
UMUNTHU AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF LEADERSHIP: LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM MALAWI

HARVEY C. KWIYANI

Abstract

In spite of all the problems that characterize the African continent, Africans have a sophisticated understanding of life and personhood. Malawians call this philosophy *umunthu*, being the equivalent of the much popular South African worldview of ubuntu. At the core, *umunthu* says that “I am because we are, and we are because I am.” Thus, the person is because the person belongs in a spirit-mediated community (which includes all creation). Understanding life in this way has significant impact on how Malawians define leadership. In this essay, I focus on three aspects of leadership in Malawi: spirituality, communality, and generosity. The three cornerstones are useful for Christian leadership as well as civil leadership, not only in Malawi, but also in North America. Thus, the essay explores ways in which these cornerstones would relate to religious leadership in the West.

Introduction

The unprecedented growth of Christianity in Africa in the last quarter of the twentieth century is one of the most exciting stories in the world right now, especially coming from a continent whose name has become almost synonymous with bad news—poverty, diseases, corruption, among many problems facing Africa. The sudden jump in the population of Christians in Africa from 100 million to 500 million in the short period of the forty years between 1970 and 2010 is a phenomenon to reckon with for the academy, global church bodies, and other interested parties. The interests of this essay are confined to the area of leadership and its intention is to explore how Africa’s understanding of personhood—

Harvey C. Kwiyani teaches missions at Springdale College in Birmingham, England, United Kingdom

umunthu—informs her understanding of leadership, and then how this “African leadership” could engage with missional Christian leadership in the West. Of course, Christian leadership is a very significant issue in African Christianity as the African church has had to develop leadership capacities quick enough to keep pace with the growing numbers of new converts and churches across the continent, and thereby, to enable the explosive growth to occur without the church bottlenecking itself. If the life of any movement rises and falls on its leadership, the growth of African Christianity suggests that there is something that the Christian leaders in Africa are doing that might actually speak to global Christians. In this light, I will attempt to reflect on what this African leadership could contribute to the global missional leadership conversation. Learning from my own people in Malawi, I will reflect on how *umunthu* has actually made available a huge number of leadership-capable converts that have led the Christian explosion in the country.

***Umunthu* and Christian Leadership**

“Leadership lessons from Africa” sounds like the best way to start a conversation about how to derail civilization by means of political corruption, greed, coup d’états, and wars. In all honesty, why should we learn leadership from a continent that seems to have gotten everything wrong? Can a continent whose political leadership is largely characterized by greed and corruption—one that has seen more than 110 coup d’états in 50 years—truly teach leadership?¹ More often than I can count, I have had to answer the question: “If Africans understand leadership in ways that would help

¹ Patrick McGowan, a professor of political science at Arizona State University in Tempe, says that in sub-Saharan Africa between 1956 and 2001, there were 80 successful coups, 108 failed coup attempts, and 139 reported coup plots. There have been 11 attempted or successful coups since then. See Patrick McGowan, “Coups and Conflict in West Africa,” *Armed Forces and Society* vol 32, No. 1 (October 2005).

develop the world, why does Africa remain the least developed continent that continues to be ravaged by poverty and disease?" In many ways, this question sounds similar to Nathaniel's question in the first chapter of John, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Figuratively, many Western Christian leaders have asked me, "Can anything good come out of Africa?" The answer to Nathaniel's question points to the Christ who actually grew up in Nazareth, and nevertheless, went on to change history as only the Son of God can. Similarly, in spite of the overwhelming problems that seem never to give Africa a break, God's work among Africans is a part of God's comprehensive message to the continent and to the rest of the world.² Indeed, many good things are coming out of Africa.

Umunthu

In Malawi, just like most African countries, the understanding of personhood in the cultural philosophy of *umunthu* is the center for the religious nature of the culture.³ *Umunthu* provides the foundational philosophy through which the Malawian people view themselves and the world around them. *Umunthu*, which means 'personhood,' is an expansive philosophical, theological, and spiritual concept that actually puts human beings in a bonded community of life that includes God, spirits, society, and nature.⁴ It describes a well-rounded

² The factors behind the current situation of Africa's economy, politics, and development are complex, and are not within the interests of this paper. However, let it suffice here to say that many of those factors were shaped by slavery, colonialism, and are currently being enforced by globalization and neo-colonization.

