



GREG MACLEOD  
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Sydney Mines  
Priest, professor, community  
economic development activist

## *The Ideas Man* *Greg MacLeod*

By vocation, Greg MacLeod is a Roman Catholic priest. But he's not like most other priests you know. You'll rarely find him dispensing Communion wafers or presiding over weddings and funerals. "Being a priest is not just saying liturgies on Sunday," says MacLeod. "My take on the official role of the Church is that you're supposed to change the world in the light of the Gospel, and the basic principles of Christianity provide a valid framework for social economic development."

His mentor was Father Michael Gillis, an activist priest devoted to rural education and a contemporary of Jimmy Tompkins. After working as an assistant to Father Gillis, MacLeod studied philosophy in Europe and went on to become a university professor. He then swiftly developed a habit of *founding* things.

He founded the Tompkins Institute for Human Values and Technology at what is now Cape Breton University in 1974. His research there focused on finding ways to use the "tools of capital-

ism” to further social development. In 1976, he put his theories into practice by founding New Dawn Enterprises, which is now the oldest community development corporation in Canada. New Dawn has 175 employees, with services ranging from commercial real estate and housing developments to small option homes, trades training and a residential care facility. MacLeod is also a founder of BCA Group, which raises investment funds for projects in Cape Breton (MacLeod says the initials BCA are a play on BCE – but so many people have asked him what it stands for, he made up an answer: “Banking Community Assets”). BCA has run a rope factory, a radio station, and a fish plant, among many other things; it also broke ground on the first-ever condominium in Cape Breton (one tenant of which, incidentally, is Annette Verschuren).

Not your typical resumé for a priest.

“Thirty years ago, my kind of role would’ve been more common,” says MacLeod. “These days, I’m an exception. Some in the church hierarchy don’t like what I’m doing. But I don’t care about that.” In his seventies now, “Father Greg” is still active at Cape Breton University as professor emeritus, and still takes on projects under the BCA Group – although, to be sure, sometimes it’s not quite clear under whose authority or direction he’s acting (except, of course, his own). He doesn’t draw a salary from any of the ventures he’s involved in, and lives off his pension.

“And on Wednesday nights, I hear confessions at St. Joseph’s,” he points out helpfully. “Just to keep my ticket!”

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**What would you say are some of the essential qualities that someone has to have to be an effective leader?**

In my experience there’s two main qualities that I would look for. One is abilities – you have to know what you’re doing. For instance, if you want to organize some fishing projects and you can’t tell a codfish from a herring, I’d say you have to be very careful.

You have to know something about the field that you're getting into; or at least, respect the technology and the technicalities of the field. The worst kind of fault in this field is people who think they know how to do things, and they jump in and try to lead others, and they don't know what they're talking about and they cause a lot of problems. So I'm saying you either have to have the ability yourself, or recognize that you *don't* have the ability, and rely on other people for those abilities.

And then the other side is personal commitment. You have to be committed. It takes a lot of energy and time and sacrifice to lead in anything; I have to be willing to jump in and give of my time even though I'm not rewarded. If you're rewarded, that's great; if it's money or prestige or whatever it is, that's fine. But I think your fundamental motivation has to be commitment – personal commitment.

**You say a frequent fault is someone doing something about something they know nothing about. What's an example of that that you've seen?**

Well, I'm involved a lot in community business. And I've seen people in the community movements – not just here, [but] around Canada – who organize people to do a housing project or something like that, and they get people in trouble because they don't understand things like a building code, they don't understand the financing, and they encourage people to get involved in something and the people lose money. These people thought they knew about the field and they went off on their own, and they caused more problems than good.

**Now you, or some of the organizations that you've been involved in, have been involved in everything from broadcasting to the fishery to housing and many, many points in between. How do you make sure you don't mess up in that way?**

I made a rule for myself. If I'm going to get involved in [the] fishery, I try to get people who know something about the fisheries involved. I talk to them and I try to get them to serve on committees. Or if it's construction, I find out who are the good people in construction. It's something like hockey. If you were going to organize a hockey team, you look around – Who are the best hockey players around? Who are the best coaches in hockey? If you don't know anything about hockey and you can't play yourself, and you say you're going to organize a hockey team to play in the major leagues or something like that, it'll be a mess! So whatever the field is, I try to find people that know more than I know about that field.

**What about the elements of leadership, though? One of the elements of leadership is recognizing what you know and what you don't know. But what does it take to get people to do what needs to be done?**

I think they have to be invited or asked. There's nothing wrong with that. You don't have to be a leader yourself; if something's wrong – you've got housing problems, unemployment problems, drug problems, whatever the problems are in your community – *ask* people. Say, "Listen, something should be done here. Could you form a committee and try to get things together?"

