



soulful steps

DISCERNING:  
A GUIDE TO SPOTTING  
NARCISSISTIC LEADERSHIP IN  
SACRED & SECULAR SPACES

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Thank you for honoring the work and the care behind it.

While it can be used as a tool to supplement an existing therapeutic relationship with a licensed mental health professional (LMHC, LCSW, LMFT, LPC, or a Licensed Psychologist), this resource should NOT be used as a substitute for therapy.

If you find that this resource brings up feelings and thoughts that are challenging to deal with on your own or with a trusted person, I encourage you to seek therapy to continue your healing journey.

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# INTRODUCTION

VOL. 6

Leadership—whether in sacred or secular spaces—carries both great responsibility and great risk. At its best, leadership is a vessel of inspiration, pointing people toward God’s Spirit, truth, or a higher mission. At its worst, it can be distorted by ego, where a leader begins to confuse their own voice, desires, and authority with the very source of that inspiration.

In the church, this distortion may look like a pastor conflating their authority with God’s. In secular contexts, it may look like a CEO, activist, or political figure presenting themselves as the sole keeper of “the mission,” “the truth,” or “the way forward.” Instead of being humbled by the responsibility of serving others, the leader may feel elevated—functioning as if they are the exclusive mouthpiece of ultimate authority.

From a clinical perspective, this pattern reflects narcissistic traits: grandiosity, lack of empathy, need for admiration, and control. Such leaders often thrive in systems that reward charisma and certainty while sidelining humility and shared power.

## Soulfull Note to Self:

**God’s Spirit may work through us, but we are never the source. Trauma-informed practice echoes this: true leadership does not exploit people’s pain or vulnerabilities but seeks to restore dignity, agency, and resilience.**

This guided reflection is designed to help you recognize the difference between ego-driven and Spirit- or mission-led leadership, reflect on your experiences, and consider how to foster healthier leadership cultures. It is especially mindful of the experiences of those who have been wounded by oppressive systems and who are seeking healing, safety, and hope.

From a cultural perspective, this dynamic becomes especially harmful in communities already carrying histories of oppression, marginalization, or trauma. People who are emotionally vulnerable, longing for hope, healing, or a way out of hardship, are often the ones most at risk of manipulation.

When someone has experienced systemic barriers—whether racial injustice, poverty, displacement, gender-based oppression, or other forms of inequity—the promise of a strong leader who offers clarity, belonging, or deliverance can feel deeply compelling. But when that leader’s ego eclipses genuine service, the very people seeking refuge may instead encounter further harm. This harm can take the form of spiritual abuse, emotional dependency, financial exploitation, or the silencing of their lived experiences.

This shift is dangerous because it creates:

- Spiritual or moral confusion – People may struggle to discern where true wisdom ends and ego begins.
- Idolatry of the leader – Loyalty becomes centered on a person, rather than on Christ or the higher purpose.
- Abuse of authority – Spiritual language or mission-driven rhetoric is weaponized to silence dissent or demand compliance.
- Loss of accountability – Challenges to the leader are framed as betrayal, rebellion, or even blasphemy.



# REFLECT ON A LEADER YOU'VE KNOWN

VOL. 6

**“You will know them by their fruits.” – Matthew 7:16**

Not every charismatic or confident leader is narcissistic. But when self-centeredness overshadows the greater mission—whether Christ-centeredness in the church or truth, justice, and service in the world—the community suffers.

Think of one leader you've encountered—this could be a pastor, teacher, boss, activist, mentor, or public figure. Write their name (or initials, or just “Leader A”) at the top of a page. On the left side, write down the positive fruits you witnessed (e.g., “I felt encouraged,” “They created space for growth,” “People were drawn to serve joyfully”). On the right side, write down any negative fruits you noticed (e.g., “Fear of speaking up,” “People burned out,” “The focus was always on them”).

POSITIVE FRUITS

NEGATIVE FRUITS



# SPIRITUAL/IDEOLOGICAL RED AND GREEN FLAGS

VOL. 6

<b>Red Flags: Narcissistic, Ego-Driven Leadership</b>
Claims to be the sole voice of God, truth, or the cause
Uses Scripture, mission, or values selectively to control
Takes credit for success but deflects blame for failures
Seeks admiration more than accountability
Surrounds themselves with "yes-people"
Lacks empathy, dismisses others' pain or concerns
Reacts with anger or defensiveness when challenged
Makes the church, group, or movement about their name/brand
Creates a culture of fear, shame, or performance

<b>Green Flags: Spirit-Led, Mission-Driven Leadership</b>
Recognizes that wisdom is shared and invites others to discern together
Uses Scripture, mission, or values to build up and guide
Gives credit to the community, takes responsibility for mistakes
Welcomes accountability and feedback
Cultivates a team of diverse voices who can challenge and contribute
Shows empathy and compassion, takes others' experiences seriously
Responds with humility and openness to correction
Keeps focus on Christ, the mission, and the community
Fosters a culture of grace, safety, and growth

# WHAT TO DO IF YOU SPOT RED FLAGS

VOL. 6

**Read Philippians 2:3–7 for a picture of servant leadership:** *Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.*

**Pray/Reflect for discernment** – Ask for wisdom, clarity, and courage.

**Seek community** – Bring concerns to trusted believers, elders, mentors, or accountability teams.

**Set boundaries** – You do not have to tolerate manipulation or abuse, spiritual or otherwise.

**Document patterns** – Keep notes if harmful behaviors are consistent.

**Consider next steps** – Depending on severity:

- Gentle confrontation - Matthew 18:15–17 can be a model for conflict resolution anywhere: *If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*
- Reporting to denominational leadership, governing boards, HR, or oversight structures.
- Finding a healthier church, community, workplace, or movement if change is not possible.

