
**WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN LEADERSHIP ACROSS
CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES?
PERSPECTIVES, OBSERVATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS
FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL LOCATION**

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Abstract Based on one historical and two contemporary case studies, this article (1) provides concrete examples of the generative theological and missiological proposals emerging from marginalized groups – those considered deficient Christians and deficient human beings; (2) suggests a theoretical framework to help reflect and learn from cross-cultural experiences, particularly from the margins; and (3) names practices which can either facilitate or repress change in Christian communities' cross-cultural experiences. For Christian leaders, the article questions our implicit assumptions about cross-cultural engagements and interplay, and it challenges our current structures of control when faced with uncomfortable change.

Introduction and Methodology

What does it take to learn leadership across cultural and religious boundaries? This is a difficult question because it could lead us to assume that all learning across cultures and religions has the same dynamics. From my scholarly perspective, a universal, non-conflicting methodology and pedagogy of cross-cultural and cross-religious learning is thin and deceitful. Certainly it is a misguided and naïve assumption. I am arguing, however, that all cross-cultural encounters are asymmetrical: we never meet, engage and interact with people of other cultures and religions in the same plane of reference.

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Although the circumstances that bring people together in cross-cultural and cross-religious encounters and dynamics create a particular space of shared affinities and/or interests, people from different cultures and religions never meet in the same plane of reference. Difference – whether in terms of class, gender, age, sexual orientation, or ethnicity – is perhaps the common denominator in cross-cultural and cross-religious encounters and dynamics. Yet there is a strong inclination to dismiss those differences and asymmetry (usually when face to face with our cross-cultural and cross-religious friends) and quickly emphasize our unity and commonality for the sake of good relationships, and we frequently evade what could potentially be troubling and upsetting. Repeatedly, we dismiss power dynamics – the binomial of power and context which shapes and changes our encounters and interactions. The asymmetrical and contextual realities of cross-cultural and cross-religious encounters are *real*, yet are minimized at best and ignored at worst.

In order to suggest an answer to the question I posed above, let me offer some methodological grounding for cross-cultural and cross-religious encounters, dynamics, and learnings. This methodological grounding is not a theoretical structure but more akin to an open mathematical matrix where other variables can be included. As they are included, the matrix changes. I am giving you, the reader, my matrix so that it may help you in adding to/changing/reconfiguring your own matrix of engaging with and reflecting on cross-cultural and cross-religious dynamics.

My method is grounded in biography – or as my Pentecostal sisters and brothers might say, *testimonio*. This essay is about testimonies grounded in the experience of the people, particularly people who are at the margins. My method integrates leadership practices and critical reflection in and through *testimony*¹ – biographical

¹ The distinguished Roman Catholic Asian theologian Peter Phan uses the term *myth* to describe the agency of common people. By using the term he

engagement in the complex dynamics of communities seeking sustainability, dignity of life and basic needs for simple but fruitful living. This method, as you will see, is also participatory – I wrestle to immerse myself in the lives of others on their own terms.² My method of theological and academic reflection seeks an embodied, historical and grassroots grounding. I strive for academic work and theological reflection that is understood by the layperson. Sometimes I achieve it; other times I need to go back to the drawing board. But I will not give up what I have understood to be my vocation as a world Christianity and mission studies scholar.

I will not deny that at times I have thought that my methodological insights were misunderstandings rather than ideas emerging from serious reflection. Then one of my colleagues shared with me bell hooks' reflections on theory and practice:

When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-discovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experiences makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other.³

She strongly persuaded me to understand that “[A]ny theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public.”⁴ I embrace this concept and seek to be the kind of scholar and teacher who grounds mission studies theory – and in today's case,

leaves open the source of the *myth*—it comes from all religions and cosmologies. I prefer to use *testimony* since because it is closer to my own charismatic *evangélico* tradition.

² I have done this in the United States and in predominantly Anglo-American institutions for the last seventeen years of my journey as a theological educator. However, my location within these institutions has provided for multiple cross-cultural and cross-religious experiences in the United States and in other parts of the world.

³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1994), 61.

⁴ hooks, 69.

leadership inquiry and theory – in everyday life experiences and conversations, including my own.