³ *Umunthu* means personhood. *Munthu* is person. Among other African peoples, the concept of *umunthu* is known by other names: *ubuntu* in Xhosa and Zulu, *utu* in Swahili, *obonto* in Kiisi, *nunhu* in Shona, *bunhu* in Tsonga, *numunhu* in Shangaan, *botbo* in Sotho, etc.

⁴ Harvey J. Sindima, "Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective," in *Liberating Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990). Also see John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians Series, no. 4 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

philosophy of life in which to be a person—to have *umunthu*—is to be at peace with self, the community around, God, the spirits, and nature. It is the solid rock upon which the Malawian life, culture, and humanity are built. All normal-minded people would want to be appreciated as a *munthu* in life for to lack *umunthu* is to be a beast, which is what people who terrorize their communities such as thugs and murderers, are called.⁵

In South Africa, *umunthu* is translated to *ubuntu*, the popular philosophy which has been used extensively in the reconciliation process in post-apartheid Southern Africa. It embodies the Nguni proverb, “*ubuntu ngubuntu ngabantu*,” which translates to “a person is a person through other persons.” At the root, it means, “I am because I belong, I am because we all are; you are because I am, and I am because you are.” In this sense, *ubuntu* makes concrete the great communal values of solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, conformity to basic norms, and collective unity. Desmond Tutu’s attempt at a definition of *ubuntu* says:

A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.⁶

As the foundational philosophy for the nation of Malawi, *umunthu* has been used to shape all spheres of life. It sustained communities long before colonization came to

⁵ For further reading on *umunthu*, see Harvey J. Sindima, “Bondedness, Moyo and Umunthu as the Elements of Achewa Spirituality: Organizing Logic and Principle of Life,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, vol 14, no. 1 (1991). Also, Gerard Chigona, *Umunthu Theology: Path of Integral Human Liberation Rooted in Jesus of Nazareth* (Balaka: Montfort, 2002). Also see Augustine C. Musopole, *Being Human in Africa: Toward an African Christian Anthropology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

⁶ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 31.

Malawi. It continues to bring communities together even today, in the face of poverty, diseases, and famine. Its importance in Malawian culture is because it provides a wholesome, well-integrated system of support that takes care of all of life. *Umunthu* takes care of the spiritual and material needs of a community, while at the same time, protecting nature and honoring the ancestors. In times of famine, not only do people pray together, making sacrifices and invoking their ancestors, they also share generously the little they have. When there is death in the community, they all grieve together while making sure that the family at loss is well supplied for. This communality of life is a support system like no other. *Umunthu* is very expansive. We will here look at only three of its major aspects—those that have direct implications for leadership. These three are spirituality, communality, and generosity.

Spirituality

At the center of the *umunthu* philosophy is the idea of the divine bondedness of all life—god, the spirits, human beings, and nature.⁷ To be a *munthu* is to find one's harmonious place in this web of bondedness. The bondedness itself revolves around a Supreme Being (god) that created the world and has sent countless spirits as messengers to take care of the world. In this way, the Supreme Being is connected to the world through the agency of the spirits in the spiritual world. The essence of this Supreme Being fills the entire universe. Spirits roaming in the spirit world include not only those created as spirits by the Creator but also those of the departed human beings. There are some good spirits that serve the Supreme Being, and then there are evil spirits who seek to sabotage the orderly bondedness of the world. The spiritual world is invisible, but the spirits can, and usually will, inhabit the material world. As such, in the *umunthu* worldview, the spirits break into the human/material world on a regular basis. The gap between the spirit

⁷ Sindima, "Bondedness," 5.

and the material worlds is very porous; most Africans believe that there is no gap at all. Consequently, both human beings and nature are part of this grand divine connectedness.

