SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AND TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE ACROSS CULTURES: THE SLI LEADERSHIP INCUBATOR

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Abstract: The obstacle in many international contexts is too few leaders to equip and disciple the growing number of new disciples, which in turn breeds a lack of sustainability to movements. By contrast, a common obstacle domestically is overcoming a pastor-centered membership model of church for a lay mobilization model of disciple making. Using adaptive leadership, complexity, and missional DNA and with the assistance of international leaders and experience in a variety of contexts, SLI (Spiritual Leadership, Inc.) has developed three organizational principles that are proving to be transferrable across cultural boundaries with necessary contextualization. The contexts of West Virginia and Brazil have been selected to make specific cross-cultural application of this learning.

Introduction

What if you found yourself leading a dying church in a declining community? The people in the congregation are aging, they no longer live in the community around the church, and the cultural makeup of the community is different than those within the church. The church seems to have lost sight of its primary mission and lacks any sense of vision, which has resulted in mere maintenance and survival. What would you do?

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These types of congregations are legion, but we want to tell you about one in particular that we, the authors, worked with through the organization called Spiritual Leadership, Inc. (SLI). It is a story that will serve as a vivid case study for our reflections in this space. The church is the product of three previous mergers of churches, each of which brought added resources and people for a season but did nothing to change the DNA. After about a decade, what remained each time was a group of divided people about the same size of only one of the churches before the mergers. This resulted in a membership model of church rather than a disciple-making model of church. Out of this came a growing sense of desperation to do something different but an unwillingness to merge again. In response to this desperation, this dying congregation made a bold move to sell everything they owned and pursue a complete restart.

To add yet another layer of complexity, leaders within this dying congregation recognized that many other churches in their community had similar stories and were also on the downhill slide toward slow death. A vision emerged of bringing churches together to restart – not merely to survive as before in merger, but instead to partner in new life that would bring missional impact in their community.

Does God still raise the dead? Is it possible for a complete restart to occur in which the tightly held values of the past can be transformed into something more missional? Can three unhealthy, dying congregations unite together and change the world around them? This is the story of Community of Grace United Methodist Church in Huntington, West Virginia.

As this story illustrates, one of the key problems in congregational renewal is finding ways to overcome a pastor-centered membership model of church for one that mobilizes the whole people of God and transforms the world through intentional disciple making. This

transformation necessarily becomes a cross-cultural experience if the gospel is to be incarnated.

Outside the European-North American context, the key obstacle is often having too few leaders to equip and disciple the growing number of new disciples, which in turn breeds a lack of sustainability to movements.[1] In attempting to address this issue, Western models have too often been adopted in international settings that lack indigenous contextualization. This is a dilemma on which SLI has been working passionately.

Over the last decade, Spiritual Leadership, Inc. has been leading transformation projects through a process called the Leadership Incubator in local churches, denominational groups, and Christ-centered nonprofit organizations. In each of these types of groups and in diverse contexts, this process is producing significant fruit. Recently, a group of leaders from various international contexts, including Brazil, Benin, Kenya, and India, participated with SLI over the course of a year to learn together and contextualize the Leadership Incubator for their own countries.

We assume that there are key transferrable principles of spiritual formation, leadership formation, and transformational movements that cross cultural boundaries. We also assume that the application of those principles must be inculturated indigenously (incarnated) and particularized to be useful. This paper proposes a synthesis of the key transferrable principles SLI's team of leaders are learning regarding how to cross cultural boundaries in the development of leaders and initiation of long-term transformational change. The contexts of West Virginia and Brazil have been selected to make specific cross-cultural application of this learning.

The Leadership Incubator is a process focused on the development of spiritual leaders in covenant community for the purpose of bringing greater missional effectiveness. This process brings leaders and their teams

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[1] P. Johnstone and J. Mandryk, *Operation World – 21st Century Edition* (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Pater Noster Publishing, 2005).

into an environment that transforms their ability to work together, continually improving both their lives as spiritual leaders and their ability to create generative ministries. Yet, before we explore the process of missional transformation, we need to direct our attention to an emerging paradigm of leadership, for it is the heart of the transformational process.

Complexity and Spirituality:
A New Paradigm of Leadership

Leadership studies have often been too simplistic in their approach, assuming that the actions and attitudes of leaders bring the rise or fall of organizations. As Yukl points out, much of the current leadership research has simply focused on leaders themselves, specifically their actions, roles, attitudes, and characteristics.[2] While leader actions and attitudes are important, a more realistic view of the world must see that what occurs within organizations and beyond (domestically and internationally) is much too complex to make such simple judgments. While certain research has sought to look at the context or situations in which leadership happens,[3] and still other research has looked at the dynamics occurring in the relationship of leaders and followers,[4] there is still a gap in understanding the actual process of leadership within organizations that takes the complex realities of twenty-first century organizational leadership into account.

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[2] G. A. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006).

[3] F. E. Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) and P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard, "Life Cycle Theory of Leadership," *Training and Development Journal* 23 (1969): 26–34.