Ann Fadiman suggests the following location in order to “see” better, to understand deeply:

I have always felt that the action most worth watching is not at the center of things but where edges meet. I like shorelines, weather fronts, international borders. There are interesting fictions and incongruities in these places, and often, if you stand at the point of tangency, you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one.⁵

For me, Fadiman’s point is not just an observation but a *location requirement* for learnings in cross-cultural and cross-religious encounters and dynamics. A claimed objective and properly distanced location for engagement is a deceitful starting point because it denies our own biography, our own *testimonio*.

Our third and final point of departure is based on and inspired by Phil Wickeri’s work on “Mission from the Margins,” the title of his inaugural address at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Wickeri, who was the Flora Lamson Hewlett Professor of Evangelism and Mission at SFTS and currently is a theological advisor for the Anglican Church in China, has argued that the vitality in missional theologies and practices comes from people in the margins. He pushes for Christians at the old, declining centers to rediscover the Gospel and its missional character by dwelling and living in solidarity with mission agents at the margins. In other words, he not only recognizes the demographic transformation of the Christian religion but advocates life-giving, depth-of-faith mission practices and theologies from the margins. He invites Christians from the West to have open eyes, ears and hearts so that they might receive lessons and fresh reflections on mission.

⁵ Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), vii.

The history of the Christian Movement is, in many ways, a history of cross-cultural encounters. The vitality of the Christian faith is discovered in the theological and ecclesial challenges that result from the serial (the ebb and flow) and non-replicating process of the transmission and reception of the Christian religion.⁶ This process is characterized by the insertion of the Gospel in a multi-layered complex – cultural, economic, political, religious, and social. In this spatial complex of cross-cultural asymmetrical power interactions, different historical agents interact in a particular time and context. In other words, the faith's vitality is found in the interplay between those who cross boundaries – language exchange and translations, idiomatic expressions, gender and sexual orientation differences, class tensions, etc. – and in the asymmetric, polycentric power dynamics between cultures. It is a paradox in which the Christian religion finds its vitality and – in uncertain, often effervescent and puzzling cross-cultural and cross-religious experiences, a unique opportunity for exciting learning experiences. The Christian religion finds its vitality—and the unique opportunity to have some of the most exciting learning experiences—in typically uncertain and often effervescent and puzzling cross-cultural and cross-religious experiences

Below I will discuss three different cross-cultural case studies. The first case study is historical, belonging to the first half of the twentieth century; the other two are contemporary. I want to provide the reader with my *testimonio* of engagement with the historical material and the people in the contemporary scenarios. I share with the reader my own lessons learned from these case studies. I give the reader my matrix: my description of

⁶ For literature on this topic please see Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002); Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, revised 2009); Dana Roberts, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Chichester, U.K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

the factors that interacted with each other, and my own conclusions. But I also invite the reader to reconfigure my matrix and create her own matrix of cross-cultural encounters, particularly when it comes to the last two case studies.

First Case Study: What can we learn from a Puerto Rican *Evangélica* Poor Peasant Mulatto Woman?

In his Christian missionary imagination – *his* understandings of who the missionized are, *his* understanding of the Gospel and *his* expectations of what the Gospel will be for the missionized – George Milton Fowles, a mainline missionary to the Caribbean, portrays his values and prejudices. In his book *Down in Puerto Rico* (1910), part of the Series of Studies on Missions of the Young People’s Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada, Fowles gives North American youth, Protestant churches and mission organizations information about different missionary projects in the region, and promotes their contribution of economic and human resources.⁷

Anthropologically, Fowles moves to describe the Puerto Rican person in a rational attempt to understand and legitimize the missionary activity. Legitimizing the missionary activity ultimately means stating an ontological difference between the missionized – the

⁷ My work on Milton Fowles first appeared in “Facing the Dilemma: The Case for Latin America as a Mission Field,” *Apuntes* 16.1 (Spring 1996): 17–29; “Nos llamaron: mulatos, fiesteros, pero redimibles: Antropología misionera y protestantismo en Puerto Rico,” *Apuntes* 14(4) (Winter 1994): 99–111; and “Re-discovering Caribbean Christian Identity: Biography and Missiology at the Shore,” *Voices: New Challenges to EATWOT Theology (The Journal of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians)*, XXVII(1) (June 2004): 114. I continue to work with his writings, but looking at Milton Fowles’s work in dialogue with Puerto Rican grassroots and theologians *evangélicos*. I also provide some discussion on the two case studies below in my chapter “Christian Mission in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Chalice Introduction to Theology*, Peter Goodwin Heltzel, ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008). The material in this chapter, however, addresses issues of cross-cultural leadership, while in these other materials the focus is theological and in the context of the history of the Christian movement.