Fundamentally, Malawians believe that to be a person—to have *umunthu*, or to be a *munthu*—is to be one who lives in harmony with both the spiritual and the material aspects of this web of connectedness. Such a person is at one with one’s own spirit and the spiritual realm that comprises the Creator and the spirits. That person is also in harmony with nature. A *munthu*, then, is one who is spiritually conscious at all times, careful not to disturb the equilibrium in the web of connectedness by making the spirits angry in any way. That person’s spirituality is grounded in extensive rituals, habits, and practices that are carried out to maintain a sense of harmony with the spirits. When that harmony is breached, a *munthu* will make serious efforts to purge the community of the iniquity in order to restore the harmony. Even in the case of a death in the community, far-reaching rituals are carried out to “remove the bad spirits”—known in chiChewa as *kuchotsa mphepo/mizimu yoyipa*.

Following the wisdom of the ancestors, Malawians say that *munthu ndi mzimu* (a human being is a spirit). Among the aChewa, as Sindima has shown, the word for personhood is *umunthu* and is also used to mean *spirit*.⁸ Among the aLhomwe, in addition to “spirit,” *umunthu* can also be used interchangeably with *nthunzi* (vapor, breath). Lhomwe hermeneutics, therefore, believe that the spirit which God breathed into Adam at creation is what makes the human being to be a spirit being.⁹ Sindima adds that, “*Mzimu* [human spirit] is the principle of life, the divine

⁸ Sindima, “Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective,” 139-41.

⁹ Gen 2:7 (NRSV).

element in people, which is able to transcend death.”¹⁰ Indeed, this writer’s Lhomwe upbringing believes that the spirit is the essence of the human being, the center of a person’s gravity. Even though every human being has a spirit, those with *umunthu* have aligned their spirits to the good order of the spirit world. To have a spirit as a *munthu* then is to live in a reverent submission to the divine order. It is because of this that to have *umunthu* is a moral issue. One’s submitted spirit is the connecting point to the spirit world. To be rebellious to this divine order is to lack *umunthu* and therefore, it is also to be an *animal* that is cut off from the bondedness of the universe. In a nutshell, the *munthu* is a very religious being who lives in a very religious world.

In a perfect world, everyone would have *umunthu* and the entire universe would be in eternal harmony. However, this is not the case. When the harmony is disturbed and the spirits are angry, misfortunes happen to people. The person with *umunthu* has the responsibility to sustain the harmony and to get it restored as soon as possible whenever breached. To be a person then is to pay constant attention to the spirit-world and to live in constant readiness to respond to the demands of the spirits, especially those of the ancestors who may communicate to people through dreams, visions, and trances, etc.

In addition to breaking down the barriers between the spirit-world and the material one, *umunthu* also bridges the gap between the priests and the lay. Generally, the official priest in any geographical area will serve as a guide and sanctified leader of the community which, in essence, is a community of priests. Major ceremonial rituals will demand such ordained priest’s expertise. However, in the daily life of the community, every person that has *umunthu* has the responsibility as well as the mandate to religiously maintain the order in the bonded

¹⁰ Harvey J. Sindima, *Africa's Agenda: The Legacy of Liberalism and Colonialism in the Crisis of African Values*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies), (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 146.

world. Usually, the older family members, especially the aged ones who are believed to be closer to joining the community of the departed, are responsible for making sure their families are living out this harmony. They will be expected, from time to time, to offer sacrifices for their family members...sacrifices that come in many forms like feeding orphans, helping the poor, and other rituals.

This understanding of the world places some serious spiritual demands on the leaders of the society. To be a leader here means that you are always engaged in the business of spiritual discernment. Further, it is to lead a community of discerners. In essence, the leader and his community are engaged in a constant discipline of spiritual discernment. This is necessary because, in most cases, communities live in a state of constant fear of angering the spirits or provoking the destructive attacks of the evil spirits. The leader joins the priests as mediators between their community and the spirits. They have to be exemplary in their conduct and sacrificial in their services. When all has been said and done, leadership in an *umunthu* community is a religious—or rather spiritual—exercise. To maintain the divine bondedness of life, the leader must be spiritual.