[4] G. B. Graen and M. Uhl-Bien, "Relationship-Based Approach to Leadership: Development of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory of Leadership over 25 Years: Applying a Multi-Level Multi-Domain Perspective," *Leadership Quarterly* 6(2) (1995): 219–47.

Many organizations are facing today what Heifetz referred to as *adaptive challenges*.[5] These are challenges that require new learning, because applying current know-how is no longer effective. In the midst of such challenges, it is the natural response of many organizational leaders to attempt to lead based on former experience or to simply "fake it" when technical competence or previous experience no longer produce the results they had previously. Heifetz insists that adaptive work requires new learning not only by those with leadership roles but by everyone involved. Adaptive work requires creating an environment where values and assumptions can be challenged and revised and where learning and experimentation is welcomed.

In view of this, there must be a distinction drawn between leaders (including their most important roles) and the actual process of leadership. Leadership is most often defined as a process whereby one person influences a group toward achieving a common goal.[6] By contrast, leadership is now being understood as relationally constituted. An emerging literature called "complexity leadership theory" sees leadership as a complex, dynamic process that emerges in the interactions of people and ideas.[7] In this respect leadership catalyzes adaptive work, not by making change happen but by evoking change dynamics among people who work and learn together. The focus on leadership, then, shifts from the individual as a leader to the actions of leadership that foster creative and productive learning within organizations. Thus, leadership is fundamentally a system phenomenon.[8]

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[5] R. A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[6] P. G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice,* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2004).

[7] B. B. Lichtenstein, M. Uhl-Bien, R. Marion, A. Seers, J. D. Orton, and C. Schreiber, "Complexity Leadership Theory: An Interactive Perspective on Leading in Complex Adaptive Systems," *Emergence: Complexity & Organization* 8(4) (2006): 2–12.

[8] R. Marion and M. Uhl-Bien, "Leadership in Complex Organizations," *Leadership Quarterly* 12(4) (2001): 389–418; R. Marion and M. Uhl-Bien,

Leaders enable the conditions within which the process of adaptive leadership occurs but are not themselves the direct source of change.

Writing on complex theories of leadership, E. B. Dent has endeavored to relate complexity theory with workplace spirituality.[9] Struck by the absence of consideration of spiritual dimensions or wisdom traditions within complexity research, Dent points out that although most researchers do not see God's hand in the data, his perspective in looking at the same evidence is that many complexity theory philosophies and evidence strengthen the case for the presence and action of a supreme being.

Another scholar/practitioner who has integrated complexity perspectives with Christian spirituality is Alan Hirsch, who studied the two most explosive Jesus movements in history, the early church and the Chinese underground church in the latter half of the twentieth century. He identified six key themes that were resident in both movements that are consistent with complexity.[10] Hirsch begins his book with a rather compelling diagnosis of the current state of Western Christianity:

> We find ourselves lost in a perplexing global jungle where our well-used cultural and theological maps don't seem to work anymore…The truth is that the twenty-first century is turning out to be a highly complex phenomenon where terrorism, paradigmatic technological innovation, an unsustainable environment, rampant consumerism, discontinuous change, and perilous ideologies confront us at every point. In the face of this, even

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"Complexity Theory and Al-Qaeda," *Emergence: Complexity & Organization* 5 (2003): 56–78; and M. Uhl-Bien, R. Marion, and B. McKelvey, "Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting Leadership from the Industrial Age to the Knowledge Era," *Leadership Quarterly* 18(4) (2007): 298–318.

[9] E. B. Dent, "Reconciling Complexity Theory in Organizations and Christian Spirituality," *Emergence: Complexity & Organization* 5(4) (2003): 124–40.

[10] A. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

the most confident among us would have to admit, in our more honest moments, that the church as we know it faces a very significant adaptive challenge. The overwhelming majority of church leaders today report that they feel it is getting much harder for their communities to negotiate the increasing complexities in which they find themselves. As a result, the church is on a massive, long-trended decline in the West.[11]

According to Hirsch, the inherited formulas, tools, and techniques will not likely work anymore. The church is facing an adaptive challenge to find a new paradigm for faithfulness as the body of Christ. Hirsch insists that "we are now living in a time when only a solution that goes to the very roots of what it means to be Jesus's people will do."[12] However, when glimpses of an answer come they are so radical and disturbing in nature that we often retreat to the safety of the familiar and the controllable.

By studying several of the greatest Jesus movements in history, Hirsch discovers the makeup of what he refers to as missional DNA (mDNA). As he puts it, "Einstein said that when the solution is simple, God is speaking…There are six simple but interrelating elements of mDNA, forming a complex and living structure."[13] These elements represent the simple rules or principles that form the fractal-like pattern of any authentic, missional Jesus movement. Simply put, these elements are present at every level within a living system, at the macro level (the overall movement), the group level, and the micro level (the individual). In fact, Hirsch says that this mDNA is present in every true follower of Jesus and every group of Jesus followers, although it may be latent or dormant. These six elements of mDNA are: (a) Jesus is Lord; (b) disciple making; (c) missional-incarnational impulse; (d) apostolic environment; (e) organic systems; and (f) *communitas,* not community. Further description of

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[11] Hirsch, 16.
[12] Hirsch, 17.
[13] Hirsch, 24.

these six elements, as well as other complexity research, will be forthcoming in the case study discussion.