objects of mission – and the missionary – the subjects of mission. He writes:

They are impulsive, excitable, talkative, and demonstrative. On the streets, in the stores, in the homes, they talk in loud tones accompanied by many varied and suggestive gesticulations. The movements of the hands and arms, the expression of the body, the inimitable shrug of the shoulders, enable the listener to understand much of the conversation without hearing a word. With their naturally excitable nature, it is almost impossible for them to wait until one person finishes speaking, but several, and sometimes the whole company, are talking at once.⁸

Fowles' descriptions are far from neutral. In fact, the author alludes and connects the previous description with Puerto Ricans' incapacity to take on responsibilities, lack of interest in the dignity of work, evil practice of gambling and of vices, carelessness of dress, and absence of democratic sentiment where the majority decides for all.⁹ Many of these evils, according to the author, are the result of (1) the inadequate administration of the Spanish government, (2) the Catholic Church's improper education of the people, and (3) the mixed blood of Puerto Ricans. Fowles comments:

One of the pathetic features connected with the people of mixed blood is their desire to be considered white. As we have stated before, there is a comparatively small percentage of pure whites and a large percentage of persons of mixed blood. These latter want to be classed as whites. By a generous use of face powder, by a skillful dressing of the hair, by talking disparagingly of persons of negro blood, by explaining their own dark complexion as due either to the sun or to the Indian blood, or to a dark-skinned Spaniard, they

⁸ George Milton Fowles, *Down in Puerto Rico* (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada, 1910), 46.

⁹ Fowles, 47–9.

try to avoid suspicion themselves, but they cannot eradicate the unmistakable signs of the negro race. With this kind of feeling prevailing, one is surprised at the lack of sentiment against intermarriage. Especially among the poorer classes, blacks, whites, and persons of mixed blood live together indiscriminately. Among the higher classes, if a person has but a small amount of Negro blood he can pass as white and marry into the best families.¹⁰

Furthermore, Fowles's anthropological description focuses on issues of class and race. Nevertheless, in his description of Puerto Ricans, he also conveys an apprehensive and ambiguous perception regarding the interaction of cultures, races, and classes in Puerto Rico. While missionaries recognize the ethnic plurality of Puerto Ricanness to their judgment, the pathetic and inferior state of this bio-social condition is proof of the need for the Protestant faith.

Consequently, Fowles notes the contribution that Protestantism can make to the formation of the moral character of any people. In fact, most of the book focuses on advocating the importance of Protestantism in the redemption of this socio-cultural-biological condition. For Fowles, the Gospel is a socio-cultural-biological redeemer. The very character of the Protestant faith promotes the highest values for life. Fowles also describes Puerto Ricans' struggle in accepting these values, a struggle between the forces of genetic conditioning (a Darwinian framework typical of missionary theory of the period), their socio-cultural context, and the new socio-religious alternative offered by Protestantism. He states:

To raise a high moral standard of this kind among people who have been used to impurity of life in its priesthood, among the so-called higher classes, and quite generally among the lower classes, requires a great moral courage. One of the highest

¹⁰ Fowles, 60–1.

tributes that can be made to the Porto Rican [*sic*] people is that they have responded to these appeals to their noblest nature, and the standards thus set have called forth the devotion and loyalty of many thousands of Porto Ricans who show by their lives that they are *earnestly striving* to live up to this higher life that has been opened to their view.¹¹

In his Christian missionary imagination, Fowles hoped for a “higher life” for the Puerto Rican Protestants. It seems that Fowles sees a socio-redeeming factor, but, coherent with his proposal, limits the power of the Gospel in the ethnic-biological condition of Puerto Ricans’ mixed blood. In other words, Puerto Ricans are partially redeemed because their mixed blood condition limits their engagement with and embodiment of the Gospel.