Communalism

A popular Malawian proverb says *kalikokha nkanyama, ali awiri ndi anthu*. In English, it translates to: “anyone who is alone is not a person, but a beast, but those who are two are persons.” A similar proverb further says that *kuyenda awiri simantha koma kudziwa*, meaning working/walking in pairs is not a sign of fear but wisdom. At its core, *umunthu* is a communal adventure. Individualism suggests a lack of personhood. Any person who is individualistic does not have *umunthu* for he or she does not know the meaning of living together as a people.¹¹ As such, individualism is scorned, rejected, and

¹¹ Harvey J. Sindima, *Africa's Agenda: The Legacy of Liberalism and Colonialism in the Crisis of African Values*, 203.

shunned as poison that corrupts community. Individuality, however, is celebrated since it helps the individual to make their unique contribution to the community, and this makes communal life better. Individuality is encouraged as a building block for the community.

A person with *umunthu* must constantly seek to embody the belief that “I am because we are.” True personhood entails a commitment to community in ways that prove a devoted “we are because I am.” For one to prove *umunthu*, they must show a commitment to the betterment of the community through self-sacrificing service. They must put the welfare of the community well above their own. To believe that “I am because we are” is to say “without you, I do not exist as I am.” Consequently, it says, “I need you to be the most authentic you can be for me to be me.” Thus, without the community there are no individuals as they are, and without individuals, there is no community.

In this sense, then, personhood is a spiritual journey that one cannot embark on alone. One needs community to be fully the person they are. Musopole observed that among the people of northern Malawi, *umunthu* is established on two pillars of communal life: moral integrity and economic productivity.¹² To underscore the moral communal aspect of *umunthu*, Sindima observed that for Malawians, to have *umunthu* (now understood to be both personhood and spirituality) is to have *mtima wabwino* (a good heart)—making you a good neighbor. The spirit is housed in the heart (the seat of feeling and consciousness) whose identity it embodies after the heart stops beating.¹³ To have *umunthu* is to be humane, hospitable, dependable, sociable, and many other

¹² Augustine C. Musopole, “Religion, Spirituality, and Umunthu: A Perspective from Malawi,” in *Agitated Mind of God*, eds. Dale T. Irvin and Akintunde E. Akinade (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

¹³ Sindima, *Africa's Agenda*, 148. Sindima, here, argues that in Malawian cultures, there is no distinct category for the soul. The human being is primarily a spirit and the body that houses it in the heart. Everything that is associated with the soul elsewhere belongs to the spirit in Malawian culture.

aspects that would make a person live favorably and in harmony with the society. Generally, when one's humanness is in question, it is common for people to ask, “*Ali ndi mzimu ameneyu?*” (Does he/she have a spirit/personhood/*umunthu*?)

This communal aspect of the *umunthu* life shapes everything to do with the people's religious lives. To be fully a *munthu* is to belong, but the community that you will belong to includes the spirits of the dead, etc. Generally, a *munthu* is not a *munthu* apart from his or her spirit (being in harmony with the spirit-world). In other words, to be fully human is both to belong and to be spiritual. Just like *umunthu* says that one's personhood is constituted through other persons, it appears that one's spirituality is also constituted through the spirituality of others. Any person with *umunthu* will pay attention to the spirituality of others as well as that of the community. Individual spirituality is never consummated if it does not end in communal spirituality. Together with the community, one worships the god of the community who is often the god of the ancestors. To breach this is to bring disorder to the web of connectedness that forms the foundation for the community's existence. Therefore, spirituality is never achieved in isolation. In a nutshell, *umunthu* spirituality needs company. As a matter of fact, the work required to maintain the harmony in the bondedness of life is communal. Indeed, the African understanding of the spirit-world demands a communal understanding of spirituality. Be it in ancestral veneration, or a simple pouring of libation to the *living-dead*, there is a way in which the community is represented. In most cases, the community will be present and actively involved.

