

Leading to Christ

Dan Ebener and Luke Ebener



REBECCA'S STORY

Rebecca is a student at the Don Bosco Senior Secondary School (DBSSS) in Gumbo, South Sudan. She shows up every day at 8:30 a.m. with an enthusiastic

attitude and an eager desire to learn. You would never know that she's been up since 4 a.m. and spent the past three hours traveling to school.

That's because Rebecca is grateful for the opportunity to gain a Catholic education with the DBSSS, which is operated by the Salesian Fathers. She thinks of it as her ticket out of poverty, and it will give her the ability to help provide for her needy family as well.

When her alarm clock rings well before sunrise, Rebecca is the first of the 22 people living in the three-room house to get up in the morning. She takes a quick bath, sweeps the house, prepares tea for her cousin, and packs her bag for school.

No breakfast. No coffee to jumpstart her day. And no worries about what to wear as she slips into the same Salesian school uniform each day. Rebecca must leave the house by 5:30 a.m. to catch the first of three busses that will take her close to her destination. But she must still walk the final mile to the school.

After a long day of classes, she has to walk the 15 km (9.3 miles) back to her house, as it is too late to catch a bus. Every day, she spends six hours commuting to receive six hours of secondary school education. For Rebecca, the youngest of five siblings, it is all worth it.

The long journey to DBSSS is a choice that Rebecca makes every day. Hers is the type of intrinsic motivation that we all wish for our religious education students. There is no adult who is forcing her decision. She simply says, "I read about

Don Bosco and I knew God would help me if I went to Don Bosco."

A CONTRASTING STORY

Contrast Rebecca's story with one which I (Dan) heard while visiting a Baptist church in Florida. The guest preacher was a missionary who was "leading teenagers to Christ" in Brazil. They were holding an altar call where young Brazilians were expected to "commit their lives to Christ" while the congregation prayed for them.

The preacher described one teenage girl who was resisting his invitation to approach the altar. He quoted himself as telling her, "If you don't commit your life to Christ, your soul will be tormented in hell for all eternity." The girl continued to refuse.

However, about 15 minutes later, as the preacher told the story, he saw that same girl approach the altar "to be saved by Christ". And the congregation in Florida replied, "Praise the Lord!"

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LEADERSHIP AS A VOLUNTARY PROCESS

These two contrasting stories present two different approaches to evangelization. In the first story, we find a Sudanese girl who is fundamentally motivated out of love for her family and hope for the future. In the second story, we discover a Brazilian girl motivated by fear and intimidation. The two stories present contrasting styles of leadership.

Scholars define leadership as a voluntary, interactive process of influencing others toward a change. The change might be a change of heart, mind, or behavior. It might be a change of policy, structure, or strategy. Leaders change all these things.

There is an emerging consensus among scholars that leadership is *not coercion*. That is not to suggest that coercion is not necessary under any circumstances, but it means that when we are coercing, it is not leadership.

LEADING LIKE GOD

With this definition in mind, what does it mean to say we are “leading people to Christ?” We would like to suggest that there are three major ways to lead someone to Christ in ways that will get the natural type of results that we saw in Rebecca. These are three ways that model the way that God influences, and they are backed up by scholarly research in leadership studies.

Aquinas taught that God influences human beings through (1) love, (2) truth, and (3) beauty. We all believe that God has almighty power; that is part of our creed. But when it comes to instilling faith, God grants us free will. For some reason, God does not use coercive power to lead us to Him. God leads us with unconditional love, everlasting truth, and the beauty of creation.

Yet, when we are granted the opportunity to use coercive power, as parents, teachers, and church leaders, how often do we resort to using it? We would like to suggest that coercive tactics, such as using fear, guilt, and punishment, are not useful ways of leading people to Christ. Instead, we should try to use the loving, truthful, and beautiful ways that God modeled and provided for us.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATORS

Let’s look at the scholarly research and apply Rebecca’s story to the three ways that leaders can intrinsically motivate their followers through individual consideration (love), intellectual stimulation (truth), and inspirational motivation (beauty). (See the work of Bernard Bass.)

The first of these intrinsic motivators, **individual consideration**, suggests that people are motivated by their relationships with people. “I don’t have a father,” Rebecca says. “So I come to school to educate myself and provide for my family later on. I want to have a good future.” Like many people in poor countries, Rebecca is motivated by love for her family.

Rebecca is also motivated by the relationships with friends she has made at Don Bosco. Despite the six hours per day she spends getting to school and back, she finds time to develop friendships as well.

Relationships are an intrinsic motivator for all of us. While few teenagers in the USA may be as worried as Rebecca about the day-to-day subsistence of their families, they pay close attention to their relationships, especially with their friends at that age. Consideration for the relationships in the group should be a major concern for anyone trying to “lead teenagers to Christ.”

The second intrinsic motivator is **intellectual stimulation**. People are motivated by how stimulating the learning environment is. Adults need to learn how to make learning fun. As

teachers, we are leaders, and leaders have to bring bursts of energy into the room or it can be a long day for everyone in the classroom.

Rebecca could go to a much closer school where she would get a public education but she would not receive religious education at all with that option. Don Bosco blends practical education and English classes with catechesis, all in one stimulating environment.

One of the highlights of the day for Rebecca is lunch break. Like most of the 27 other students at DBSSS, she cannot afford to eat lunch. It is a time to enjoy time with her friends, play basketball, foosball, or a card game.

The third intrinsic motivator is **inspirational motivation**. To inspire is to lift up the spirit. Leaders inspire with the passion for a mission and clarity of a vision of the future. Young people today are hungry for

a sense of purpose (mission), i.e. why religious education is important, and a direction (vision), i.e. how it will impact their future.

When I (Luke) ask my students why they come to our Catholic school, they suggest they want to help their fellow people of South Sudan. They want to make the world a better place for their loved ones.

Rebecca states, “I love school and studying CRE (Christian Religious Education) and English. CRE teaches the Word of God and when you follow the Word of God, God will help you. Knowing English allows you to communicate with everyone and is good knowledge to have wherever you go.” She hopes to continue with her studies and finish all four years of secondary school.

LEADING TO CHRIST

We all want our students to succeed in life and to grow in the love of Christ. We want them to *want to* live active faith lives. When we face resistance, hesitation, or indifference from them, it is tempting to use coercive tactics, especially if those tactics are readily available to us.

When we use coercion, the results are less than stellar. When we coerce, command, and control, we generally get sub-ordinary results. If we want the extraordinary motivation that we see in Rebecca, we need to use the loving, truthful, and beautiful ways that God uses to influence us. |

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