What Fowles never imagined was that Puerto Rican Protestants, particularly Disciples of Christ, would actually challenge the North American missionaries with new and charismatic worship services at a time when the “Protestant project” was failing according to the missional motivations, expectations, and developments of the missionaries as named by Fowles.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico was the first mainline church to declare its autonomy from its “mother” church in the United States. This action was taken in the early 1930s after the island had experienced one of the most devastating hurricanes in its history and suffered, as a colony of the United States, major economic consequences during the Great Depression. The Disciples in Puerto Rico, finding themselves in a situation of anomie, experienced a revival that disturbed the missionaries’ church order and worship patterns in most of the island’s congregations. Missionaries, confused by the vitality and charisma, decided to close the churches. The nationals appealed to the U.S. courts in Puerto Rico and found themselves

¹¹ Fowles (emphasis by author), 123.

protected. The churches had to be opened!¹² This historical episode, still in need of further research, is an example of the irony of colonialism. Western, Christian, democratic colonial powers—the old Christian centers—through missionary work, contributed to the erosion of Christendom models and the emergence of a contextualized Christian faith.¹³ This is a side-effect of the serial and non-replicating lens of the Christian movement. This is the Gospel matrix, the insertion of the Gospel in a multi-layered complex—cultural, economic, political, religious, and social—of cross-cultural asymmetrical power interactions, where different historical agents interplay in a particular time and context.

During the next decade, lay leaders began to create unique worship resources, particularly hymns. One of those lay persons was Ramona Alamo, a poor peasant mulatto woman. She was one of those who had the “pathetic features connected with the people of mixed blood” from the coastal town of Dorado. Alamo, author of many hymns, wrote “A Empezar de Nuevo” (“To Begin Anew”), which has become one of the most important and popular hymns of Puerto Rican Disciples.¹⁴ In a context of worship and revival, Alamo gives a *testimonio* of leadership in this ecclesial and contextual transition.

¹² Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico, 1899–1987* (Costa Rica: DEI, 1988) 82–95.

¹³ For a discussion on the contribution of colonial powers to the erosion of Christendom see Andrew Walls, “Christianity in the non-western world: a study in the serial nature of Christian expansion,” *Studies in World Christianity* 1.1 (1995): 9–20.

¹⁴ Lucas Torres, “El Avivamiento: Toma de conciencia en cuanto a nuestra identidad puertorriqueña expresada en la adoración y la música,” (Asamblea del Centenario, Iglesia Cristiana [Discípulos de Cristo] en Puerto Rico, 15 de febrero de 1999) (unpublished manuscript), 3–4.

A testimonio of creativity, intuition, discernment, and theological discontinuity

I have been unable to date the hymn. Local church historians and pastors of the Disciples in Puerto Rico suggest the early 1940s, during the latter part of this period of theological and ecclesial emancipation.¹⁵ Musically, the hymn does not follow any of the popular modalities of the time, though its tempo and rhythm clearly fit Puerto Rican popular musical patterns. Nor does it follow the pattern of the traditional hymnody that was used and transmitted by the missionaries, though its lyrics and character keeps the dignity and solemnity of traditional hymns. The hymn is a combination of a march, a *paso doble* (double step), and a simple combination of tunes that allowed the hymn to be accompanied by a guitar and other Puerto Rican instruments.

A Empezar de Nuevo (To Begin Anew)

Ramona Alamo (Translation Carlos F. Cardoza Orlandi)

Coro

Chorus

A empezar, a empezar, a empezar de
nuevo otra vez
Hermanos en Cristo hay que empezar otra
vez.

To begin, to begin, to begin anew again;
Brethren in Christ, to begin anew again

Estrofas

Strophes

A empezar de nuevo la carrera en Cristo,
Oh Señor bendito guíanos con tu luz,
Danos nuevas fuerzas para seguir en ti
Deja que tu gracias se deje sentir

To begin anew our journey in Christ
Oh merciful Christ, guide us with your light;
Give us new strength to follow you;
Let your grace overwhelm us

Dios llama a su iglesia a empezar de nuevo
Nuestra mente al cielo debemos tener
Siempre confiando y en comunión
Y recibiremos mayor bendición

God calls the church to begin anew
Our minds to heaven should always be;
Always trusting and in fellowship;
We will receive greater blessing

Empezemos todos mirando nuestras almas
El gran sacrificio de Cristo en la cruz
Su bendita sangre derramada fue
Procuremos todos serle siempre fiel

Let us begin by searching our our souls; The
great sacrifice of Christ in the cross; His
blessed blood, shed it was; Let us all
seek to be faithful to him.

