
A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP WITH INTERNATIONAL VOICES

MARK LAU BRANSON AND JUAN FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ

Abstract: Branson and Martínez have written elsewhere on matters of church leadership; in this article, they focus on contributions to this topic by scholars from other nations. They use the frame of practical theology to structure their inquiry, modeling the value of input from social theory, migration studies, various Christian resources, and personal and corporate local narratives. They posit that church leaders need to listen not only to international scholars but also to the international voices in their own church pews and in other churches. In particular, they draw attention to how the growing Latino population in the United States should impact our understanding of leadership.

Introduction

In broad terms, leadership is about shaping learning environments and connecting with diverse resources so that a social group can engage in change. Such environments are composed of men and women and their relationships, the habits they inhabit, the memories and knowledge readily available, their shared imaginary concerning identity and agency, their cooperative activities, and how they understand and relate to men and women who are near to or far from their group.

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Branson and Martínez co-authored Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities (IVP Academic, 2011)

In this article, Mark Lau Branson begins with two generic descriptions concerning churches and late-modern approaches to leadership, with apologies for the obvious stereotypes involved. From there he will describe and use a practical theology method to explore leadership praxis. The overall direction is to move from current praxis to new praxis. While steps are presented sequentially, in practice they will loop back on each other, reshaping meanings and surfacing new questions and resources. The overall method serves the discernment of new praxes, but the actual work of shaping the needed imagination and experiments is in step 5. While such a method has numerous sources for reflection, this article will pay special attention to non-U.S. voices. At several points, Juan Martínez provides sections that engage realities and stories related to specific U.S. contexts with a continuing and growing presence of Latinos. Both authors raise the following questions: What are the benefits of our porous borders in regard to churches (Latino and others) in the United States, and how does that situation call for rethinking leadership practices?¹

Pentecost: Who matters? Who is an agent? (Branson)

The Pentecost event of Acts 2, in addition to being an audio-visual spectacle, focuses on languages, borders, ethnicities, power arrangements, belonging, and agency. Israel was literally an occupied country; a few weeks prior, Jesus had been crucified by Roman and Jewish rulers. It was unsettling for the authorities that Jesus' body was missing, that there had been reports of sightings and conversations, and that a modest messianic movement had not abated.

Shavuot (Weeks) is one of the three required Jewish festivals, but unlike Sukkot (Booths) and Pesach (Passover) it was only one or two days long. (God knows that when a farmer begins a grain harvest and leaves

¹ Our own experiences have been primarily in the United States, so we write from and to that context. We believe much of what we write may be useful for our Canadian neighbors to the north.

home to sacrifice the first sheath, it is not the time for a week of picnics or liturgies.) Jerusalem likely had pilgrims who could either make the walk or were not tied to agrarian work, but this festival was not a major attraction for international pilgrims. That contextual reality may serve to clarify our reading of the Acts text. After the description of prayerful waiting, a roaring wind, a visual anomaly akin to flames, and a cacophony of diverse languages, Luke writes (Acts 2:5-11):

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!” (CEB)

The listed peoples represented a significant geographic spread, far beyond weekend treks. Based on grammar (“living in Jerusalem”) and the shortness of the festival, it is likely that many of these Jews (including proselytes) were senior citizens who had moved to Jerusalem for their retirement years. They brought their ancient languages with them and perhaps set up neighborhoods so they could maintain regional customs and conversations. Like residents of Palestine, they were accustomed to the empire’s language of Greek, and everyone usually functioned in that common language. So it was quite a surprise (“They were all surprised and bewildered”) to hear their regional, parochial languages from these Galileans. Luke credits the entire event to

God's Spirit, which is consistent with how the Spirit makes concrete the life and mission of God.²

So this transitional and defining event places emphases on (1) the value of international connections; (2) the importance of culturally diverse groups in a geographic setting; (3) the use of diverse languages even when a dominant language is available; (4) the inclusion and potential agency of senior citizens; (5) the Spirit's innovative initiatives; (6) the central role of persons who are not in structural authority; and (7) the follow-up work of interpretive leadership (as Peter, using the common tongue, tries to explain everything). As the stories of Acts continue, the role of Antioch becomes notable, and the agencies of non-Palestinians and non-Jews gain prominence. If leadership is to be adequate to the Spirit's engagements, it needs to attend to what God makes real and possible among the common people – the diverse participants – in every location.

Practical Theology, Leadership, and International Voices (Branson)

How can U.S. church leaders benefit from leadership resources beyond our borders? What can churches gain by learning conceptual and practical resources rooted in other contexts? What benefits are available in the resources of academics and pastors from other nations as well as of the voices of immigrant and culturally diverse persons in our own churches? The constant work of relating actions with knowing, of shaping interpretive communities as communities of practice, is work that defines the relationship between church leaders and

² Even though some theological perspectives indicate that the Holy Spirit is primarily ethereal, Craig Van Gelder posits, and we agree, that the Holy Spirit's presence in the Bible indicates concrete, located, specific activities of God-on-the-ground. This is especially relevant to our topic because a key role of leadership is that of discerning, with a group, how they can participate in God's initiatives. See *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 23–46.

churches. The framework of missional ecclesiology³ creates a nexus that impacts the relationship of a church with its context, leaders with participants, and the whole church with the Trinity. Practical theology serves as a method for connecting diverse methods and resources for this set of topics.

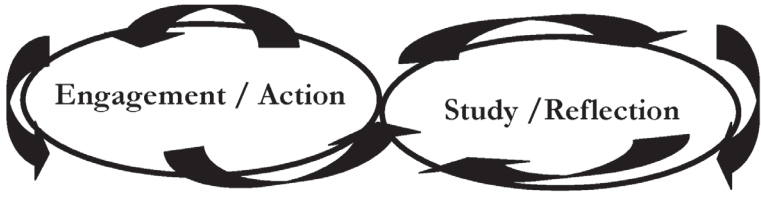
I will outline a basic practical theology method and relate the method to the question of how U.S. churches might benefit from leadership resources available through porous borders, then Martínez will demonstrate that these resources are not just for academically-trained leaders but are also available in and through the everyday Christians in our churches.