SLI Leadership Incubator: The Adaptive Model

Using the backdrop of adaptive leadership, complexity, and missional DNA (mDNA) and with the assistance of domestic and international leaders and experience in a variety of contexts, SLI has developed an incubator process of leadership development. In the typical Leadership Incubator environment, 6 to 12 leaders spend significant amounts of time together for at least a year. Each session is structured around the integration of three organizational principles and three operational values that are proving to be transferrable across cultural boundaries. The three organizational principles are defined as a) becoming spiritual leaders, b) creating environments of transformation, and c) developing processes/systems that produce fruit. Each of these principles are characterized by three operational values: Loving, Learning, and Leading (L3).

In the environment and process of the Leadership Incubator, the assumption is made that learning happens best in community interaction and overcoming many of the obstacles faced today in various contexts will require new solutions. As previously mentioned, this is what Ronald Heifetz refers to as adaptive challenges.[14] Overcoming adaptive challenges requires new learning by all those with the problem. The leader's role in such situations shifts away from giving answers toward increasing the adaptive capacities of the team and organization. In seeking to model this same phenomenon, SLI invites leaders, including the aforementioned international leaders, into this process to learn adaptively together.

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[14] Heifetz.

*Key Transferrable (Organizational) Principles of
the SLI Leadership Incubator:*

The first organizational principle of SLI is *becoming spiritual leaders* in covenant community who love, learn, and lead (L3) together. We work on this principle by means of a variety of processes integrating spiritual formation and leadership development in covenant community. The theological foundation for this generative principle is that Christology leads to missiology and missiology, in turn, leads to ecclesiology. In other words, Christ must remain at the center for spiritual leadership. The mission of spiritual leaders is grounded in Christ's mission. The church, then, gets its identity from the mission it participates with in Christ, which is God's mission. This first organizational principle states that leaders should exercise authentically the type of leadership that is desired in others.[15] What is Christ-like leadership? The Apostle Paul describes Christian leadership as a unique form of servanthood modeled after Jesus. Christ-like leadership, described in Philippians chapter 2 involves *kenosis*, making the self nothing for the sake of God's mission in the world (complementary to Level 5 Leadership in *Good to Great).*[16]

The second organizational principle of SLI is *creating environments for transformation*. This begins with the intentional creation of L3 covenants in each Leadership Incubator team. This intentional environment involves the shift to a team leadership paradigm. Team leadership is necessary because the assumption is being made that solo leaders cannot overcome adaptive challenges alone. Instead, leaders create intentional environments in which the adaptive capacities of the organization can be increased through the interactive learning that occurs within shared team leadership. In this intentional environment, time is given to developing team-based

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[15] R. E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996) and Arbinger Institute, *Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006).
[16] J. C. Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

spiritual formation practices and to developing and multiplying team-based ministry. The theological foundation for this is that God lives in community as the Trinity, and Jesus modeled trinitarian life in community, in *koinonia*, with the disciples. In Christian community, transformation occurs through interaction and mission together rather than through information given solely by a leader.[17] A communal environment moves teams of leaders into an incarnational process of inhabiting, of indwelling the lives and cultures of others, just as the Son of God came to dwell among us. The implication of this is that effective generative leadership requires incarnational learning: getting into the "shoes" or context of others and knowing it from the inside.

The third organizational principle of SLI is *developing processes/systems that produce fruit*. Leading change involves several key elements within the Leadership Incubator. First, the team engages in Ministry Action Planning (MAP), which is grounded in the current reality (context), focused toward embodying values, mission, and vision, and implemented through intentional disciple-making systems that allow for continual improvement and multiplication of team ministry and mission (mDNA).[18] Another element in leading change involves moving past technical problems to truly facing and overcoming adaptive challenges (getting to root causes) together.[19]

The materials that SLI uses are focused on these three organizational principles and are designed to elicit transformative interaction among the team of leaders. While the principles transfer across cultural lines, the specific content and delivery methods relaying those principles often shift as the principles are contextualized for specific situations. Rather than detail those contextual nuances in theoretical terms, the following discussion highlights how the SLI organizational

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[17] Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey.

[18] Hirsch.

[19] Heifetz.

principles play out in two different settings, one domestic and one international.

Case Study: Community of Grace UMC in Huntington, West Virginia

Here we pick up the transformation story in Huntington, West Virginia, which began with three dying and declining United Methodist churches. All three churches engaged in the beginning stages of a Leadership Incubator to discern how they might voluntarily die and be reborn as one new missional community of faith. SLI refers to this particular type of project as a ReStart.