For most Malawians, then, the entire spiritual experience is a public phenomenon. For instance, in the old days, when a soothsayer entered a village, life stopped for everyone in the village in order to hear what the ancestors had to say to the community. In those cultures where trances are a means of spiritual communication, when someone fell into a trance, the elders of the village

were brought together to listen and mediate for the entire community. Individual spirituality has its *telos*—purpose and goal—in communal spirituality. This spiritual orientation towards community is what makes the community itself a spiritual endeavor. To effectively engage in a religious activity, one needs company. The arrival of a newborn into the community, or the beginning of a new family by way of marriage are all junctures in the community's life when, through rituals, the spirit-world of the ancestors and the gods is invoked. In some cultures, a strict set of ritualistic religious activities will shape the initiation rites by which children are accepted into the society. A community broken, for instance, by death, has to go through rigorous ritual cleansing in order to restore itself. The existence of community itself is a spiritual process. The community itself is a spiritual phenomenon. Unity and connectedness, peace and harmony are the marks of a community that is in tune with its ancestors and the rest of the spirit-world. Ancestors will not hesitate to intervene through dreams, divination, etc., when such a harmony is destroyed.

Generosity

A more important characteristic of *umunthu* than spirituality and communality is generosity. Among the Malawian peoples, to have *umunthu* is to be a good-hearted, generous person who sacrificially gives of him or herself to help those that are in need in the community. The same is said to be true of *ubuntu* in South Africa. To be a *munthu* is to be one who cares deeply for the society. Naturally, when Malawians say '*wakuti ndi munthu*' (someone is a person/is a human being), they mean that the person is kind, sociable, caring, self-giving, generous, communal, and hospitable. Anyone who does not help others is not a *munthu*.

In this generosity, the community intends to humanize others through the acts of hospitality, inclusivity, and generosity, listening, etc. Generally, Malawians understand that to humanize others is to share

a person's *umuntu* with others, but this sharing is good for the giver just as much as it is good for the receiver. It humanizes the giver as well. Right from infancy, the Lhomwe people of whom I am part teach their children that you cannot humanize another without humanizing yourself. Consequently, we teach our children that if you seek to humanize yourself, you must humanize others. At the end of the day, all our humanity is intricately bonded together. When one member of the community is undergoing difficulties, the whole community suffers. When someone's humanity falls short, all our humanity falls short too. In a nutshell, the humanity of a community is seen in how well it takes care of its needy. It is because of this that the most common description of *ubuntu* is that of being hospitable to strangers in need. In describing *ubuntu*, Nelson Mandela paints the image of a community pleading with wayfaring strangers to stay the night for it is late and there are lions down the road that may attack them.¹⁴ In offering this needed hospitality, the community is asserting its *ubuntu* while protecting the humanity of the strangers, for the humanity of the community depends also on the humanity of the strangers.

To exclude and to oppress a fellow human being is to dehumanize him or her, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressor. In this sense, the oppressor lacks *umuntu* and is therefore equivalent to a wild animal that does not have a moral compass. The baseline for this understanding of life is yet again spiritual. The involvement of the spiritual world in the material one opens up avenues whereby ancestors can appear in human form as strangers in need. When this happens, there is a possibility that they will appear needy, or hungry, or even sick. A person with *umuntu* will respond compassionately to such strangers, knowing it may be his or her ancestor. Even if it is not his or her ancestor

¹⁴ Mandela's video is accessible here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28philosophy%29 (accessed August 31, 2013).

appearing in human form, the stranger may have been sent by the ancestor. The writer of Hebrews may have had this in mind when he said, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2).

A Little Caveat

Umunthu is life philosophy that has been the foundation of the African life for centuries. Its expansive geographical reach throughout sub-Saharan Africa suggests that it has been part of the lives of millions of people down the centuries. While it promises an orderly and harmonious connectedness in the world, it does not deal well with the problem of evil in the world. It understands the presence of evil spirits, but it assumes that ostracizing those without *umunthu* will solve the problem. As such, it leaves communities vulnerable to the cruelty of greedy and evil minds. While it does not think in terms of capitalism or communism, and it probably strikes a safe middle ground in between the two where there is a good sense of ownership but also expects an outrageous sense of generosity, it leaves people open for exploitation. Mzee Jomo Kenyatta’s observation of the exploitation that took place when the colonialists took advantage of Africa’s generosity is spot on. He said, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, “Let us pray.” We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”¹⁵ The political problems in Zimbabwe right now are a good example of this trust misplaced and abused.