# REFLECTION & JOURNAL PROMPTS

VOL. 6

- Where have I seen humility vs. pride in leadership—both sacred and secular?
- How do I discern between charisma and true character?
- What keeps me from speaking up when I sense something is off?
- How can I be part of building healthier, Spirit-led and mission-led leadership cultures?

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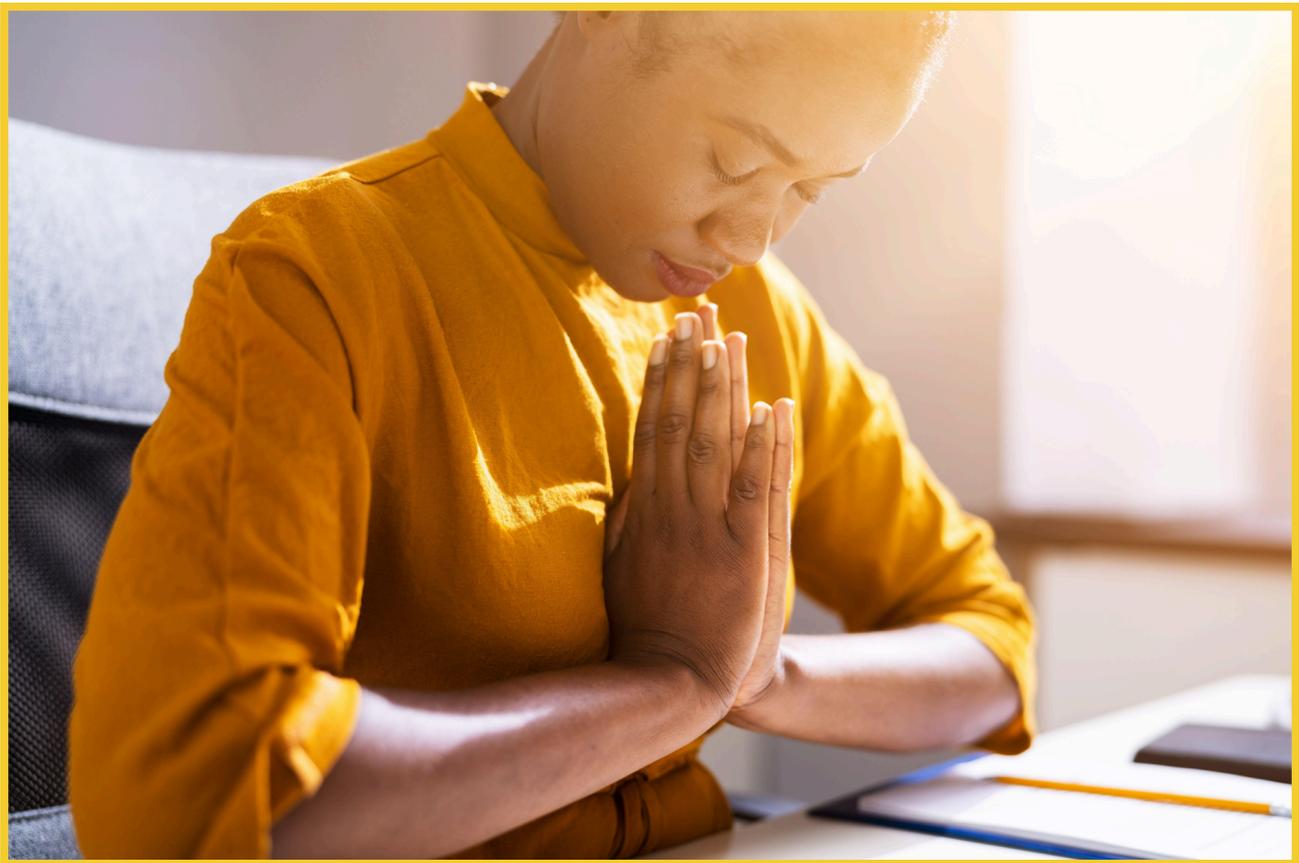
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# CLOSING PRAYER (OR REFLECTION)

VOL. 6

Lord,

give me eyes to see truth, ears to hear Your voice, and courage to act with wisdom. In every space—sacred and secular—help me honor Your Spirit, discern true character, and seek leaders who shepherd and serve with humility.



# NOTES

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# About

## THE CREATOR

I'm a Midwestern girl raised in a home adorned in Black art, music, literature, and culture. From Faith Ringgold on the walls, to Toni Morrison on the shelves, and old-school R&B spinning through the house, my upbringing instilled a deep pride in my heritage, and a love for storytelling, creativity, and community that still guides me today.



My academic path took a few turns—Nursing, and then Psychology at Fisk University, a master's in Sociology, and ultimately a second master's in Counselor Education—each step clarifying my calling to become a therapist. Through personal experiences, faith, and growth, I felt led toward soul-centered, culturally grounded mental health work.

When I'm not in session, I'm creating, coloring, crocheting, listening to music, podcasts or audiobooks, or watching historical and sociocultural documentaries and classic Black sitcoms. I'm a proud member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., a wife to my best friend, a mama to one radiant daughter, a dog mom, and a caregiver in the sandwich generation—held up by strong women, deep friendships, and a whole lot of love.