The lyrics are simple. It begins with an invitation to the church to begin anew, focusing on glorifying God in Jesus Christ. The call is to be faithful and live out the Gospel. The hope is that God’s presence and grace will lead and guide the community in a new beginning.

¹⁵ Torres.

The hymn is simple, evangelical, unique, visionary, and in affinity with the Protestant theological framework of the time—yet it is Puerto Rican. It is grounded in the culture, seeking a new beginning rather than copying the communicated faith of the Anglo-American Protestant. In addition, this hymn has the same theological perspective and proposal that Karl Barth had in some of his writings regarding Christendom and mission in the early 1930s. Good theology and an astute religious *intuition* about the emerging contextualization process also come from a woman of a poor *barrio* (shanty town) in Puerto Rico. Through her *discernment*, she develops a theology that invites the faith community to “rediscover” its faith with *sabor boricua* “indigenous Puerto Rican flavor.” Moreover, Alamo *discontinues* the transmitted socio-biological interpretation of the transmitted Gospel. She evokes the liberation of the gospel and dismisses the North American limited socio-biological interpretation of the good news for Puerto Ricans. She generates a theological discontinuity in the most prevalent context of Protestant Puerto Rican religious life, *el culto* (the worship service). Paradoxically, during this period and with the impact of the Great Depression, American missionaries were being called back home, and in the denominational mission boards there was a deep concern regarding the future of the Disciples missionary endeavor. However, Puerto Rican Disciples had taken control, were speaking in tongues, praying day and night, and rediscovering the Gospel; and Alamo led the way!

Second Case Study: Unexpected Leadership: Renewing Life by Saving Lives

Borders witness the encounters of death and life. And in these encounters complex interactions and dynamics emerge. It is a place of paradoxes and surprises. Borders are locations from where “interesting fictions and incongruities” can be seen. Borders provide a unique window to explore the power of human and context dynamics; they are a physical and symbolic location from

which “you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one.”¹⁶

The desert is a trail to new life, but it can also be a death alley. The landscape is rough. I walked the desert under the best possible conditions—no extreme heat or cold, hydrated, nourished, rested, and in good physical condition—and it was a difficult walk. We came in vans and drove for an hour, and then we walked two hours. It was a long and difficult journey, and yet extremely insignificant when compared to what immigrants walk!

Those crossing the border hire a *coyote*, or guide. This coyote is paid to take you through the desert at night—perhaps leaving at 11:00 p.m. at night and arriving at your destination in the other side at 1:00 p.m. the next day. Some are good coyotes, others are bad coyotes. Bad coyotes leave you in the desert; they do not protect you from thieves and abusers, or from the U.S. Border Patrol. And once you are alone, the desert overwhelms you. It quickly changes from a trail to new life to a death alley.

It’s cold at night, and your coyote has left you in the dark desert. You have no water and no food. You see the sun come out, and you begin to feel the heat of the desert...80 degrees, 90 degrees, 100 degrees...and no water. Your feet are swollen and bruised. You have been beaten like the man in the story of the Good Samaritan. The desert is becoming the “(v)alley of death.”

CRREDA is a rehabilitation center in the city of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, a border city with Douglas, Arizona. In a city that is infected with drug trafficking and abuse, CRREDA is a place of refuge, not only for Mexicans and other migrants from Central America, but for poor people from Douglas, Arizona.

This governmental organization is administered by an ex-addict, one who strongly believes that *rehabilitation is intertwined with a ministry of saving lives*. The budget is extremely limited. Education and medicine are scarce. Resources are precarious. But saving lives is an

¹⁶ Fadiman.

imperative; there is no other option, diversion, or more important activity for CRREDA than saving lives.