You know, I find that around Cape Breton there's lots of people with ability who could take [on] leadership and who could lead, but they don't like to step forward. Because around here if you step forward too much and it appears that you think you're better than everybody else, you'll be knocked down pretty fast, eh? That's in traditional communities. And if you're wealthy, you'd better be careful – don't drive an expensive car, drive a cheaper car! (Laugh.) Businessmen tell me this, eh? So it helps if the leader should be invited by other people. And there are lots of people around. I'm never afraid to do that. If I see people, I ask 'em, "Hey, could you help us in this? How 'bout serving on a committee? Or

helping give us some leadership on this thing or other?” You don’t use quite those words, eh? But I think the way to develop leaders is for the community to *ask* people. Because it’s considered sometimes a little arrogant for someone just to step forward and take over things. I’m a little arrogant myself. You know, I tend to say, “Well, *somebody* has to do it,” so if nobody else is doing it, I’ll jump in and try to do something.

**You’ve said that there can be the tendency sometimes for someone who steps forward to be knocked down a peg. What’s been your experience with that, as someone who’s stepped forward a number of times?**

Well, I know that over the years that people have gossiped about me and talked a lot about me. I’ll go up town sometimes and people say, “Oh you’re lucky, you got that government money and you built all those apartment buildings that you own.” People don’t distinguish sometimes; *I* don’t own them, I help another organization to *get* them! But I’ve learned not to pay much attention. I judge myself. I decide if what I’m doing, is that right? Is that a good thing to do? And if [in] my own mind I think it’s a good thing to do, I don’t pay too much attention to what people say.

**What about advice or criticism?**

I go out of my way to get people who will criticize me and argue with me in the actual organization. Now, there’s different kinds of criticism. There’s kind of a criticism, gossipy kind of thing on the street – and people around Cape Breton love to talk, and I like to talk myself, and gossip, everybody does – and you can’t pay too much attention to that. But when you organize something –myself, I like to have strong people on committees who don’t automatically agree with me, who say no. I always come up with all kinds of things, projects, and my boards say, “What’s MacLeod dragging in now?” And half of the stuff, *three-quarters* of the stuff I propose gets turned down anyway! So I like that. It’s kind of a

screen and a test. If you try to lead in anything, the worst thing in the world is to have everybody agree with you. It's much better to have some people disagree. And you find out after a while these people were right!

You know, that radio thing I was involved in, CHER Radio, my board didn't want to.\* That's about fifteen years ago. They said, "Look, it's a field we don't know about." And I had the social side. I said, "It's important for communities to have media, locally owned media. To have all the media owned by outside companies in other places is bad." So my argument was social and political. Their argument was business: "We don't know what we're doing." I finagled them and pushed to take it over. But in the end, my board was right. We weren't *competent* to run that kind of business. *You* should know, you're in radio!

I couldn't run one either.

Anyway. (Laugh.) Each time you do something, you learn a lesson. And over the years, more and more, I've learned to listen to my boards and the people that I work with, who know more than I do about these different kinds of things.

**Was there a turning point in your life where you began to take up a mantle of leadership? Where you began, instead of sitting aside when you had an idea, coming forward with it?**

Yeah. I was a student at the old Xavier College, and famous [broadcaster and community leader] Ann Terry taught public speaking, and I was one of her students. I was nervous speaking. I was shy. Coming from Sydney Mines, you come over to the big city of Sydney and these people in Sydney seem so suave and well-spoken, and I was nervous about looking stupid. I remember having a discussion with Ann Terry, and she said, "Well why do you feel

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\* In 1995, BCA took over Sydney-based CHER radio. The idea was to prevent ownership from going outside the community, but BCA couldn't make a go of it, and eventually ended up having to sell out to an off-island company after all.

that way?” And I said, “Well they might laugh at me. They might think I’m stupid.” [She said,] “Well, maybe you *are* stupid! And maybe they *should* laugh at you. It means you’re proud. You’re vain about yourself. Why not take yourself as you are? If you make stupid remarks, people will laugh at you. If you say intelligent things, people will respect them.” So I reflected a lot on that, and I said, “What the hell, I’ll say whatever I think. I’ll be myself. And people just have to accept me the way I am.”

**What is it about you that makes you think you have something to offer?**

My experience. I’ll tell you something about leadership. I think it’s like riding a bicycle. How do you learn to ride a bicycle? You can read all the books you want as a kid, you won’t be able to jump on a bicycle and ride it. The only way you can learn to ride a bicycle is in riding a bicycle. And so, I had my own experience in organizing things. I tried little bits and pieces of this and that, and it seemed to work. I tried to do some things, and it seemed to work. So I tried to do more things. And I still try to do more things! (Laugh.) Too many things.

**Where do you start?**

Where do I start – I start by thinking. It’s a question of honesty, of looking around where I am and what I am, and what am I doing with my life and what’s it all about? Actually, I would find it boring just to sit in a day-to-day job, do the same thing day in and day out, go home and watch television – that kind of a life. I start by being interested in things, eh? Curious about what’s happening around me, and looking at what’s happening around me. And when I don’t *like* what’s happening around me, I just feel I have to change it. That’s the way *I* started anyway. I think: is it like music? You know, some people seem to automatically sing, and other people can’t sing at all. Some people, they pick up a guitar and they start playing and fiddle with it – and they’re a guitar

player! I'm no good at playing guitars. I'm no good at singing. But I think I'm fairly good at disturbing people, getting people going on something! (Laugh.) I've done a bit of that, I suppose.