The practical theology method that I will use is rooted in Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.⁴ Among his significant contributions is his approach to *praxis*, which has its roots in Aristotle. There are two primary traits of praxis for Aristotle: that it is an activity of free persons and that the *telos* is embedded in the action. Working as an educator in the oppressive environment of Brazilian laborers, Freire sought means for liberation, and he knew this was not just a matter of more or even specialized information. The move toward agency had to be something that people chose, and the *telos* of freedom had to be embedded in the activities. Strategic plans for democracy committees would not work; education about the technical means of production in modern life was also inadequate. Rather, “This [liberation] can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”⁵

³ For some primary books on missional ecclesiology, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Darrell Guder (ed.), *The Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and Alan Roxburgh & M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), and Alan Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

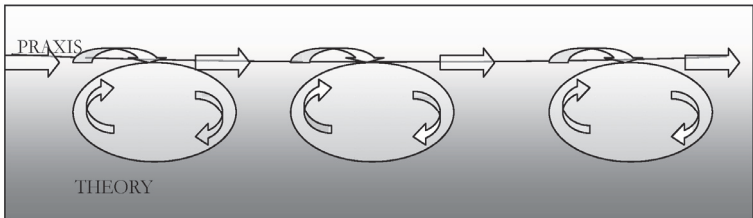
⁴ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Crossroad, 1974) and *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1970).

⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 36.



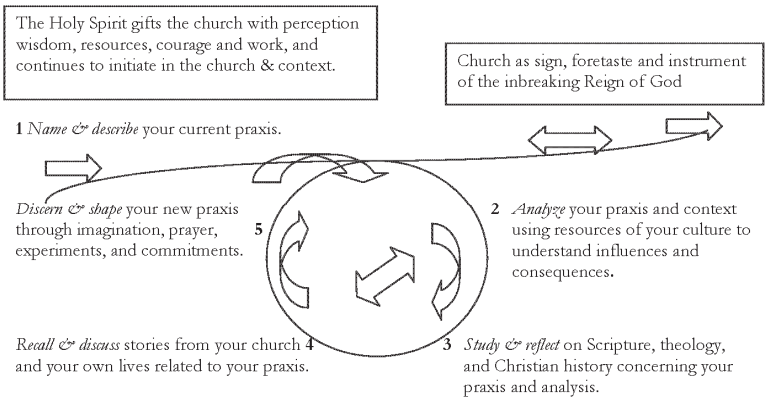
Freire’s access was that of literacy education, and he leveraged this for something the Brazilian government did not appreciate. The adults who entered into the literacy courses did not just memorize words and definitions and conjugations; they received a new imaginary that they too were creators of culture.

This shift of imagination required another key move. Epistemology is not fundamentally a matter of amassing data – information – but requires a continuous cycling of action and reflection. An assumed mode of learning, in which people acquire theories that are then applied to life (theory-to-practice, or the banking approach), is rejected in favor of this iterative mode of praxis-theory-praxis. As individuals and as groups, we engage our environment (praxis); then we step back and reflect on ourselves, our environment, and on available theories and information; then we reengage, based on a new understanding of ourselves and our context. This is learning – this is knowledge – the action-reflection cycle that defines praxis-theory-praxis.



Freire’s basic *praxis* model is behind the practical theology I have constructed, with appreciation to

Thomas Groome,⁶ Ray Anderson,⁷ and Craig Van Gelder,⁸ in service of the work of theological reflection and congregational discernment. I understand the role of leaders to be that of attending to the work of a congregation’s praxis in light of these resources. In basic terms: (1) we name and describe our current praxis, (2) we analyze our praxis and context by using cultural resources, (3) we bring our Christian texts into conversation with our praxis, (4) we tell and listen to our own stories regarding our praxis, and (5) we discern and experiment on our way to a new praxis.



With Freire and the practical theology method as means for sorting and discerning, I will engage other non-U.S. resources and indicate how they might contribute to leadership and discernment in U.S. churches. For convenience I will associate each author with a particular step of the practical theology cycle, but it should be self-evident that each will often overflow into other steps. This nonlinear, iterative mode is also how the method works in the daily life of a congregation; the categories serve to shape questions, observations, and imaginations, but forced categories would undermine the creative

⁶ Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999).

⁷ Ray Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

⁸ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*.

synapses we need if we genuinely want new praxes. I will connect Jürgen Habermas, Paulo Freire, and Jehu Hanciles with step 2 and René Padilla, Gerhard Lohfink, and Nancy Bedford with step 3, then reengage Hanciles in step 4. Martínez will bring Elizabeth Conde-Frazier and Justo González into steps 3, 4, and 5.

Step 1: Name and Describe Current Praxis (Branson)

This first step provides a description of current praxis, which in this article is framed by the theme of congregational leadership. This description names activities, actors, context, and forces that may shape praxis. In general terms, church leadership in the United States has been shaped by the historic forces of the Enlightenment and Romanticism as embedded in late modernity. For example, scientific rationalism, rooted in the Enlightenment, led to modern management theory and strategic planning.⁹ Romanticism, with its fronting of sensuality, affectivity, and expressive individualism, shaped consumer preference and marketing, family systems based in therapeutic models, and a subfield of volunteerism.¹⁰ Two common scenarios illustrate how these social forces show up in churches:

⁹ For an informed account of history, philosophy, and social theory behind modern organizations, see William Roth, *The Roots and Future of Management Theory: A Systems Perspective* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2000). There are significant benefits in learning new ways to see, as provided by the Enlightenment, but the overconfidence in human capacities to predict, manage and control is problematic to theological praxis. See Alan Roxburgh, *Missional Map-making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 73–85.