The process began with the launching of a new team with participants from each of the three aforementioned churches. This team began by crafting a covenant for purposes of accountability and clarity of expectations. It included elements related to intentional spiritual formation together, trust and love for one another, and focus toward clarifying the current reality and discerning a unified vision. Through the creation of this intentional L3 covenant environment, the team began to grow spiritually together in a safe place and began to dream God's dreams again. In clarifying their current reality, they discovered that incremental change would never bring the kind of lasting and transformative fruit they were imagining. Led by the Holy Spirit, they pursued Christ and learned together Christ's vision for them. As a result, they began to model a new set of values for the congregations that put Jesus Christ at the center of their lives and focused on Christ's mission into the world. Only out of this focus did the church have meaning and purpose.

Coinciding with all of this, the team began to lead the congregations into joint prayer, discernment, and listening. Since there was no set agenda for where this Leadership Incubator process would lead, the three churches had the opportunity to pray and listen to one another regularly for most of a year. The ReStart team facilitated these times of prayer and listening events but saw their role as recorders of learning rather than

presenters of information. Through these discernment events, a clear vision began to emerge of where God was leading them. After many months, the three churches voted separately to voluntarily close their doors, which involved giving up their leadership, buildings, and charter. The hope was to recapture the best of the missional heritage of the three churches without carrying all of the baggage into the future.

At above 90 percent in each of the congregations, the decision was to close and ReStart as one new missional community of faith. They took the name Community of Grace United Methodist Church and began their journey toward living out God's vision for them. A new team was formed to continue the Leadership Incubator process that was particularly selected based on complementary gifts and passions (see Ephesians 4). While the pastors of the three former churches were involved in all of these transitions, the new church was clearly shifting away from the former pastor-centered membership model to a lay-centered missional disciple-making model. The remainder of the story will be described using Hirsch's framework of mDNA.

Jesus is Lord

As Hirsch points out, the simple confession that Jesus is Lord is at the center and circumference of every significant Jesus movement, and with this confession they changed the world. In order to survive persecution that was present in both the early Church period and in the Chinese movement, faith became linked in utter simplicity to Jesus, and they jettisoned all unnecessary impediments. Hirsch explains that the simple gospel (meaning "good news") message of Jesus spread in patterns similar to an epidemic. "Given favorable social and religious conditions, and the right people relationships, easily transferable ideas can create powerful movement that can change societies."[20] Thus, as the

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[20] Hirsch, 86.

people of Israel were to have allegiance to One God (Deut. 6:4–9), so Jesus becomes the one reference point for life and existence for the church. This means that everything – one's work, one's domestic life, one's health, one's worship – has significance to God and is to belong to God in Christ Jesus. This necessarily removes any division between what is sacred and secular, but instead all of life belongs to God. The early Christian movement and the Chinese underground church discovered this claim that Jesus is Lord as their sustaining and guiding center in the midst of a massive adaptive challenge. The other five elements of mDNA revolve around this one.

At Community of Grace, the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of John served as the foundation on which the whole transformation process was built. John 15 insists that abiding in Jesus is the key to fruitfulness and joy and that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. With this in mind, the ReStart team and each consecutive leadership team at Community of Grace purposed to set apart Jesus as Lord (I Peter 3:15), and they built accountability to this commitment into their covenant. It was their conviction that being authentic disciples of Jesus must precede any efforts at making disciples of Jesus. This reiterates SLI's first organizational principle of becoming spiritual leaders (like Jesus). Staying deeply connected with Jesus forms the root from which the fruit comes through the Spirit's activity in the branches.

Apostolic Environment

The John 15 passage of abiding in Christ uses the imagery of the vine and the branches. Interestingly, this imagery has application both personally and collectively. It is critical for each individual follower to abide in Christ; however, the metaphor is one of a vineyard, not a vine and single branch. In the Western context, this is often overly individualized.

The second organizational principle of SLI is creating an environment for transformation. This environment is one of love, trust, and mutual accountability in covenant community. The Trinity serves as the primary model for

this type of community, and the New Testament describes how the early Church followed this pattern in the gospels and the book of Acts. This environment creates the context for deeper pursuit of loving God and neighbor (L1), as well as for learning (L2) and leading (L3) together. Thus, it is a formational and relational environment, as well as a missional environment since those within the environment are pursuing greater effectiveness at both being and making disciples. Hirsch describes this as an apostolic environment, which is one of the elements of mDNA.

Simply put, the word apostle means "sent one," so for Jesus movements to multiply to become movements, a sending environment is necessary. Once again, Hirsch points out the massive adaptive challenge that the church is facing, which is rooted in the prevailing Constantinian (Christendom) form of church, with all its associated institutional rigidity. Missiologist Alan Roxburgh insists that the current situation is one of liminality, a transition from one fundamental form of the church to another.[21] This liminality necessitates that apostolic role. Hirsch indicates that true apostolic influence is characterized by a more bottom-up, highly relational quality of leadership rather than the typical CEO-type leadership that tends to disempower others.