As Africa develops to compete on the global scale, the spirit of *umunthu* finds itself in danger of being sidelined. The influence of outside philosophies like that of the Western Enlightenment’s “I think therefore I am”

¹⁵ This citation is often attributed to Desmond Tutu. However, more reliable resources have suggested it belongs to Jomo Kenyatta who evidently showed similar sentiments in Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938).

and its ensuing free market economy started to creep in and overshadow *umunthu*. Asian philosophies like *Sobam* of India also began to make inroads into Africa. In globalism and capitalism, the innate greedy sinfulness that shapes the human heart was awakened among Africans when they learned of the goodness of having it all. The community ceased to be the ultimate source of security. Riches became the security. Generosity was conquered by the desire to accumulate and hoard as much as possible. The harmonious unity that marked community slowly gave way to vices like tribalism, nepotism, and every other divisive philosophy. The unforgettable civil wars of Mozambique, Angola, and Nigeria, the genocide of Rwanda, and the world-reaching greedy scams from Nigeria speak of the disappearance of *umunthu*.

There is an encouragement, however, in that for the past twenty years, there has been a renaissance of *umunthu* in Africa. Its impact in holding peace in post-apartheid South Africa brought awareness to the rest of the world that it is a powerful alternative tool for community building. In Malawi, the incumbent president has reclaimed it as the foundational guideline for her leadership. Malawians have spoken in chorus about the effects of having a uniting ideology on their national solidarity. Kenya has managed to move beyond the homophobic violence that marred the political elections of 2008. In addition, academic works on *ubuntu* are increasing in numbers significantly. As Africans become more confident in themselves and their cultural heritage, *umunthu* will continue to be a very valuable resource for progress.

The Implications of *Umunthu* on Religious Leadership

Umunthu is the most celebrated leadership philosophy in Africa. Without it, leaders lose their following and end up dictators. These leaders are leading from the heart, leading in communion with others for the betterment of the entire created world. I will for the remainder of this essay reflect on how *umunthu* may enrich our understanding of missional leadership.

Spiritual Leadership

Above everything, Christian leadership is spiritual leadership, and there is a world of difference between other types of leadership and spiritual leadership. While seminaries and business schools will help students to perfect their skills and sharpen their talents, leading congregations is more about maintaining continuous discernment of what the Spirit of God is saying and doing than it is about marketing and growing churches. To lead a spiritual community—a fellowship of the spirit—the leader must be spiritual. Social skills are helpful, but they are limited in that it is not possible to socialize someone into a spiritual community. To do this, spiritual disciplines like prayer and meditation are absolutely necessary. Without the connection with the Holy Spirit, churches may be reduced to self-help and social clubs. This, said in a context where pastors with MBAs are more marketable than those with Masters of Divinity, calls for a retrieving of a sound theology of the Spirit in theological education as well as in congregations.

The missional church network has done a great job of highlighting the need for strategic planning and organization. The momentous works of the missional leadership conversation have helped many congregations negotiate the adaptive changes that bombard them on all sides. The intentional listening to voices outside religious leadership conversations like those of Ronald Heifetz,¹⁶ Richard Pascale,¹⁷ and Margaret Wheatley¹⁸ is also a step in the right direction. However, to stop at organizational leadership is to miss the spiritual nature of the kingdom

¹⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994). Also Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Richard T. Pascale, Mark Milleman, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* (New York: Crown Business, 2000).

¹⁸ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organization from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 1992).

of God. If anything, organizationally speaking, Jesus' strategy leaves a great deal to be desired. Starting a movement purposed to reach and change the entire world with a group of uneducated Galileans seems to spell disaster. However, in God's plans, these were the people who would usher in the work of the Spirit in the founding of the church, but they would only be ready after three and half years of learning to hear from the Spirit from Jesus.

