he have any views on your becoming Christian?

I think he was quite happy. Apart from him and my sister, the three other brothers all became Christians. Yeah, he accepted it. He liked people with religious backgrounds. He accepted it. Hon Sui Sen was a very devout Catholic, he was a very close friend of LKY, and LKY respected him a lot for his religious practice. He was a very religious man, Hon Sui Sen. When he went to China, on a Sunday he looked for a church to attend, but he couldn't find one. This was in the 80s.

What was it like to sit across from Mr Lee and have a conversation with him?

He had two aspects of it. With his old classmates and friends, he was very animated, and he would use his hand gestures and all that. Even with the family sometimes. But basically, as he got older, he became less physical, because, you know,

the movements got slower. But when he was much younger, with his college friends, or friends he used to play cricket with a lot, he was very animated.

But in public, he was not a physical person. He was more controlled, but it was natural for him not to be too physical. That's why it looked as though he was a very stern person and unfriendly, but basically he was not like that, he was basically a very friendly person. It was just that he was more reserved. When he was meeting people he didn't know, he would be more careful. But when he knew the person, like, for example, I knew at some dinners he'd invite some people he was very close to, he was animated. He'd talk, he'd laugh and all that, but that was when they were very close friends or close relatives. Amazing. But in public life, strangers and all that, he was a bit more reserved. The body language was different.

So he had something of an inner circle with whom he relaxed?

Yes, very relaxed. In fact he could be very charming. He'd say, come and eat more of this... or he'd make sure that you were more comfortable... or he'd give you some nice presents, and so on and so forth. People he was close with, the family and friends, he was slightly different. Basically he was not a physical person, he didn't like to touch, you know. When we take pictures, we like to put our arms across each other, but he would not do that. He would just keep his hands together. So he was very reserved in public life. But amongst old friends, whenever he invited his old college friends, he'd be very animated. Maurice Baker, his old college friend, he'd be very animated. Very close. Very hard to describe. They would laugh and joke and all that.

Would you say he had an IQ that was higher than the average person's?

Yes, he was very intelligent and very dedicated in his work. His IQ was quite incredible. My mother told me that when he was a young kid, at an age when people didn't know how to read, he was already cutting the newspapers and putting the alphabets together. That was quite incredible, and my mother noticed that. I think he was just born with it, naturally. And when he got a first-class honours at Cambridge, in his law school, he was competing with all the top people from all over the Commonwealth, and the British. And he got his starred first, which means he was just top of the list. I think he was just born with a natural intelligence. And luckily for us, he made use of that for Singapore, not for himself. That's the beautiful part about it. (End of interview)

5. Conclusion

As we pull together the various strands of thought in this thesis, I return to the title “If Lee Kuan Yew were a pastor” and add to it the question, “... what might he do differently from most other pastors?” It is of course not advisable to venture a dogmatic answer to such a speculative question. But there may be value in mulling over the question, because pastors, especially senior pastors of churches with larger congregations and staff teams, have to provide leadership not only in the typical pastoral sense, but also in terms of direction and management, and Lee Kuan Yew was an extraordinary leader in this regard.

Underlying the question of what we as pastors can learn from Lee is the more basic question of *whether* we should be trying to learn anything from Lee at all, especially since he never professed Christian faith. A narrative in 2 Chronicles may provide a clue. In 2 Chronicles 35, we have an account of King Josiah of the southern kingdom of Judah who was doing well, spiritually speaking, in leading the kingdom back to God following the spiritually apostate reigns of Manasseh his grandfather and Amon his father. Then at one point Josiah decided to confront king Neco, the pagan king of Egypt, in battle when Neco was on his way to fight another army. A curious exchange ensued between the two:

“What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you.” Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. *He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of*

God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo. And the archers shot King Josiah. (2 Chronicles 35: 21b-23a, emphasis added)

The narrative raises the possibility, which the monotheistic mind struggles to grasp, that God can actually speak to and through a pagan king like Neco, and even *be* with him in battle to prosper him. And if such a godly king like Josiah can misjudge the situation to his own detriment, then we should not be too quick to dismiss out of hand the possibility of God's wisdom at work through secular leaders today. Neither should we be too quick to affirm and baptize all secular notions of leadership. As discussed in the Introduction, we need a mixture of humility and skepticism to discern what can be appropriated from secular models and exemplars of leadership into the church context: humility to realize others may be wiser than us in the way they manage their institutional affairs, and skepticism to know that not everything that "works" in the world is going to do likewise in God's church.

We therefore set about in Chapter 2 to assemble a biblical grid to guide our discernment. This grid was constructed with Lee (and the data available on him) in mind, and would therefore not be universally applicable. Perhaps one potential area of further exploration (beyond the scope of this thesis) would be to identify elements of a generic biblical grid that could be more universally applicable. Alternatively, it could be useful to elucidate general guidelines on how the information available on a particular secular leader ought to shape the kind of components of a grid for assessing aspects of their leadership that are fit for import into the Christian setting.