¹⁰ I am not seeking to denigrate Romanticism's attention to affectivity, sensuality, and thick locality but merely to acknowledge the social history behind church attempts at marketing, and to offer a mode for engaging "the other" that does not treat them as objects. Concerning expressive individualism, see Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), especially Chapter 6. On the relationship of desire to discipleship and church, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 75–85.

Pastor Jamie has a primary role of moving a congregation into the future. On a regular basis, Jamie takes the church board and other key leaders on retreat to create strategic plans for the board, staff, and committees. There are various required parts: a catchy mission statement, some quotable and frameable values, marketable goods and services, and perhaps a BHAG¹¹ to infuse energy. Jamie's skills in management, negotiation, and selling are key elements of this approach to leadership, because the congregation expects that kind of expertise in an organizational leader. So the plan is put into shape for marketing to the members – print, media, t-shirts. An emphasis is put on being united – because others in the church need to be sold on the plan before they will volunteer time and money. Jamie's role is much like that of a CEO who shapes marketing and recruitment functions. Theological and biblical resources are aligned with the plan for preaching and teaching (including comments during committee and board meetings).

Pastor Taylor has a role similar to Pastor Jamie, but the church's size and history have created a situation in which strategic plans are no longer created and the church has settled into a habit of "getting by." The board has functional responsibilities regarding programs and personnel and budgets, and they feel responsible for the viability of the church. Because the loss of any member or family would be noticeable, there is a high value on keeping members satisfied. There are conversations about being a "family" church and a confidence that they are "welcoming" of visitors, with confusion about why more people don't come and join. Taylor's attention is on pastoral care, insuring that the functional procedures continue, giving guidance to community service, and perhaps engaging civic life. Biblical and theological texts are evident in sermons and teaching in a way that focuses on God's grace and personal responsibility in discipleship.

¹¹ "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" from James Collins and Jerry Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision," *Harvard Business Review* 74 (5) (1996): 65–77; the authors propose that large, emotionally engaging goals provide clarity and motivation; I believe this non-participatory mode is disrespectful of participants and misses what God makes available through the wider community.

Either of these churches can be visibly successful or not; either can be humanly warm or cool; either can be rooted in new or old theological and denominational systems. My focus on these leadership frameworks is intended only to identify basic assumptions and to see that those assumptions are rooted in a particular socio-cultural environment. For example, top-down management, seeing pastors as experts, a marketing approach to members, and the focus on satisfying customers are all assumed in modern organizations. This is the current praxis of congregational leadership. In each step of the practical theology process, other ways of seeing and acting will provide resources for alternative approaches.

Step 2: Analyze with Social Tools (Branson)

The purpose of step 2 is to use cultural resources to understand what is behind the current praxis, to more thoroughly understand the context, and to name potential resources for alternatives. Paulo Freire, engaging social and educational theories, provides insights into how leaders help others learn about, engage, and change their environments; Jürgen Habermas's proposal for "communicative competence," also rooted in critical social theory, promotes group understanding and cooperation; Jehu Hanciles's work on migration helps us understand congregational formation.

Freire emphasized that humans, individually and in groups, can be culture-creators.¹² When we assume that social arrangements are determined by others – that structures, resources, and even imagination are beyond our influence – we have lost our vocation as humans. In both of the illustrative churches, the members are not

¹² To counter societal "massification," Freire sought critical consciousness through education that helped men and women become subject-actors in their own culture. See Freire, *Education*, 32–84. This fronting of the actions of ordinary people is also emphasized by Gustavo Gutiérrez, trans. Robert Barr, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979) and Michel de Certeau, trans. Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

expected to be involved in an imaginary beyond what is given to them. They are consumers, volunteers, financiers, and committee members. Freire employed a sequence of methods to change this situation. Because he was shaping a literacy program, he created images that prompted vocabulary while also prompting imaginations. A farmer, even on a small plot, lives in creation and learns how to change creation – the earliest meaning of the word “culture” has to do with farming. Gradually, through vocabulary and conversation, Freire’s learners transfer farming ideas to society; they realize that they might be able to reshape social arrangements just as they plow and plant and harvest. This is a huge shift of imagination, and it needs to be tested. Freire’s action-reflection cycle demonstrates how some small initiatives concerning money or working conditions or teamwork would let men and women see that they are culture-creators, which is consistent with the vocabulary they were learning. They were not merely objects; they were subjects. The action-reflection cycle is incremental and dangerous. Freire’s literacy was too much of a political threat to the government, so he was exiled.

Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher and social theorist, also offers two interconnected and helpful frameworks. First, he describes how larger societal structures, as expressions of instrumental rationality, have a tendency to infringe on smaller social groups, such as local communities and microcultures. His language about the colonization of a people’s *lifeworld*¹³ parallels Freire’s awareness that oppressed people do not believe they can create culture. In Habermas’ framework, our mental capacities – our imaginations – have been colonized just as thoroughly as if conquerors took control. Second, Habermas’ confidence in what he believes are underdeveloped assets of modernity leads him to a theory of communicative action (which is often contrasted with

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 356–73.

strategic action).¹⁴ The lifeworlds of a people are differentiated by the diverse “worlds” or “world concepts” in which they live: the objective world, the subject world, and the social world. The objective world is the “totality of entities about which true statements are possible,” the social world is “the totality of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations,” and the subjective world is “the totality of experiences to which the speaker has privileged access and which he can express before a public.”¹⁵ Habermas is dealing not with a theory of reality but a framework for communication. Each of these worlds has its own subject matter, its own sphere of vocabulary and syntax, and its own measure for validity. This chart summarizes this theory.