Donde Ashmos Plowman and his colleagues discuss how small changes in the initiating conditions brought about the emergence of radical change in a church.[22] The small change came from an informal group only somewhat connected to the church that acted primarily out of boredom and began a homeless breakfast. In this context, a far-from-equilibrium state gave way to emergent self-organization. That far-from-equilibrium

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[21] A. J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997).
[22] D. A. Plowman, L. T. Baker, T. E. Beck, M. Kulkarni, S. T. Solansky, and D. V. Travis, "Radical Change Accidentally: The Emergence and Amplification of Small Change" *Academy of Management Journal* 50(3) (2007): 515–43.

state was brought about by four factors: (a) imminence of organizational decline; (b) change in leadership; (c) struggles with identity; and (d) ongoing major organizational conflict. They point out that in a complex adaptive system (CAS), individuals and groups form a nonlinear network. Every time two people interact, the actions of one have consequences on the other, whose response feeds back information to the first person, who then responds again. The result is a continuous circular loop, or what Weick called a "double interact."[23] Negative feedback attempts to counteract deviations, while positive feedback amplifies them. In this particular church situation, the actions served to amplify the small change into continuous radical change. The interaction of resources, language, and symbols not only amplified the initial small change but also impacted each other bringing further amplification. Interestingly, the pastoral leaders in the church were not involved in the initial small change, but their use of language and symbols helped to clearly articulate the transformation that was occurring and served to create what Hirsch calls an apostolic environment.[24] This language of transformation "played a role in creating, sustaining, and maintaining the church's unfolding new vision and values."[25]

At the leadership-team level, Hirsch suggests an open learning system, which allows for "fit and split" and "contend and transcend."[26] The term *fit* refers to that which binds together in unity, namely the group's common ethos and purpose. *Split* occurs when diversity of expression is intentionally allowed in the team. *Contend* refers to leadership permitting and even encouraging disagreement, debate, and dialogue around core tasks, and *transcend* means that all in the group collectively agree

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[23] K. E. Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[24] Hirsch.

[25] Plowman, Baker, Beck, Kulkarni, Solansky, and Travis, 532.

[26] R. T. Pascale, *Managing on the Edge: How Successful Companies Use Conflict to Stay Ahead* (London: Viking, 1990).

to overcome disagreement for the sake of finding new solutions. This type of team approach to leadership serves to create apostolic environments as well.

The former reality of the three congregations that became Community of Grace was one of decline and despair. Leadership was reserved for only a few (primarily clergy), and the environment was more about survival than mission. The ReStart process brought with it a shift to a team approach to leadership and mission. Over time, this team environment brought empowerment to the whole people and brought a grassroots, relational quality to the emerging transformation. Within this team environment, pastors had important roles to play, but they were neither the center of ministry nor the source of change. Similarly to the Plowman et al. discussion, both the pastors and key lay leaders began to recognize God's vision emerging and point attention to it by use of language and symbols.

The leadership team that formed upon the launch of the new community of faith functioned in the same covenantal (L3) ways as did the initial ReStart team. Built on the foundation of spiritual formation in covenant, the team became an open learning system as Hirsch and others describe. In this environment, the team experienced remarkable unity of purpose, while simultaneously sharing tremendous diversity of perspectives. Their shared mission together gave them the courage to risk and opened the doors for the church to become a sending community.

With unity and trust in place in the leadership team, they were able to clarify the current reality of their context. As in the Plowman et al. article, the far-from-equilibrium state at Community of Grace was brought on by similar factors. The leadership team spent time discerning, researching, and clarifying the strengths and weaknesses of the new community of faith. In addition, they began extensive research in the city of Huntington that led not only to learning but also to discovering a sense of vision for what their impact could be. This

vision was emergent in nature over time and the leaders on the team used language and symbols to point others in the church and community to this vision. In the midst of discerning this emergent vision, the team also clarified their values and challenged their former assumptions about church. They began to hold one another accountable to personally embodying their new shared values, mission, and vision. This set the context for Community of Grace to become a sending environment.

Missional-Incarnational Impulse

In order to understand their sense of mission, Community of Grace looked no further than Christ's Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20. They determined to understand and embody what it meant to both be and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This necessarily led them outside the walls of their church into the community in which they live. This new impulse was a radical shift from their former attractional model.

Hirsch describes the missional-incarnational impulse as the "dynamic outward thrust and the related deepening impulse, which together *seed* and *embed* the gospel into different cultures and people groups."[27] Thus, this missional-incarnational impulse is the practical outworking of the mission of God and the incarnation. It is rooted in how God redeemed the world and how God revealed himself to us. Hirsch contrasts a missional/sending impulse with the attractional model that is more popular in the Western church. The former is about multiplication and the latter is about addition.[28]

The Incarnation (see John 1:1-18) is God's mysterious action of moving into our neighborhood in Christ Jesus as an act of humble love. Jesus not only identified with us in a radical way but also revealed to us the human image of God. As Hirsch puts it, "The Incarnation not only qualifies God's act in the world, but must also qualify

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[27] Hirsch, 25.