Men of different ages are assigned to various groups. Some drive the pickup truck, and others fill the containers in the vehicles with gallons of water, food, and some first aid needs to help the migrants in their desert journey. The rehabilitation patients of CRREDA provide water! As in many religions in the world, water has very unique meanings in the Christian religion. “I am the water of life,” states one of the Gospels; water for baptism, for a celebration of a new beginning in life; water for cleansing our thirst; water that flowed from Jesus’ side in the cross; water of life! Rehabilitation is not rocket science, the director of CRREDA stated; it is a very concrete answer to a very concrete need. Migrants need water in the desert in order not to die, and they provide water! However, that concrete answer comes with challenging political, ideological, and life-threatening consequences.

The agents of mission are rehabilitating drug and alcohol addicts and some mentally ill people. It reminds us of that question in scripture: “Nazareth! Can any good thing come from there?” Agua Prieta, CRREDA, drug addicts? Can any good thing come from there/them? What good can come from rehabilitating drug and alcohol addicts? What good can come from mentally ill people? It is a mission of reconciliation: with God, other, and self.

The theology is simple, yet deep and biblical: “What better way to be liberated from our vices than to be servants to the migrants who are in need and see in them ourselves?” With these words the director of CRREDA in Agua Prieta gives us an insight into leadership in a context of limited resources.¹⁷

¹⁷ There is a growing literature, both academic and popular, on the importance of service work, volunteerism, short-term mission, and the healing and vitality that comes from sharing and engaging in other people’s needs. Regrettably, most of this literature assumes a “have” and “have not” relationship, where the exchange of gifts, particularly the gifts coming from

The expectations of rehabilitation are connected to community, far from an individualistic, feel-good-about-oneself attitude or ethic. CRREDA's entrance wall has the following version of the Lord's Prayer.

Do not call me "Father," if every day you do not
behave as my child;

Do not say "Our," if you live isolated in your
selfishness;

Do not say "Who art in Heaven," if you only think
about earthly/material things;

Do not say, "hallowed by Thy name," if you invoke it
with your lips, but your heart is far from Him;

Do not say "thy Kingdom Come," if you mistake it
for your material success;

Do not say "Thy will be done," if you do not accept
the will when it is painful;

Do not say "give us this day our daily bread," if you
do not worry about the hungry;

Do not say "forgive us our debts/trespases," if you
bear your brother and sister a grudge;

Do not say "lead us not into temptation," if you do
not avoid occasions to sin;

Do not say "deliver us from evil," if you do not
fight evil;

Do not say "Amen," if you have not taken seriously
the words of the Lord's prayer.¹⁸

CRREDA's rehabilitating expectations generate leadership accountability to the patients themselves, the

the "have not," are blurred by the asymmetry of power that sustains negative assumptions about the poor. Below is a list of materials that are either an example of the problem or try to contribute to resolve the problem, yet fall short in the returning contextual analysis: Bill Berry, ed., *Short-Term Missions Today* (Pasadena: Into All the World Magazine, 2003); Robert Priest and Tito Paredes, "Special Issue on Short-Term Missions in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Theology: Christian Reflections from the Latino South 2* (2007); Robert Priest, *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right!* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008).

¹⁸ This is popular religion material. Possible author is Angel Riba, Charismatic Catholics. Translated by Juan Cardoza-Oquendo and Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi.

immediate community, and to those in need in their immediate context.

CRREDA exemplifies ecumenical leadership. CRREDA works with Presbyterians and Roman Catholics, with Pentecostals and indigenous religious groups. It is ecumenical—evangelical, ritualistic, sacramental, ethical, biblical, and eschatological. CRREDA also has a spirituality nurtured by prayer that goes beyond their rehabilitation process. They pray “A Prayer for My Migrant Sisters and Brothers:”

Loving and merciful heart of Jesus,

I pray for my migrant brothers and sisters. Have mercy on them and protect them from mistreatment and humiliation in their travel. They are identified by many as dangerous and poor because they are strangers. By the grace of God, let us respect and value their dignity. Touch our hearts with your goodness, Lord, when we see them as they travel. Protect their families until they return home, not with a broken heart but with their hopes fulfilled. Amen¹⁹

Many times this prayer is fulfilled. God has mercy on the migrants and protects them of injustice and danger. And God finds the migrant and the migrant finds God in the water that CRREDA provided as members of “No More Deaths” in Agua Prieta. Water that sustains two journeys: the journey of the migrant seeking new life and the journey of the rehabilitating addict seeking a renewed life.