	Objective World	Subjective World	Social World
Type of speech	Descriptive	Expressive	Regulative
Subject matter	Propositional knowledge	Narratives and affects	Norms and intentions
Validity measurement	Truth	Honest	Just and appropriate

To the extent we embrace Freire’s mode of shaping a learning community of acting subjects, Habermas’s approach to communicative action is a resource for strengthening the group’s capacities for understanding and cooperative activities.

Finally, Jehu Hanciles’s masterful work on migration and globalization demonstrates how porous borders shape churches. (His work provides significant biblical and theological reflection, but we are using him as a source within migration studies.) The earlier

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 333.

¹⁵ Habermas, vol. 2, 120.

synchronization of Christendom with the Western-based missionary movement has given way to multidirectional flows of peoples, cultures, and influence: “[F]ar from being a one-directional, single, unified phenomenon, the processes of globalization are multidirectional, inherently paradoxical, and incorporate movement and countermovement.”¹⁶ While economic globalization is driven by the West and can often be characterized as a new feudalism under an alliance of wealthy nations, other cross-border movements and linkages bring cultural peoples and perspectives from South to North, in what Hanciles calls “globalization from below.”¹⁷

Hanciles’s work is far-reaching for the global church, but our focus is on U.S. churches. It is notable that the church in the United States, in general terms, is not declining at the rate of European churches; Hanciles draws our attention to studies that indicate that 60% of immigrants are Christians,¹⁸ mainly from Africa and Latin America, but also from Korea and the Philippines. Also, in his more extensive studies of African-initiated churches in the United States, it is notable that many of these churches are intentional about cross-cultural outreach and see no conflict between honoring their African cultures while shaping multicultural congregations and mission.¹⁹

Concerning matters that affect frameworks for leadership, the South-North migration of Christians who bring profound spiritual and missional commitments may, according to Hanciles, offer a different set of traits and modes:

This non-Western missionary movement represents mission *beyond Christendom*: mission delinked from structures of power and domination; mission undertaken from positions of vulnerability

¹⁶ Jehu Hanciles, *After Christendom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 2; Hanciles is from Sierra Leone.

¹⁷ Hanciles, 2, 15.

¹⁸ Hanciles, 7.

¹⁹ Hanciles, 364–73.

and need; mission freed from the bane of territoriality and one-directional expansion from a fixed center; mission involving agents who reflect the New Testament reference to the ‘weak things of the world’ (1 Corinthians 1:27).²⁰

Hanciles’s understanding of migrations and mission are important factors for consideration as we gain resources to reflect on leadership praxis.

A practical theology of church leadership can benefit from these perspectives and resources. Freire emphasizes the diffusion of participation and initiative, demonstrating how a people who have been deprived of power can regain their role as subjects as they create culture. Habermas serves our awareness of context – how societal structures have shaped our congregations and the environments that we inhabit; he offers a framework for improving our communication, a framework that attends to personal stories and opinions, to data and observations that meet more formal requirements for objectivity, and to the obligations we have for shaping a shared future. And Hanciles helps us understand the importance of changing demographics as migrations impact our contexts and our churches, as illustrated by Martínez, below.

Borderlands & Cultural Shifts in the U.S. (Martínez)

The changing demographics of the United States, particularly in the Southwest, provide us with an illustration of Hanciles’s thesis in our own country. The United States takeovers of the Southwest in 1848 (from Mexico) and Puerto Rico in 1898 (from Spain) shaped migration patterns from these countries in a way that created a borderland culture in the Southwest and continues to change the demographic composition of this country. When one adds the newer migration patterns created by the complexities of U.S. relationships in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and throughout Central America, it is not surprising that Latinos are now the

²⁰ Hanciles, 369.

largest minority group in the country and that minorities are projected to become the majority sometime around 2050 or sooner.²¹

This movement is creating demographic changes in the United States, and is thereby also affecting issues of national identity. Some of the migrants are transnational people who live part of their lives in the United States and part in their countries of origin. Even many of those who permanently move to the United States are part of transnational networks that keep them closely linked to their countries of origin. This two-way movement of Latinos – and their ideas – creates an environment in which they are linked to more than one national identity and are invested in the future of more than one country.

Most of the people who have migrated to the United States have been working class people, poor people like those described by Hanciles. The vast majority of them are Roman Catholic and they are changing the face of American Catholicism. Today over thirty percent of the Catholic population in the United States is Latino and sixty percent of Catholics under thirty-five are Latino. They are among the most faithful and expanding segments of the church.²² As the single largest population of active parishioners, Latinos are vastly under-represented in the leadership of the Catholic Church, which means that U.S. Catholicism has to make major shifts as it rethinks about what it means to be church in the United States.

But this growing Latino population is also affecting Protestantism. Since Protestant missionaries went south, and as more U.S. Latinos have come into contact with Protestant believers during the last century, a growing percentage of Latin Americans are Protestants. In

²¹ See the Pew Research Center's study, "U.S. Population Projections: 2005–2050," <http://pewsocialtrends.org/2008/02/11/us-population-projections-2005-2050/> (accessed August 8, 2011).

²² See "Reflections on the Hispanic Catholic Moment" by Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, September 26, 2010, <http://www.ncchm.org/619354.ihtml> (accessed August 16, 2011).

particular, Pentecostalism has grown significantly in Latin America, so that many of the new immigrants now are Protestants. For example, Puerto Rico is 40% Protestant. There are several Latino denominations that are predominantly Puerto Rican, but several denominations, particularly mainline groups, have been importing seminary-trained leaders from the island to lead Latino ministries on the mainland. And because Puerto Rico has such a high percentage of Protestants, many Protestant Latino leaders in the United States have a Puerto Rican background.