Because of light shed by Lee's memoirs on the obvious influence of his early life experiences upon his thinking and basic assumptions about leadership, we selected 'formation' (both natural and spiritual) as a component of the grid. Because of the vulnerability of the population of Singapore at the point of separation from Malaysia when Singapore became independent, and their need for a leader who could lead them to safety, we reflected on the biblical theology of shepherding in Scripture. Because of Lee's relentless push for excellence, to make Singapore a "First World oasis in a Third World region"¹ and the mantra of meritocracy that he instilled in the nation, we included the element of 'excellence' in the grid, seeking a Christian understanding of this term that went beyond bettering the competition. And because the most controversial and contentious aspects of Lee's leadership were his use of power to crush dissent, paralyse his political opponents and exercise an iron grip over the organs of state, we included a study on the biblical concept of power as primarily being a gift given by God for the purpose of facilitating flourishing.

In Chapter 3 we delved into Lee's life and leadership in some detail. We saw from Lee's journey that his formative experiences in the family, in school, during the war, during his varsity days and as a budding lawyer all played a part in shaping him as a leader. They affected his motivations, his assumptions and his priorities. This gave us pause to trace our own formation as Christian leaders, not just in spiritual terms but also in natural terms. The several occasions when Lee had close brushes with death also

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2000), 75-76.

hinted at the possibility of divine intervention in his life, whether he realised it or not, and that he was a man of destiny. This invites reflection on the ways God has perhaps acted and intervened in our lives, that we can draw hope and encouragement from for the future.

We observed from Lee's leadership a number of positives, such as his ability to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of others, his never repeating a mistake, his speaking persuasively with *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*, his thoroughness in researching issues, his insistence on high personal and institutional standards of integrity, efficiency and effectiveness, and his dedication to long-range thinking and leadership renewal even in the face of stiff criticism from many quarters. There is hardly anything in these traits and qualities that would seem repugnant to the values and principles identified in the biblical grid. These are traits and qualities that senior pastors and bishops can benefit from reflecting on and incorporating in their own leadership, as they have relevance beyond the realm of politics to virtually all fields.

To bring balance to this exploration of Lee's leadership, Chapter 3 also delved into a few of the more pointed criticisms that Lee garnered in his years in power, noting first of all that Lee himself had shifted to a posture of greater openness to criticism in his later years. As we encountered abundant testimony about Lee's intimidating aura, his use of the Internal Security Act to detain people without trial, his pre-emptive strikes against potential political opponents, and his extreme emphasis on excellence and performance, we also saw that these were traits that Lee seemed aware of but was reluctant to openly and readily acknowledge as faults. The biblical reflections on shepherding, excellence

and power helped us to conclude that (1) shepherds need to be perceived by their sheep as safe people, and cannot lead by creating an atmosphere of intimidation and fear; (2) true power is not insecure about maintaining position and control, but instead makes room for others to share power and participate in the task of promoting flourishing; (3) excellence is not only to be attained by harnessing strengths, but there is a grace in allowing our weaknesses to become the arenas for the display of God's power.

Because leadership is as multi-faceted as it is, and those who observe a leader only from a distance can benefit from the perspectives of those who knew the leader up close and personal, Chapter 4 included interviews with people who knew Lee first-hand, so that they might throw additional light on this intriguing figure. In my preparation for this thesis, apart from the four whom I interviewed (Retired General Winston Choo, Retired Permanent Secretary Lim Siong Guan, former Cabinet Minister Lim Hwee Hua, and Lee's brother Dr Lee Suan Yew), I also wrote to a few others currently serving in the Cabinet for interviews (with the help of Mrs Lim Hwee Hua whom I know personally). None was able to grant me the interview I sought, but I was most heartened to receive a personal reply from the Prime Minister, who is none other than Lee Kuan Yew's eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong (see Fig. 3 below). Interestingly he writes about his father: "My father was talented and could have done many things in life, but being a pastor is probably the exception... If, as part of his legacy, religious leaders can pick up a thing or two from his approach to leadership, I think he would be very content." That statement made this exploration into Lee's relevance for pastors all the more absorbing for me.