CRREDA’s Christian mission at and with the margins illustrates the surprising character of leadership creativity and courage in the midst of scarcity and persecution. The lesson is inspiring yet so difficult to internalize. Why? Perhaps our last case study may offer some insight to our inquiry.

¹⁹ Prayer written by Archbishop of Hermosillo José Ulises Macías, date unknown.

Third Case Study: Matt and the *Return Effect*: Are Leaders Obstacles or Facilitators of Change and Meaning?

I have shared with you two particular international and cross-cultural case studies which showcase traits of religious leadership – one historical and the other current. These case studies provide a window into leadership characteristics in contexts of anomie and poverty, asymmetrical relationships, lack of formal education, and normative power structures that limit financial and educational resources. I am consistently amazed by the power of the Holy Spirit to remind us of the creativity and courage of women and men in extremely difficult and transitional situations. Alamos' creativity, intuition, discernment, and theological discontinuity generate a contextual grounding that is still in place as Puerto Rican Disciples of Christ seek to live the gospel. CRREDA's embodiment of renewing life by way of saving lives in a dangerous environment testifies to the sacrament of human interaction and exchange across religions, cultures, ethnicities, class, and gender. Leadership is embodied in the risk to dwell in dangerous contexts and the courage to challenge political and ideological forces that dehumanize the actors of this desert drama. It is a leadership fueled by a spirit of participation that emphasizes liberation by service (rather than cautious self-interest participation), a spirit of mutual accountability – to God, community, and self.

The subtitle of this conference is a challenge: "Learning Leadership from Our International Neighbors." We gather here seeking to be learners of others. We learn. We see, we hear, we touch, we ask questions, we explore, we discover. We are intrigued, excited, reflective, and ready for change. In this process of learning from our international neighbors, we return to our places of leadership with enthusiasm and prepare for renewal. Yet, we quickly forget that we "return," and returning means that we go back to our context, we enter established structures of power and resources, leadership ethos, and institutional dynamics – and surprisingly we

think that this “return” does not affect our cross-cultural and cross-religious learnings.

My third case study is an exploration of what I call “the return effect.” After twenty-one years of teaching and doing scholarly work on cross-cultural Christian mission, engagements, and interactions, I have acquired some insights into the experience of returning home. I want to emphasize that what I am sharing below are preliminary thoughts, ideas, and intuitions about the complex return home after a changing cross-cultural and cross-religious experience.

For the purposes of this essay, I will define the *return effect* as “an ambiguous yet strong state of being and reflection generated by an encounter with something new and unexpected, yet embodied in and perceived as something known, that challenges who we are, the way we live, and the order of our worldview and existence.” The return effect is a preliminary stage for change—the beginning edge of chaos in relation to our understood order.

Two examples, one biblical and another contemporary, might help clarify my working definition. In Acts 10 we have the story of Cornelius and Peter.²⁰ Let me focus exclusively on the account of Peter’s vision. The Holy Spirit gives Peter a vision where reptiles and other profane animals come to him in a sheet. Hungry, yet knowing that these animals are prohibited for food in his tradition, he sees something familiar, yet the voice of the Spirit suggests something very different from his customary food practices: “Peter, kill and eat.” Peter does not hesitate. “This food is profane.” The Spirit then responds with something new, yet also known: “Do not call profane what I have made sacred!”

One of my students at Perkins School of Theology coordinates short-term mission trips to Central America. In one of those trips, my student experienced the scarcity of clean water in a very remote and marginalized

²⁰ I have a broader discussion of Acts 10 in my book *Mission: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

community. Just after a few hours at home in the United States, the sprinkler system of my student's house went off. The tears of my student's eyes were as abundant as the water spouting from the sprinkler over the yard. Water became the link between something new, and something known. In both the biblical and contemporary example, the anthropological insight is simple, yet profound: we can only know new things through what we already know.