[28] Hirsch.

ours."[29] If God reached out to us in a loving, humble, incarnational way, then our reaching to the world should likewise be incarnational. "Incarnational ministry essentially means taking the church to the people, rather than bringing people to the church."[30] Together, this missional-incarnational impulse represents the church's innate reproductive capacity. "If you think about it, this is actually how all powerful movements start. It begins with a group of people impassioned with a cause that reproduces itself through multiplication systems."[31]

The missional-incarnational impulse at Community of Grace is still growing. It began to form in the leadership team's covenant discussions about being authentic disciples and God's mission into the world in Christ. These discussions prompted experimentation in the community, which began simply with listening to the people in their neighborhood. This listening planted seeds for relationship to form that provided insight into how they could love and serve their neighbors. Out of this, partnerships began to emerge between the church and the neighborhood association, the schools, and other churches. In addition, they began to hold "Engage" events in the community to build relationship and serve others and potentially connect them to the family of Jesus followers.

Disciple-Making and Organic Systems

The new missional-incarnational impulse brought the necessity of developing an intentional system of making disciples, which is one of the ways they embodied SLI's third organizational principle. Hirsch points out that the second element of mDNA is disciple making, which is the irreplaceable and lifelong task of becoming like Jesus by embodying his message. According to Hirsch, it is an irreplaceable core task of the Church and must be structured into every church's basic formula. This is

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[29] Hirsch, 133.
[30] Hirsch, 135.
[31] Hirsch, 139.

where Jesus himself focused his efforts. This element "is at once the starting point, the abiding strategic practice, as well as the key to all lasting missional impact in and through movements."[32] He explains that forming simple disciple-making systems was key not only to the two primary movements he studied but also to many others including the Methodist movement in eighteenth century England led by the Wesleys. Embodying this element requires a move away from consumerism in local churches and toward creating environments for people to become like Jesus. This is not only embodying Christ-likeness, which involves patterning and modeling, but also transmission of Jesus' life and message in viral patterns through relationships.

Another element of mDNA is to devise organic systems. Interestingly, organic images of the church and the kingdom of God abound in scriptures, including the body, field, yeast, seeds, trees, living temples, vines, animals, etc. According to Hirsch, these images draw their primary theological foundation from the biblical doctrine of creation (cosmology). "The Holy Spirit is described as the essence of life/spirit: it was he who brooded over the chaos of the preformed universe and brought forth form."[33] All too often, though, contemporary images of church leadership and structure are mechanistic. Hirsch characterizes a living systems approach as one that seeks to structure the common life of an organization around the natural rhythms and structures that mirror life itself. This was certainly true in both the early church and Chinese underground church movements. Organic structuring fosters greater adaptation to different conditions and activation of latent intelligence when needed (emergence) precisely because structures for human interaction are constantly forming and reforming around people's intrinsic interests and needs.

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[32] Hirsch, 103.
[33] Hirsch, 181.

With clarity around their focus (values, mission, vision), the leadership team at Community of Grace engaged in designing an intentional and simple disciple-making system. This simple system was designed to be generative in nature and required the launch of more teams with the same mDNA as the leadership team (L3 covenant environment). Over the course of the next few months, the participants in the leadership team began launching new teams that were directly relationally connected to the leadership team and to one another in partnered mission. These four teams represented the different steps or stages in the church's new disciple-making system: Engage, Connect, Grow, and Send.

The Engage team is particularly focused on engaging outside the walls of the church building in incarnational ways with those in need and disconnected to the good news of Christ. Their role is to develop relationships with persons in hopes of connecting them to the family of Jesus followers and to Jesus. This team hands off persons to the work of the Connect Team that helps people get connected to the church and to Jesus in authentic relationships. As true connection happens, the work of the Grow team facilitates the development of disciples of Jesus through intentional covenant groups. Finally, the work of the Send team assists disciples in discerning their own gifts and passions and sends them into ministry and mission accordingly. Thus, the cycle begins again and is continuously repeated and reproduced.

It is important to remember that this organic network is held together by a common set of values, principles, and purpose rather than an institutional structure. This type of organic system has the potential of virus-like growth, which both Hirsch[34] and Marion and Uhl-Bien[35] compare even to organizations such as Al Qaeda. Hirsch says, "It is this aspect of organic multiplication at a remarkable rate that makes the missional-incarnational

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[34] Hirsch.
[35] Marion and Uhl-Bien.

impulse so very powerful."[36] Organic multiplication begins much slower than addition, but in the end is infinitely more effective.

Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja indicate that CAS become more vulnerable the more homogenous they become.[37] They write, "To thwart homogeneity, nature relies on the rich structural recombination triggered by sexual reproduction,"[38] which maximizes diversity. This is why churches, like people, must multiply by reproduction rather than cloning. Hirsch says that "*reproducibility* needs to be built into the initiating model through the embedding of a simple guiding system that ensures that the organization will continue and evolve through a process akin to sexual reproduction, whereby we share new genetic information and yet remain the same species."[39] He isolates the elements of mDNA as these simple, reproducible, guiding agents in Jesus movements.

