

7 Habits of Spiritually-Focused Leaders: What do we think they should be?

The full audience at the April 13, 2021 BELIEVES session via zoom was in for a treat as they had the opportunity to engage with Jonathan Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity International to kick off the theme for BELIEVES in the 2nd quarter of 2021 centered on “Seven Habits of Spiritually-Focused Leaders.”

Reckford began the session by saying, “The world needs hope more than ever. The world needs prayer more than ever.”



While the theme for the 2nd quarter at BELIEVES was focused on the idea of “7 Habits of Spiritually-Focused Leaders,” Reckford shared there are five that he believes are foundational:

1. **Recognize the importance of character – who before what**
2. **Focus on servant leadership**
3. **Learn from the white space**
4. **Be religious about principles, not tactics**
5. **Accept that God never said it would be easy**

Early in his professional life, after graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he was a rower, Reckford had a unique experience that was pivotal in his life.

In 1988, he had the opportunity to travel to South Korea to work with the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee and coach the Korean national rowing team.

“The Korean rowing team at the time was kind of like the Jamaican bobsled team,” Reckford said. “That year forced me to pull back to think about life.”

Reckford said he was fortunate during that time to get to know and become friends with Jim Peterson, a Christian leader and pastor.

“Jim was there teaching in Seoul at a Christian university. In that time together, he gave me the gift of going through the New Testament.”

That pivot in Reckford’s life helped to shape the foundation for things to come, including the first of the five habits he wanted to speak about – **recognizing the importance of character**.

“God cares more about my character than my occupation,” he said. “I work both for people and an organization.”

One of the most important people in his life who inspired him to focus on character was his grandmother, Millicent Fenwick, who was widely known for her commitment to justice.

“Every time I saw her, she would quote Micah 6:8 to me.”

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

“My grandmother was a role model in Congress. One thing she told me was, ‘If you go into politics, know your line and when you’ll walk away.’”

The second habit Reckford identified was **focusing on servant leadership**.

“Jim Collins was one of my business school professors at Stanford,” recalled Reckford. “He would always speak of Level 5 leaders – servants, not rock stars.”

Reckford added that the focus on servant leadership is closely related to character, but also encompasses integrity and accountability.

“Putting ‘mission’ before ‘me’ requires humility,” he said. “Whatever the missions of our organizations are, they are bigger than we are as individuals. When we are humble, we recognize that we always have more to learn and that success depends on others.”

He added, “When we spend more time thinking of others than ourselves, we listen.”

Reckford then transitioned to the third habit– **learn from the white space**.

“We often want to show what’s shiny and hide the messy, but God shows up in the messy,” he said. “On resumes, it’s the white space that really matters. When I interview people, I always ask what’s not on the resume that led to decisions.”

Reckford went on to share that in his life, there have been periods that others might describe as dark such as ...

- running for student body president in college and losing,
- being a mediocre investment analyst at Goldman Sachs in his first job out of college,
- being laid off from his job at Marriott when the recession hit, and
- being unemployed for 18 months after having three kids.

“When I was the president of stores for the Musicland division of Best Buy, I did what I advised others not to do. I left without knowing the next step, he recalled. “After doing this, and with my wife’s blessing, I took a mission trip to India. There, my heart broke for serving the poor.”

During his 18 months of unemployment, Reckford said he watched various non-profit leadership roles become available, but they would get filled by others.

“Doors were shutting one after another for the first time in my life.”

Despite this, he said the period was filled with great family time and led to a great correction of his ego.

Ultimately, Reckford stepped into a role as the executive pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minnesota, and from there he became the CEO of Habitat for Humanity International in 2005.

“When I came on board with Habitat, Hurricane Katrina happened soon thereafter. This actually enabled me to ‘tip some sacred cows’ within Habitat, resulting in some changes that would benefit the mission and the direction of the organization.”

The experience leading Habitat during the aftermath of Katrina highlighted the fourth habit Reckford spoke of – **be religious about principles, not tactics**.

“Amidst inevitable change, our challenge is to be consistent in how we do business and how we behave,” he said.

Finally, Reckford transitioned to speak about the fifth of the habits he believes are foundational for spiritually-focused leaders – **accept that God never said it would be easy.**

“Our work as leaders can be hard ... and messy ... and complicated,” he stated. “As genuine as our intentions may be, just claiming to be faithful does not make it so.”

Reckford shared there is a book he’s read entitled *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*. In the book, the author describes two groups of people. One is the ‘no conflict group’ because for them there is no relationship between church on Sunday and work on Monday. The other group is the ‘messy group’ because they try to live out church on Sunday and work on Monday with integrity.

He added, “Jesus followers are bridge builders and knitters at best, and clubs at their worst.”

Reckford cited a very meaningful example of a bridge builder, U.S. Air Force veteran Vic Romback.

“For many years, Vic has gone to Vietnam with other U.S. veterans and builds houses alongside Viet Cong veterans. He and the others exemplify serving together around something that appeals to both sides.”

As Reckford spoke, he reflected a bit more personally and commented, “Just showing up with a serving towel with no agenda is so powerful. We don’t trust God enough.”

Before beginning to take questions, he also commented that we all desperately need personal systems of accountability.

“We need someone, in addition to our spouse, to whom we can confess all things and be 100% transparent. If space creeps in between our public persona and our personal self and internal life, it’s dangerous.”

Reckford was then asked to go back to his remarks around **being religious about principles, but not tactics** and share another example to illustrate what he meant.

“Taking government money is one that comes to mind,” he said. “At Habitat, the principle we adhere to is to not be dependent on government money. How we maintain this principle is by ensuring that no source of income in a country where we are present is greater than 30%.”

He added, “Our mission and principles are the outside framework within which all things are evaluated to see if they fit.”

Elaine Szeto, CTK parishioner and BELIEVES regular, then asked Reckford to speak about anything in his daily routine that helps him to be a servant leader.

“COVID’s actually helped this,” he responded. “I get up early and enjoy the quiet. We have a daily 15-minute global prayer call that includes people from around the globe at Habitat, so I participate in that.”

He also stated that he has a series of different devotionals that he reads.

“Stopping to be quiet is the most challenging thing for me.”

Throughout the Habitat organization as a whole, Reckford mentioned that in addition to the daily 15-minute prayer call and weekly devotionals, they have a chaplain whose job is to focus on “equipping the souls” of those in the organization and ensuring there are opportunities to pray. Additionally, they start each meeting of the board of directors with prayer and devotion.

Before the session concluded, Reckford was asked if there were any other habits that he felt were important for a spiritually-focused leader.

He spoke of living in the tensions and learning.

“Living in the tensions deals with the problems you solve and the tensions you live with,” he said.

“And I thrive on learning, especially from serving others in periods where you have room. I’m just trying to figure out what God’s doing.”