Something similar is happening with Central American immigrants. Because many of them are already Protestants when they migrate to the United States, some of them are bringing their churches and denominations with them. This recent trend is accompanied by new ministry efforts among the U.S. population at large.

Other Protestant immigrants are joining existing U.S. denominations, particularly Pentecostal denominations. While many are forming Latino churches, others Latinos are joining “non-Latino” churches. Initially, Latino newcomers are over-looked, but some eventually become leaders; they are also changing the face of Pentecostal denominations. Currently, most of the growing and dynamic churches and denominations in the United States have a growing Latino presence. The denomination that has been most impacted by Latinos is the Assemblies of God. Today it is about 25% Latino and most of its growth is happening among Latinos.²³ A practical theology of leadership needs to call attention to contextual changes and migration patterns, not just as academic data but with awareness and responsiveness to

²³ The General Secretary’s Office of the Assemblies of God created a document called “Assemblies of God Statistics, USA” based on 2008 reports. It states that 20% of the denomination is Hispanic. Jesse Miranda, an AG Latino leader, told me that the AG is estimating that the number is closer to 25% as of 2011 (personal conversation). The book *Los Protestantes: An Introduction to Latino Protestantism in the United States* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2011) by Juan Martínez addresses the growth of various denominations.

the men and women in the pews – their perspectives and networks, their well-being, and their gifts.

Step 3: Study and Reflect on Christian Resources (Branson)

For step 3, I work with René Padilla, Gerhard Lohfink, and Nancy Bedford regarding resources from our Christian tradition that can help us rethink leadership praxis. (The opening study of Acts 2 can also be regarded as appropriate for this step.) These theologians demonstrate capacities to address their own contexts while also providing perspectives that have great potential for U.S. churches.

René Padilla provides an integrative missional ecclesiology²⁴ that becomes the basis of a comprehensive framework for discipleship linking individual and congregational initiatives:

Christian discipleship understood as a missionary lifestyle – the active participation in the realization of God’s plan for human existence and the creation, revealed in Jesus Christ – to which the whole church and each of its members have been called, expresses, in a word, the essence of the church’s mission.²⁵

The church’s mission is neither a focus on its own institutional structures nor on the work of an elite group of leaders. Rather,

Gifts and ministries are the means used by the Spirit of God to equip the church as an agent of change in society – change that reflects God’s plan for human life and the whole creation – and to equip all the faithful for the fulfillment of their vocation as God’s co-workers in the world.²⁶

²⁴ C. René Padilla, “Introduction: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission” in *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation*, eds. Tetsunao Yamamori & C. René Padilla; trans. Brian Cordingly, (Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2004), 19–49; Padilla is Ecuadoran and has spent decades in Argentina.

²⁵ Padilla, 28.

²⁶ Padilla, 43.

Padilla's work undergirds a missional ecclesiology that attends to the topics of Christian anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, and missiology. The vocation of the church (and of the members) is to participate in God's ongoing work of drawing the world (society) toward full humanness as revealed in Jesus Christ. In a framework that seems confusing to many U.S. Christians, Padilla's notes a congruence that affirms his Anabaptist theology (non-violent, non-coercive) and key elements of earlier liberation theologies (with an emphasis on justice, including the need to rearrange power dynamics) – that “the historical Jesus (is) a paradigm for the mission of the church.”²⁷ In this framework, he is re-emphasizing the life of Jesus alongside the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection. Then Padilla calls for a non-hierarchical agency of those who make up the church, critiquing any worship and individualistic spirituality that is divorced from a daily life of engagement with context or any leadership framework of specialists providing a managed religion.²⁸ He seeks a different approach to organizational leadership:

The historical nature of the church requires organization, but it is one thing for the church to be organized to maintain itself institutionally and to ensure its own survival, and something different to organize itself for integral mission, for collaboration with God in the fulfillment of his plan for human life and all creation...All churches are called to cooperate with God in the transformation of the world based on the gospel centered in Jesus Christ as Lord of the universe²⁹

In these ways Padilla has re-emphasized the importance of the local church, framed priorities for organizational vocation and leadership, and called for all believers to

²⁷ Padilla, 36.

²⁸ Padilla, 43–4.

²⁹ Padilla, 48–9.

engage all of creation toward an embodied eschatological hope.

Gerhard Lohfink, a German Roman Catholic priest, provides an important example of how praxis-theory-praxis can be implemented by a biblical theologian. His analysis of contextual forces and ecclesial life in mid-century led to his writing *Jesus and Community*.³⁰ His critique of Western individualism and the resulting cultural over-emphasis on interiority brought Lohfink to use his biblical scholarship to explore the essential social dimensions of faith, concluding, “What we now call church is nothing other than the community of those ready to live in the people of God.”³¹ In sequential chapters he expounds biblical texts and early resources concerning Jesus and Israel, Jesus and His disciples, the New Testament communities, and the ancient church. The framework of church as a contrast-society becomes central:

[The] idea of the church as contrast-society does not mean contradiction of the rest of society *for the sake of contradiction*. Still less does church as contrast-society mean despising the rest of society due to elitist thought. The only thing meant is contrast *on behalf of others* and *for the sake of others...precisely because the church does not exist for itself, but completely and exclusively for the world, that it retain its own countenance*.³²

Lohfink’s work with the Sermon on the Mount, his descriptions of early church life, and his clarity about the church’s missional existence on behalf of the world provide grounded and authoritative sources for today’s churches. Lohfink’s work was received by many as a refreshing, inspiring, faithful proposal in the midst of a theological era that too often served up theories that seemed disconnected from church life. Then, as Lohfink

³⁰ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, trans. John Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

³¹ Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, xi.

³² Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 146 (italics in original).

received numerous invitations to speak and converse with churches, and as he moved from an academic environment to a church-based community, he began to rethink his exposition.