By structuring themselves in an intentional, organic system around disciple making, Community of Grace has overcome their former mechanistic structure and created the environment for generative growth. In this system, what was once leadership by the few has become leadership distributed to many through intentional reproduction. In fact, the four new teams (Engage, Connect, Grow, Send) created by lay leaders on the leadership team are now involving around 25 percent of the congregation in leadership and responsibility of embodying their disciple-making system. There are many others as well who are involved in mission and ministry being led by these teams. It is important to note that while Community of Grace has radically restructured around disciple making, their new structure is still in line with the requirements laid out in the United Methodist Book of Discipline.

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[36] Hirsch, 207.
[37] Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja.
[38] Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, 28–9.
[39] Hirsch, 213.

The fruit of all of this is a new (resurrected) missional community of faith that is intentionally developing disciple-making disciples within covenant teams that are reproducing similar teams. They are engaging the poor, baptizing and discipling new Jesus followers, and sending people into partnered mission and ministry. Additionally, they are building partnerships with other churches, with the school system, and with the neighborhood association to more effectively embody their mission and values. They are indeed living into their vision becoming a vital church living through the power of the Holy Spirit, creating passionate disciples of Jesus Christ, and transforming lives and the world.

Communitas, not Community

The final element of mDNA is *communitas,* not mere community. Hirsch describes it this way, "The persecuted church in both the early Christian movement and in China experience each other in the context of shared ordeal that binds them together in a much deeper form of community than the one we have generally become accustomed to."[40] He indicates that in the Western church there has been a significant move from the missional idea of "me for the community and the community for the world" to the more consumptive "the community for me." Hirsch draws upon anthropologist Victor Turner's use of the ideas of *liminality* and *communitas.*[41] Turner studied rite-of-passage ceremonies in African tribes, and the term *liminality* was used to describe the transition process accompanying a fundamental change of state or social position. It is that period "betwixt and between" that is "frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility."[42] In the midst of *liminality,* those experiencing the shared ordeal move from being disoriented and individualistic to a deep

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[40] Hirsch, 218.

[41] V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969).

[42] Turner, 95.

bond of comradeship and community forged by the conditions of *liminality*. This deep comradeship and community is what Turner refers to as *communitas,* which is always linked to the experience of *liminality*.

For Hirsch, *communitas* presents a challenge to the safe, middle-class, consumerist captivity of the church. "And it is here where the adaptive challenge of the twenty-first century could be God's invitation to the church to rediscover itself as a missional *communitas*."[43] Hirsch argues that *liminality* and *communitas* ought to be the normative experience of the pilgrim people of God. Transformation is a biblical norm: it comes in the context of great challenge, including the exodus, the exile to Babylon, the time of Jesus, and the early church. The implication is that the church is "always reforming," always transcending its current forms.

All living systems will cease to exist if they fail to respond to their environments. The law of requisite variety reminds us that "the survival of any living system depends on its capacity to *cultivate* (not just tolerate) adaptability and diversity in its internal structure."[44] The system in static equilibrium does not have the adequate internal resources or mechanisms to respond to adaptive challenges. Therefore, self-transcendence is essential to organic health. This principle is all the more true of the church. According to Hirsch, "*Mission is, and must be,* [as the movement beyond itself] *the organizing principle of the church.*"[45]

The adaptive challenges that the three former churches were facing brought a desperation that helped initiate change. The willingness to change allowed leaders to come together into covenant and reconnect with the primary mission of the church. In the midst of these shared adaptive struggles, *communitas* began to emerge. To this point, the members of the leadership teams regularly articulate their deep trust, love, and camaraderie with one

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[43] Hirsch, 222.
[44] Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, 20.
[45] Hirsch, 232.

another in those covenant environments. In the midst of *communitas,* leaders were able to articulate the emerging vision in ways that transformed their living in the present.

For this purpose, a vision of ourselves in mission, going beyond present boundaries, engaging people and cultures that are truly "other," catalyzes communal action. As Hirsch states,

> [H]olding a definite sense of vision (a preferred future) and mission informs and alters how people think and how they will behave in the present. Viewed this way, the future is a means to alter behavior. The new behavior shapes the ends, which in turn alter the future, and the spiral continues.[46]

Thus, vision serves as a catalyst, a tag, or a strange attractor.[47] Visions such as Kennedy's moonwalk and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech evoke missional *communitas.* Hirsch says, "We look back on such events as "inevitable" but "it is not so at all. We seem to lose perspective on the missional *communitas* that visions like these evoke…When we are caught up into it, and pursue it, we are changed, and we go on to enact history."[48]

SLI's role in the Leadership Incubator is simply to keep the three organizational principles before the leadership teams and to provide objectivity and accountability for those teams to live out precisely what they themselves are designing as the Spirit leads. Thus, SLI is modeling the pursuit of Christ (becoming spiritual leaders) and participating in the covenant, while intentionally creating and shepherding the environment and process. All the design and fruit from the Leadership Incubator has emerged from those in the new church who were facing those adaptive challenges.

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[46] Hirsch, 233.

[47] Marion and Uhl-Bien.

[48] Hirsch, 234.