Young Christian leaders in Malawi are usually taught that the art of organizing the church is effective if only it puts into practice something that has already been attended to spiritually. In other words, there are spiritual things—which comprise most of the church's life—that organizing and strategizing will not fix. The work of the Spirit has to be made concrete by leaders taking good biblically-informed, communally-discerned strategic actions. Both organizing and strategizing are important, but they are insufficient on their own. In the same way, spirituality alone will not run a church. On the one hand, praying may build a spiritual community that may eventually organize itself into a church, but on the other hand, organizing may form a social group that may find it hard to transform itself into a spiritual community.

When young boys and girls in Malawi go through their initiation rites as they reach puberty, the community leaders begin to pass on to them the habits and practices needed to attend to the spirit in ways that are edifying to the community. Before they reach teenage, they need to learn to recognize when the spirits are trying to communicate something to the community, and how to respond to the gentle nudges of the spirit world. Men and women learn how to offer sacrifices, pour libations, and invoke the ancestors at a very young age even though they may spend an entire lifetime watching the elders do it. In a community where attending to the spirit is a matter of life and death, this ability to decode the spiritual world is a must-have tool for leaders. This applies especially to Christian leaders whose work depends on listening and attending to the work of the

Holy Spirit through and among God's people in the world. Most Malawian pastors would not trust into a leadership position anyone who has not learned to communicate with the Spirit of God even if he or she had the best theological education. Ministry training is mostly done by apprenticeship simply because through the mentoring process, young leaders learn to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. In such mentoring relationships, J. Oswald Sanders' *Spiritual Leadership* was required reading for many young leaders.¹⁹

Communal Leadership

When I grew up watching the community leaders in my village, *umunthu* taught me that good leadership is always communal leadership. Leaders with *umunthu* realize that they cannot be good leaders in isolation. The principle of "I am because we are" comes into play here. No leader can ever have it all by himself/herself. Important decisions that have repercussions in communities need to be communally discerned and agreed upon. For this reason, in Malawi, every chief has a team of *nduna*—advisors or counselors who have to be present at every deliberation of the community's affairs. Above all else, these *ndunas* are first and foremost co-leaders with the chief such that the chief is more like the first among equals with the *ndunas*. These counselors serve two purposes: (1) to make sure that the welfare of the community (which includes the harmonious connectedness with the spirit-world) is primary to the leader's vision, and (2) to take some pressure off the leader so the leader can remain healthy. Wise leaders in the context of *umunthu* are those who surround themselves with good co-leaders.

In the context of a congregation, *umunthu* leadership will also be always communal. The pastor is not a CEO in any way, and the team of advisers is not in any way similar to the church council or board. Both the chief and

¹⁹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer*, Updated Edition (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007).

the advisers have no power apart from that given to them by the people. *Umunthu* leadership often manages to break away from power, and is therefore able to lead the community from within. In many cases, *umunthu* leaders guide from behind the community. They are oftentimes invisible. The help the leaders receive from their advisers usually means they are more facilitators of conversations than directors. If anything, the leader's leadership is only possible because of the team of people that he or she works with, including the entire community.

Communal leadership goes against the individualistic leadership styles that have corrupted the congregational landscape of North America. As I have visited a considerable number of congregations in the past six years, I have become convinced that the individualism that is rampant in American culture also shapes the way most Christian leaders do their work. Business type entrepreneurial leadership styles driven by visions of grandeur of excellent church buildings and thousands of members have caused countless pastors to think of other pastors as competitors rather than coworkers in the field of God. Congregational leaders are bound to be just as territorial about their church as WalMart. With *umunthu*, the bondedness of the universe and submission to the overarching spirit-world would force leaders to recognize that the field is much bigger than they can handle and also that to maintain the harmony in the universe, there is need for them to respect one another and work together. If anything, they need to realize that they need one another for them to even be who they are. One pastor needs another pastor to help them be the pastor he or she is supposed to be. "I am a pastor because we are pastors." In the same way, congregations need other congregations if they are to be who God called them to be. There is no need for congregations to fight for members even to the driving of other congregations out of business. After all, the primary goal of *umunthu* leadership is to maintain the harmony in the bonded world of the spirits, society, and nature.