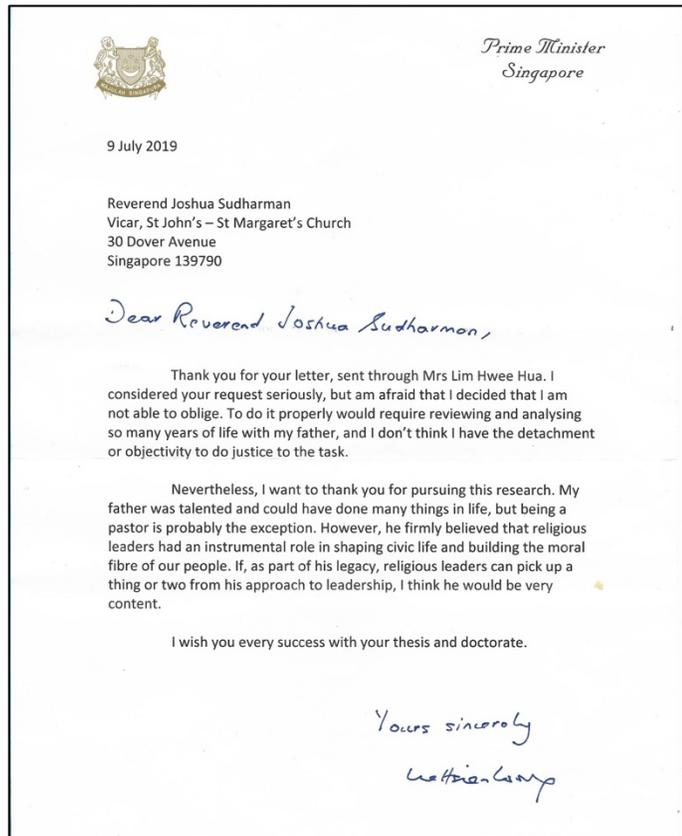


Figure 3: Reply from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

Kishore Mahbubani, the former Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, shared a perspective that helps sum up our evaluation of Lee’s relevance for Christian leaders. He described Lee as leaving us a “complex legacy” because he was a “complex man”, without elaborating on what he meant by “complex”.² I understood his comment as alluding to the way people simplistically tend to either love or hate this polarizing figure, depending on whether or not they (or someone they cared for) were

² Shashi Jayakumar, Rahul Sagar. *The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew*. (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2015), 9.

directly hurt by Lee, or their ideological convictions were disrespected by Lee. Perhaps Mahbubani was advocating that the better and wiser way might be to not get “personally involved” with Lee, so to speak, but to hold the pluses and minuses about him in tension. In other words, instead of an overly-admiring view of Lee, or an overly cynical and hyper-critical perspective on Lee, we would do well to hold the positives and negatives in tension, taking a both-and, instead of an either-or, view of Lee.

As an illustration of the complexity of discerning what leadership ideas from a particular exemplar may be relevant in a Christian context, it is helpful to reference a recent report by the World Economic Forum that placed the Singapore economy at the top of the global league table as the “most competitive economy”, narrowly beating the United States to the top spot. While such an achievement would not have been possible in 2019 without the foundation that Lee laid for the nation’s economy, that is not my main point in highlighting this award. Rather it is to provide an analogy for the task of evaluating Lee’s relevance for pastors.

This ranking is based on 12 “assessment pillars”, each of which subdivides into several sub-categories, resulting in over a hundred distinct metrics by which economies are assessed. The overall standing is a summation of the scores on all these metrics. Incidentally, there were some metrics on which Singapore performed spectacularly well

(e.g. 1st position in infrastructure), and others on which it did spectacularly badly (93rd position for ‘ease of hiring foreign labor’ and 124th for ‘freedom of the press’).³

The complexity of a person, taking into account their interior contours and external impact, is in some sense on a par with the complexity of a nation’s economy. If judging an economy’s competitiveness (or health) requires a summative approach, with more than a hundred metrics taken into account, we should expect that judging a leadership exemplar should likewise take into consideration a wide spectrum of factors. And just as holding the positive and negative factors in tension could result in the economy that did poorly in some metrics still being judged to be excellent overall, so too by holding the positives and negatives about any leadership exemplar in tension, it may yet be reasonable to conclude that despite misgivings about certain areas of their lives, their example overall could still have instructional value.

This thesis would have served its purpose if pastors reading it are inspired and sharpened in some aspect of their ecclesial leadership responsibilities. Equally, if future researchers were to construct an altogether different grid and arrive at wholly contrary conclusions, this author would derive satisfaction from having sparked lively debate and conversation over Lee Kuan Yew’s leadership legacy. Whatever the final views or verdicts on Lee, one thing is for sure: he cannot be ignored.

³ Emma Charlton, “Singapore crowned world’s most open and competitive economy”, *World Economic Forum*, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/competitiveness-economy-best-top-first-singapore-secret-consistency>, 11 Oct 2019 (accessed on 20 Oct 19).

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Biography

Joshua Shaam Sudharman came to faith in Christ through the education mission of St Andrew's School, an Anglican school in Singapore. He obtained his bachelor's degree in physics at the University of Cambridge. While working as a physics teacher, he received a call to Christian ministry. He served in Chapel of the Resurrection and was ordained a clergyman in the Diocese of Singapore. Having obtained his Master of Divinity at Trinity Theological College, he was appointed Vicar of St John's – St Margaret's Church and Chairman of the Education Board of the Diocese of Singapore. He is married to Faith and they have two daughters.