Context 2: Brazil

The West Virginia case study illustrates the three SLI organizational principles and how spiritual leadership can grow and transformational change can occur across cultural lines. It is helpful, however, to discuss the use of these principles within an international context. The context of Brazil was chosen because of the interest in launching SLI Leadership Incubators there and due to the participation and reflections of a key Brazilian leader within SLI.

In Brazil, there are two unique challenges that are being faced: context and the question of necessity and/or relevancy. One challenge presented by the Brazilian ministry context is that, unlike most of the contexts in which the Leadership Incubator model has been applied, this is a church that has experienced much growth in recent years. Consequently, not only do materials need to be translated, but they also need to be refocused, since much of the English translation of materials assumes a context of decline within the church. While the key organizational principles apply in the growing church context as they do in a declining church context, there is a significant shift in focus from turnaround and renewal to accelerating and sustaining momentum. Additionally, the translation of materials also includes shifts in metaphors and symbols and delivery time reduction, since at least one facilitator (during initial Leadership Incubators) is assumed not to be fluent in Portuguese. Translation and interpretation potentially doubles the time of presentations.

Context also presents itself as a challenge when it comes to establishing covenant. This is due to the fact that covenantal relationships, while formed very naturally in Brazilian culture, are also very informal in nature. Therefore, intentionally establishing covenant for a particular reason brings the risk of being unnatural or forced. One needs to discover ways (with the help of local leaders) to naturally develop the need for covenant in the context of a Leadership Incubator. Nonetheless, the adaptive nature of the Leadership Incubator allows

for enough flexibility to become effective in diverse contextual settings.

The question of necessity and/or relevancy is a challenge because even though it is believed that the core principles of the Leadership Incubator remain true and effective across cultures, it is still up to local leaders to decide whether or not this is a model that might be effective in developing generative ministries in their context. According to Bishop João Carlos Lopes, president of the council of bishops of the Methodist Church in Brazil, a leadership development model such as the Leadership Incubator is needed and vital to the current situation of the Methodist Church in Brazil.[49] It is needed not only as a means of accelerating growth but also as a means of creating balance and sustainability in the midst of growth. The uniqueness of the Leadership Incubator model lies in the fact that it does not simply develop spiritual leaders. It does so in the context of community, where leaders learn with and from each other, grow together in faith, and learn how to develop *systems that allow for continual improvement and multiplication of team ministry and mission* (mDNA).[50] Such movement does not always happen naturally in the context of rapid growth and the urgency of daily "to-dos."

Bishop Lopes added that the flip side of rapid growth is a certain blindness that occurs amongst leaders due to the excitement in the midst of growth. This can bring a failure to realize the continuous need for change in order to adapt to new demands. New situations make our past experiences and thought references inadequate to address the current demands. This takes us back to Heifetz's *adaptive challenges* and the idea that current challenges require new learning because applying current know-how is no longer effective.[51] There are few situations in the life of organizations that present more challenges requiring new learning than one of rapid growth. The Leadership

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[49] J. C. Lopes, (Interview April 5, 2011).
[50] Hirsch.
[51] Heifetz.

Incubator model allows leaders to refocus and learn together in the context of their teams. At the same time, they develop stronger relationships with each other and with God. The long-term nature of this model keeps it from being "hit or miss" and allows for cyclical continuity.

That all being said, the temptation for leaders in Brazil to forget their "first love" and lose sight of spiritual growth and intentional disciple making is as real as it is for our North American brothers and sisters. Thus, the focus on becoming spiritual leaders (principle 1), creating environments for transformation (principle 2), and developing fruit-producing processes/ systems (principle 3) is not only applicable but crucial. The intentional focus on these principles is precisely what is needed to accelerate movement and momentum both spiritually and missionally. The environment of the L3 covenant is key.

The long-term expectation created in an international partnership such as this is that Brazilian leaders would in turn be able to contextually utilize the Leadership Incubator in their missional efforts. Bishop Lopes added that the Methodist Church in Brazil now has missionaries in England, Peru, Paraguay, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. As the Leadership Incubator model adapts to the ministry context in Brazil, there are no reasons for it not to be used reversely in Brazilian missionary efforts.

Critical Reflection and Summary

Although the SLI Leadership Incubator is producing much fruit, it is important to identify some challenges and limitations for this model. Regarding challenges, the model has been applied in a variety of different cultural contexts within the United States, but there is much to learn about contextualization within international contexts. Those international leaders who have applied this model are pleased with the initial results, but much more data is needed.

One important limitation of this model is that it is not designed to produce quick results. While fruit can be seen in the initial moments, the SLI Leadership Incubator is designed with a long-term view of organizational change in mind. Another limitation is that the model is such a different paradigm from what many leaders are used to using. As such, many leaders who experience the model have difficulty applying all they are learning in their own context.

The SLI Leadership Incubator is an environment and process that has application in many cultural contexts. While much more detail can be given related to contextualization, the previous discussion highlights the adaptive nature of the Leadership Incubator and how it is being utilized in multiple cultures. Much can be shifted in the form and particular content for purposes of contextualization, but the key organizational principles of SLI translate across cultural lines.