There were many people who were seeking, on the basis of my book, to obtain concrete directions for the renewal of their parishes. I could not give them. It seemed as if the material itself refused to be made use of as a set of directions for pastoral practice.³³

Lohfink re-enters the biblical materials with new eyes and provides us with *Does God Need the Church?* He is still convinced that God has always been calling and shaping a people on behalf of the world and that God's people are a contrast-society, and he affirms confidence in what he portrayed in the earlier volume. However, rather than describing traits of a model, a kind of repeatable blueprint, he finds that,

It was always the Spirit of God who brought about new initiatives in the Church...Therefore following the plan of God means trusting in God's promises and remaining open to things that are humanly unforeseeable, in the knowledge and confidence of being sustained and led.

This ecclesiology of discerning God's current presence and actions is neither license for consumer choice nor a confidence in the interior biases of those disconnected from God's texts and community. Rather, it is a call to live in God's life, knowing "that God does not act anywhere and everywhere, but in a concrete place."³⁴

Observing God's current, local initiatives is a key matter for organizational imagination and leadership. Lohfink realized that God did not provide strategies and plans but narratives, metaphors, practices, and signs, which we engage in our own specific times and locations by the Spirit, so that as we attend to those gifts we can

³³ Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, trans. Linda Maloney, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press: 1999), vii.

³⁴ Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, viii.

participate in God's life and mission. Discernment, concerning God and our own context, becomes central to the work of churches and the role of their leaders.

Argentinean Nancy Bedford, after expositing an ecclesial missiology grounded in the Trinity and the incarnation, focuses on discernment with attention to how the Holy Spirit engages the church in God's initiatives.³⁵ Churches do not need to receive master plans from books or hierarchy but instead are called develop skills and habits for timely and local faithfulness:

The practice of discernment helps people in community, at a given time and place, to find out what actions appear to be consistent with their stand against evil, their desire to respond concretely to need, and their commitment to follow the way of Jesus Christ.³⁶

Bedford draws on Luther and Bonhoeffer in reclaiming the medieval monastic *hours* of *lectio, meditatio, oratio, tentatio*. In drawing on this historic tradition, Bedford also cites Paul Ricoeur's work on a hermeneutic of both suspicion and redemption; church work is penultimate.³⁷

Lectio embraces the text as what was in events and inscription, what will be eschatologically, and what is as a specific church makes itself available to Word and Spirit regarding its own timely participation in *missio Dei*. With appropriate cautions about a church's capacities to manipulate meanings, Bedford values the communal, expectant practice that welcomes the Spirit to use the text to read us.³⁸ *Meditatio* is personal and corporate rumination – processing, listening, thinking, conversing as the church engages the text, submitting to the Spirit's

³⁵ Nancy Bedford, "The Theology of Integral Mission and Community Discernment," in Yamamori and Padilla, (Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2004), 99–124.

³⁶ Bedford, in Yamamori and Padilla, 115.

³⁷ Bedford, in Yamamori and Padilla, 115, footnote 15; see also Nancy Bedford, "Little Moves Against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment," in *Practicing Theology*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002), 157–81.

³⁸ Bedford, in Yamamori and Padilla, 116–120.

promptings, in the church's context. *Oratio* is prayer, a "conversation (that) might take the form of a supplication, an accusation, a demand, a request or a cry of pain or anguish. At other times, it can be an expression of thankfulness and of the peace which passes all understanding."³⁹ Bedford emphasizes that conversation involves a commitment to understand God's own viewpoint, so this is a listening, receptive activity. In Christian history, the fourth step is most often cited as *contemplatio*, an experience of awareness and rest in God's presence. In Bedford's exposition, the more Protestant version moves to *tentatio*, which counters the temptation to deception and avoidance in favor of "trying out" what we believe we have discerned about our *sending* from our *lectio*, *meditatio* and *oratio*.⁴⁰ This experimental, tentative approach to discernment, in contrast to strategic master plans, makes possible a more innovative and participatory ecclesial life.⁴¹

In this set of resources for step 3, Padilla, Lohfink, and Bedford connect us with our theological heritage and traditional practices. We benefit because they engage the Christian tradition from the perspectives of their own communities of practice and invite us toward leadership frameworks that shape Christian communities that attend to scriptures, theology, traditional practices, the Spirit's promptings, and our own contexts.

Reading the Bible as Immigrants (Martínez)

Not only do professors and scholars from other nations provide important resources for U.S. churches, but the men and women in the pews of our churches are also key voices for our faithfulness. Justo González invites U.S. churches to listen to how Latinos read the

³⁹ Bedford, in Yamamori and Padilla, 119.

⁴⁰ Bedford, in Yamamori and Padilla, 21.

⁴¹ In this Practical Theology model, contexts, texts and resources are surfaced in service of shaping new praxis (step 5); so Bedford's work with the Christian tradition of discernment (noted here in step 3) can be engaged in the discernment work by leaders and participants in step 5.

Bible. In his book *Santa Biblia* he writes about “reading the Bible in Spanish.”⁴² Sometimes that literally means that people are reading in another language, but what is most important is that Latinos (and other minority groups) read from a different perspective. It is very important for leadership to encourage these culturally diverse voices at Bible studies, and to make sure that as we read the Bible we ask the question, “How are you reading it?” Leaders need to ask, “You who had an immigrant experience, what does Scripture say to you?”