Humanizing Missional Leadership

In essence, *missio Dei* is God humanizing us all in God's Son. The Triune God is the Great *Munthu*,²⁰ who came to earth in the Person of the Son, Jesus Christ, to restore human beings to their full humanity—personhood, *umunthu*—and give them life in abundance. This is divine generosity at its best...for God so loved the world. The Pauline corpus suggests that the culmination of this humanizing begins with regeneration whereby God generously gives the Spirit (breath, *ruach*), of God to bring human spirits to life (Gen 2:7).²¹ The apostle Paul testifies to this when he said, “We were once dead in our sins...but God made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:1-7, my paraphrase). Peter adds that, “You were once not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Peter 2:10, NIV). In this sense, the real *umunthu* begins with regeneration; the secular *umunthu* is only a shadow of the real *umunthu* that is made possible by Christ. When everyday acts of *umunthu* are undergirded by prayers and faith, they become divinely sanctified avenues through which God's Spirit draws people to God's humanizing love. Steven Sjogren's idea of the conspiracy of kindness could function this way.²² After all, this is what *missio Dei* is about. This humanizing principle of *missio Dei* rightly extends the concept of salvation in Africa to include many ways in which life and personhood is shared. Many scholars have shown how salvation in Africa is more than the saving of the soul.²³ Salvation, even in its Greek translation, *sozo*, includes healing, deliverance, blessing, empowerment, liberation,

²⁰ See James H. O. Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and the African Intellectual Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2007).

²¹ Among some Malawians, the word *spirit* is also used interchangeably with *umunthu*.

²² See Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness: A Refreshing New Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus with Others* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 2003).

²³ See J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Boston: Brill, 2005).

feeding, clothing, etc.²⁴ All of these are humanizing acts through which people can have the abundant life that Christ gave to humankind. In all these acts, plus many others, Christian witness is made and the Gospel is shared, even sometimes without proclamation.

The implications of this interpretation of *umunthu* on *missio Dei* are many and huge. For instance, by suggesting the possibility—or likelihood—of God’s mission manifesting itself in *umunthu*, mission easily becomes theo-centric while placing an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. We all have something to offer that can humanize someone...even if it is a listening ear. Every Christian is a missionary and God can use them anywhere, not just in church. Every Christian has the possibility to engage with the Spirit and can therefore effectively minister as the Spirit grants grace. In the daily grind of *umunthu*, then, God can surprise the church by drawing people to the cross of Christ.

In addition, in *umunthu*, mission becomes holistic. It pays attention to the whole human being, not just the person’s soul. *Missio Dei* gets rooted in healthy loving and humanizing relationships between Christians and the community in which they live. In this sense, *missio Dei* also leads to a Christian identification with the poor and the marginalized. *Umunthu’s* generosity makes such situations as we hear about in Acts that there was none lacking in the early church possible. Christian ministers leading by *umunthu* will be generous people who are there for their flock. Extortion for the sake of enriching themselves is thievery—*patse patse nkulanda*—and a sign of lacking *umunthu*. As such, *missio Dei* understood through *umunthu* encourages good stewardship of God’s creation; for to have *umunthu* is to be in harmony with God, the spirits, the community, and nature. The desertification of the land and the exploitation of the lake

²⁴ For a more detailed treatment of the subject of salvation among African Christians, see *ibid.* For further reading, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Holy Spirit and Salvation: The Sources of Christian Theology*, 1st Edition (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 399-416.

are contrary to *umunthu*, and therefore also contrary to *missio Dei*.

Conclusion

I have attempted here to think through missional leadership using a resource passed on to me by my elders in Malawi—*umunthu*. In doing so, I have tried to achieve two things. First, I have tried to contextualize missional leadership for a Malawian audience that would naturally use *umunthu* as a starting point for conversations on mission and leadership. Second, I sought to widen the missional leadership conversation to include resources from Africa. My hope is that, in doing so, I may convince some that a multi-perspectival approach to theology that includes resources outside one's theological heritage can be enriching. Indeed, *umunthu* can enrich missional leadership.