Matt, the Return Effect, and Religious Leadership

Matt is a successful businessman. Most important, Matt is a devoted Christian leader in an urban city in the southeastern United States. Matt actively participates in ministry to the homeless in his congregation and community. His intensity and conviction about this ministry is so strong that Matt became friends with many of the homeless men and women served by the congregation. Throughout his ministry, Matt moved from being a servant of the homeless to a friend among friends. Matt had been living and engaging in a cross-cultural and cross-religious ministry. Rediscovering the gospel with his homeless friends, he had been dwelling in the sacrament of human interaction and exchange, and he was growing in faith!

One afternoon after working in the ministry, as he departed from what he called his community, one of his friends shouted, "Go Matt; go back to your nice suburban home and be well!" What to make of the statement was never clear to Matt. It was one of those statements charged with a particular tone that left the interpretation wide open. "Was it a nice but awkward farewell from his homeless buddy? Was it cynical? And if it was, why would my homeless buddy be cynical to me? Was I not his friend?"

This farewell kept Matt sleepless for a couple of weeks. While people speak about the power of words, much of that power is not just the words but also the place they come from – words have context so much as context have words. And these combinations are

explosive. Matt's body, thoughts, prayers, ideas, and spirit were under the spell of a combination of words and context from the location of his ministry and his homeless buddy and context and words from his location. What will Matt do with this cross-cultural experience?

Matt decided to speak to his spiritual leader, his congregational pastor. He shared the "ambiguous yet strong state of being and reflection generated by an encounter with something new and unexpected, yet embodied in and perceived as something known, that challenges who we are, the way we live, and the order of our worldview and existence." He shared the awkward farewell and asked the pastor why was he – body, spirit and soul – overwhelmed with intrigue, uncertainty, guilt, curiosity, and expectation. Matt was seeking direction and guidance after an awkward farewell from a new, yet unknown, location that triggered such explosive emotions and thoughts in his life.

The pastor's direction and guidance were simple and to the point: "Matt, do not let those thoughts overwhelm you, just remember that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ and you are following Christ and being obedient to Christ." Matt felt some relief, but the return effect from his encounter with his homeless buddy continued to shake his Christian faith and person. Could the pastor have said something different to Matt?

This story speaks to the importance of leadership, and I hope it affirms the vocation that we all have in reflecting and training future cross-cultural and cross-religious leaders. In our work, we will meet many people experiencing the returning effect. And as we and those who we serve face the unique challenge of "learning from others," particularly those others who are very different from us, we will have to decide whether we are going to defuse, neutralize, and strait-jacket new potentially life-changing learnings with authoritative religious language or encourage, exploration and liberate new beginnings. With the gifts of creativity, intuition, and discernment from the Caribbean and the Border, and the search for

levels of theological discontinuity and the sacramental reality of being renewed by saving others, and the potential gifts to be discovered by way of an ambiguous yet strong state of being and reflection generated by a cross-cultural and cross-religious encounter that has the potential of changing our lives, we thrust into a new reality.

In conclusion, I juxtapose below what I consider are leadership actions that, on the one hand, simply diffuse new learnings and on the other, nurture and generate new learnings and the possibility of change. Perhaps as we encourage the leadership actions that nurture and generate new learnings we will discover and embody a gospel re-discovered anew. Ramona Alamo reminds us that it is truly Christian to *empezar de nuevo* (begin anew)!

Leadership actions that diffuse new learnings <i>Reduce ambiguity and suppress change</i>	Leadership actions that nurture and generate new learnings, accept ambiguity, and enter a process of change, exploration, and discovery
(1) <i>Dominate</i> dynamics at the borders and margins between people and creation	(1) <i>Promote and Foster</i> dynamics at the border and margins between people and creation
(2) <i>Control</i> the interpretations of God’s work in all dimensions of human life and creation	(2) <i>Broaden and amplify</i> the interpretations of God’s work in the world in all human life and creation
(3) <i>Manipulate and control</i> new learnings using what we already know as a limit to discover something new	(3) <i>Unleash</i> processes of new learnings using what we know to learn new things.
(4) <i>Reify</i> the gospel in terms of one history and a set of experiences from one particular context and time	(4) <i>Discover and rediscover</i> the gospel of Jesus Christ in complex inter-cultural and inter-religious exchange