
IMPROV IN THE STREETS: MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP AS PUBLIC IMPROVISATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

SCOTT J. HAGLEY

Abstract: This article argues that missional leadership in congregations is an improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid, public, and gospel-shaped identity. Such leadership demands addressing, challenging, and subverting the paradigms that keep congregations from understanding their life together as participating in the mission of God in the world. Drawing from the work of Lesslie Newbigin, the author argues the church must discover ways to tell the story of the triune God in a public arena. Conceiving of leadership as a practice rather than a person, the author suggests these ways may be fluid, dynamic, and messy, but just as an improvisational music session comes together to yield a unique artistic experience, so the church can draw on its many theoretical and theological resources to cultivate a public identity which embodies the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

Introduction

I often read and work in several neighborhood coffee shops. One of the shops I frequent has a group that meets on Tuesday nights for an acoustic guitar jam session. On these nights, a group of anywhere between three to ten friends and strangers will gather to play an array of popular and obscure country, folk, and rock songs. At times the mix of guitars, violins, and banjos does not cohere and group spins into some level of disarray. But inevitably a melody breaks out as the musicians learn how to play and sing together within that moment in time. One might say that those who gather improvise their way into a musical identity in a two-hour jam session every week despite a number of challenges, such as the presence of strangers who arrive and want to teach the group new material, or the transfer of leadership roles throughout the session. The physical