González calls our attention to what Latinos can bring to the table, including what he calls a non-innocent view of history. Many people in the United States, especially many Christians, have a sense that somehow the United States is an exceptional country, a Christian country that has done little wrong, or has good intentions, even when it has not done right. Most people from Latin America recognize that all human governments are broken, are fallen. They also know that biblical figures are fallen people. So when average Latinos reads the Bible they are not surprised by the fact that David was an adulterer and a murderer, and that he was still God’s elect. Most Latinos are not surprised by the people who are in Jesus’ genealogy; they are not surprised that it includes prostitutes and other unwanted peoples. This is part of how we understand that God’s grace works “in spite of.” Leaders, as they attend to the participation of immigrants, with the priority of immigrants being subjects in the church, will want to bring these perspectives into the conversation.⁴³

⁴² Justo González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

⁴³ Other examples of reading the Bible “in Spanish” are Oscar García-Johnson, *The Mestizo/a Community of the Spirit: A Postmodern Latino/a Ecclesiology* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009) and Eldin Villafañe, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); for other examples of how differing readings of scripture have an impact on theology, see Aida Besançon Spencer and William David Spencer (eds.), *Global God: The Multicultural Evangelical Views of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998). Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla edited a collection

Step 4: Recall and Discuss Stories

Habermas's theory of communication emphasizes that a group needs to shape interaction with attention to their objective, subjective, and social worlds. The subjective realities of church participants are key to awareness and understanding about each other and the context of the church's life and mission. When a church is working thoughtfully, reflectively, and prayerfully concerning praxis, there are numerous ways to surface important stories about the participants, the church, the context, and their more extended networks. In these conversations the goal is to learn about motivations, activities, imagined futures, contextual factors, inner promptings, information, diverse voices, roles, accomplishments, disappointments, how wisdom is gained, and various ways in which different persons provided elements of leadership.

Churches need diverse settings (large and small groups, festivals and worship, coffee bars and tea houses) as the telling and listening creates a fabric of narratives that are both personal and corporate. Sometimes stories can arise from the biblical narratives of step 3 or the cultural frameworks of step 2. There may be particular topics for stories (cultures and ethnicities, family roots and migrations, oppression and justice, avoiding or connecting with God, mercies and grace). The forms of church narratives may draw on historic traditions of storytelling or ballads. Regarding our topic of leadership, leaders can be asked when they felt the most synchronicity with members in ecclesial life and mission; participants can be asked when leaders provided guidance or helps concerning love of God and neighbor. As those stories are told, further questions can explore what actions were most valuable, how they experienced God's grace, and how they lived into God call to love neighbors. There is a crucial link between leadership and

of essays on biblical hermeneutics and Bible studies with attention to diverse perspectives in the Americas: *Conflict & Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

a church's missional formation (how it connects with local neighbors as well as missional initiatives of the global church), so stories are needed to serve discernment toward the kind of leadership and congregational practices that enhance that faithfulness.

Latino Stories and Church Perceptions (Martínez)

Most churches in the U.S. find it very difficult to see Latino immigrants as people who can be involved in mission. Historically, many U.S. churches have seen immigrants as objects of mission (if they have paid attention to them at all). Certainly most immigrants have a lot of needs, and churches can provide significant support. But leadership has a crucial role in helping people understand that just because an immigrant may need certain kinds of support services, and that a church's role in those services is important, immigrants are not just *objects* of mission. The stories of Latino immigrants can help us understand that they are often *subjects* in mission, particularly to their countries of origin. Latin American immigrant churches are often poor, but they tend to be involved in mission here, in Latin America, and around the world. Their approach to mission is very organic, following their familial and friendship networks, both in the U.S. and beyond.

Latin American immigrants in the U.S. are sending significant amounts of money to their relatives and friends in their countries of origin. They send more money than all of the U.S. foreign aid plus NGO support in the region put together. For example, about 25% of the economy of El Salvador is remittances, money that is sent by people here in the United States to help their relatives and friends. That is also the way U.S. Latino Christians are doing missions; they send money for church planting, orphanages, house construction, and many other types of projects in Latin America. They are also doing these types of mission in the United States, and they are working in different Latin America countries that represent the new networks they are creating in the United States.

Church leaders can create settings in which immigrant stories are shared within their own congregations and in conversations with Latino congregations. These stories can demonstrate the dynamic reality of how the poor, the immigrants, are being missionaries – how they are bringing the gospel north with them, and how they are using the resources they gain in the north to go back south and to go to other parts of the world.⁴⁴ It is not uncommon for some churches to send thousands of dollars for many good projects around the world (and these stories can be told). But there are people in the pews who are sending much smaller amounts yet making a much greater sacrifice and having a more direct impact, because this money is going directly to the point of need. These stories can shift our imaginations as we move into the discernment work of step 5.

Participants in many middle-class churches have their own understanding of an “average American experience.” However, there are Latinos in their pews and in nearby churches who can provide new awareness and understanding when we hear their stories about reading the Bible, listening for the Spirit, and walking in faith in the midst of U.S. society. Churches can create spaces where we actively ask people to tell us what’s going on – what is happening in their countries of origin, among immigrants they know, and how are they and other churches involved? If a church has only younger generations, they can invite the parents and grandparents to be guests; their stories can be welcomed as resources for understanding God’s initiatives in various contexts. The foods and music of a culture can enhance storytelling by creating an environment of hospitality and expectation.

⁴⁴ Over the last two years I have been involved in a study funded by the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. I looked at how five transnational Latino Pentecostal churches developed mission projects in Latin America following their friendship and familial networks. The results of this study will be online at <http://crcc.usc.edu/initiatives/pcr/la.html> and available as part of a book on Pentecostalism in Los Angeles.

The U.S. bias toward certain understandings about power and importance can be challenged when those whom we assume to be weak are seen as actors, aligned with Bible stories, innovative in mission, and wise about their context. Churches need these stories if we are to have adequate resources for discernment.

Leaders can shape opportunities and motivations for storytelling. In the book *A Many Colored Kingdom*, author Elizabeth Conde-Fraizer has a chapter called “From Hospitality to Shalom.”⁴⁵ In it she describes, in a very a concrete way, how church leadership can guide a congregation from hospitality to shalom. Churches often assume that if we are practicing hospitality then we’ve done something significant. Conde-Fraizer would say yes, this hospitality is significant, but it is only the first step. Hospitality provides the opportunity to open ourselves to others. In *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, Branson and I note the importance and complexities of cross-cultural hospitality, because diverse cultures would engage new relationships differently.⁴⁶ For some cultures, bringing someone into their homes is a way to express hospitality. For others, creating homes of hospitality is a bit more complicated. But whenever we share the table, at church, in a restaurant, at neighborhood events, or in our homes, we have the opportunity to practice hospitality, since we are sitting together.

But Conde-Fraizer says that hospitality has to open the door to encounter. In encounter we need to listen to each other, we need to hear our stories. That’s why Branson and I emphasize the importance of telling and listening to spiritual autobiographies.⁴⁷ How have we experienced being a Christian? How have we experienced the gifts and challenges of life? How have we experienced

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “From Hospitality to Shalom” in *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, eds. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve King, and Gary A. Parrett (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 167–210.

⁴⁶ Branson and Martínez, 70–4, 132–53, 210–31.

⁴⁷ Branson and Martínez, 19, 24, 235–6.

God's presence in our lives? Here in the United States we also need to ask how we experienced being in the United States. Storytelling has to include everybody. It's not just the American listening to the immigrant; the immigrant also needs to listen to the Americans. We both have to tell our stories; we both have to listen to each other, encounter each other. This also means that we have to deal with the struggles, the pain, and sometimes the conflict that would come from listening to each other and recognizing that we do tell the story differently. We have had different experiences, and sometimes parts of our stories will clash and conflict, at which point it might be easier not to listen to each other and to walk away. Leadership is crucial in the encounter, inviting us to continue listening, to confront the conflicts that encounter sometimes brings to the life of the church or communities trying to work together.

The challenge to leadership is that of shaping spaces, encouraging stories, and conveying the value of all voices. Among the topics of our stories we need to include reflections on those who have provide leadership in our lives – formally and informally. When we hear how the leadership of others has influenced us and our churches, we can rethink what is important in our own praxes of leadership.

Step 5: Discern and Shape New Praxis (Branson)

How can leaders shape an environment in which participants move toward a new social imaginary and engage the work of innovation? A theological conviction behind the practical theology model is that God's reign is breaking in, notably in biblical texts, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in the continuing activities of God's Spirit, and eschatologically as the future invades the present. God's reign of shalom, of saving justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new creation, is engaged in step 5 as participants embrace and lean into God's reign. In order for churches to discern and engage God's inbreaking shalom, leaders nurture conversations, listening prayer, risk, and experimentation, rooted in

preceding steps and followed by continuing feedback loops and adjustments. For the purpose of this paper, what kind of experiments would help a learning community toward new leadership praxes? Step 5 draws on all of the resources of previous steps in service of framing these leadership perspectives and activities. From step 2, churches benefit from leadership that understands participants as subjects who gain competencies for communication as they clarify their vocation in a particular context. Participants gain an awareness of the changes in their context, especially regarding ethnicities and generations. From step 3, the church knows its need to counter societal norms that undermine Christian discipleship, that it does so in the presence of the living God who is among them and ahead on them in their context, and that they have inherited practices that make discernment an effective and empowering way of life. From step 4, the church has learned how to detect God's initiatives in their own personal and church narratives, how to surface their personal and corporate graces, and how to gain awareness of opportunities in their neighborhoods and networks. Each step offers insights into leadership – and thus each step also provides warnings about how leadership can thwart God's engagement of a people in a contextual missional life.

The discernment activities of step 5 may be in small groups or with an entire congregation. Some experiments will be informal, with perhaps only two or three participants; other experiments will engage a majority of a church, perhaps in partnership with other churches. Because the people in the pews are subjects, they are invited into the set of practices relevant to being Christians in a particular location – the discipleship priorities notes by Padilla, the Bible conversations encouraged by González, and *lectio divina* presented by Bedford. As they voice their growing awareness and understanding about the call of the gospel, their corporate imagination provides images of next steps – experiments that will help them discern the graces of God and how they might participate.

Discerning New Praxes in U.S. Borderlands (Martínez)

The activities of step 4 shape us for the discernment work in step 5. As we learn to listen, says Conde-Frazier, as we really encounter the other and start understanding why the other responds the way they do, we can build compassion. Compassion is about feeling with the other, recognizing why the other has the perspective that they do, and why that perspective is important to them. During discernment we won't necessarily begin with the same point of view, but we recognize that the other's perspective is important. This indicates the importance of Habermas's approach to communicative competence (in step 2). One cannot understand the other, one cannot have compassion, until one has listened.

Conde-Frazier notes that if we are to love the neighbor, hospitality needs to lead us to passion. Once we have understood and stood with the other and have felt their pain, then we can have the passion to walk together with the other. For example, U.S.-born people cannot have passion toward the undocumented until they encounter their stories and understand the complexities of the American experience. Unless one has compassion for their experience, one cannot have the passion necessary to say that the U.S. immigration system is broken.

Then, says Conde-Frazier, after we feel compassion for each other, we can begin to build shalom – and we can work toward reconciliation. In this very simple model, Conde-Frazier⁴⁸ encourages us as leaders to find ways to create hospitality, but then to use those spaces of hospitality to make sure that we have encounters, that we learn to listen to each other and then we go to the hard work not only of listening but of confronting how that listening affects us. Our discernment work may lead us to additional experiments with relationships, cooperation, and reconciliation. Because our learning shapes our hearts and perspectives, we work toward compassion

⁴⁸ Conde-Frazier, 167–210.

and then create passion about working together. In that process we work together toward God's shalom and reconciliation.