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## TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIALS OF LIMINAL LEADERSHIP

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### Abstract

This article considers the crucial contribution of liminal leaders who engage with individuals and groups temporarily dwelling in spatial-temporal thresholds, thresholds in which dissonance and dislocation provide opportunities for transformative growth. These liminal leaders focus their work in “betwixt and between” spaces and times, bringing people together across boundaries and enabling critical collective reflection that creates new ways forward. Two examples of how this liminal leadership can be transformative within religious organizations are included in this article: one in higher education from the United States, and one related to the British Methodist Church from the United Kingdom.

### Introduction

Questions regarding the most effective approaches to leadership within organizational life dominate much secular leadership literature and research; religious organizations are not alone in facing significant challenges regarding how they should integrate such questions into development opportunities for leaders. For example, the *McKinsey Quarterly*'s most recently published research indicates that ninety percent of the chief executive officers in the business world spend significant time thinking about content for leadership training that would best serve their organizations. In “Decoding Leadership: What Really Matters,” three directors of international McKinsey & Company offices researching leadership suggest that four types of leadership behaviors are primary characteristics for developing effective leaders.<sup>1</sup> Among twenty distinct leadership traits researched

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<sup>1</sup> Claudio Feser, Fremanda Mayol, and Ramesh Srinivasan, “Decoding Leadership: What Really Matters,” *McKinsey Quarterly*, January 2015.

[http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/leading\\_in\\_the\\_21st\\_century/decoding](http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/leading_in_the_21st_century/decoding)

through experience, academic literature, and surveys conducted on 189,000 people in 81 diverse organizations (a variety of industries on four continents), the authors found that leadership effectiveness was strongest when these four behaviors were exhibited. The most significant characteristics for leadership in their view were: (1) solving problems effectively once data is gathered; (2) seeking different perspectives by monitoring trends and changes in environment in conjunction with giving weight to stakeholder concerns while focusing on important versus unimportant issues; (3) being supportive by building trust and allaying fears in employees; and (4) operating with strong results orientation by prioritizing the highest-value work after developing a vision and setting objectives.<sup>2</sup>

These traits might have much to offer to secular organizations, but leaders in religious organizations also need to reflect constructively and critically on such approaches in light of their theological perspectives. In particular, transformative understandings of what this article calls “liminal leadership” are critically informed by the Christian faith; we argue that this leadership can make substantial contributions to the agile transformation of Christian religious organizations as they seek to respond faithfully to the rapidly changing contexts they face. For example, within many Western societies, religious organizations are engaging with contemporary social contexts that are increasingly diverse in their ethnic and religious composition, as well as increasing numbers of people who identify as atheist or agnostic. Religious organizations often face challenges concerning how to respond to this diversity, as well as how to respond to the contested role of religion within public life. Religious organizations are not alone in facing such challenges, as assertions, often contested, in wider society include how

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[leadership\\_what\\_really\\_matters?cid=other-eml-nsl-mip-mck-oth-1501](#)

(Accessed January 26, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Feser. Exhibit and explanation based on McKinsey’s Health Index included in article (January 2015).

different ethnic and religious groups should relate to each other within this changing context,<sup>3</sup> and how conflicts between different perspectives might be resolved.<sup>4</sup>

The defining feature for liminal leadership is the way in which it operates at points of intersection, or border zones, where tensions, dislocations, and disruptions are likely to occur. This article argues that creating new connections, understandings, and actions that bridge these zones requires a particular kind of transformative liminal leadership, one that skillfully traverses transitional and perhaps threshold times and spaces in the midst of change. Like the generic leadership behaviors emphasized by McKinsey (problem solving, perspective seeking, support, and results orientation), this form of leadership moves into ambiguous, spatial-temporal areas and involves a dynamism that responds to complex, fluid contexts with innovative relationship-building. However, ironically, models such as McKinsey's that are designed to move toward change don't always fully recognize the extent to which the process of change, if it is to be transformational, involves creating its own disequilibrium in the midst of transition.

In particular, the liminal leadership approach that we are proposing here involves a willingness to radically review the meanings, means, and aims of the organization, taking into account new perspectives that were previously excluded. Liminal leaders who work for transformational change engage with and express mutual solidarity with those who might previously have been seen as "the other." This kind of leadership can move with groups through interruptive events or spans of evolution in organizations, ministries, and educational endeavors. Such an engagement includes drawing on the deep foundations of an organization's existing understandings of its vision and mission, and the willingness to learn profoundly from disruptive and

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<sup>3</sup> See Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), for one perspective.

challenging engagements with others. The deep relationality of these engagements across difference within liminal times and places holds within it transformative potential. However, such potential might not be realized without the contribution of liminal leaders who have an eye on relational transformation. To illustrate this claim, a model for liminal leadership will be illustrated by two examples that explore this concept further. These examples are the leadership of antiracism work in one U.S. theological school (an institution of higher education) and the ministry of the deacon in the British Methodist tradition.

### Liminal Leadership

The etymology of the word *liminal* indicates that it originates from the Latin *limen*, meaning “threshold.”<sup>5</sup> Thresholds bring to mind spaces and times of transition from one state of being or location to another. Studies in ethnography, ritual, rites of passage, psychology, spirituality, art, music, and social development encounter these threshold times and spaces where an ambiguous, limbo state exists; sometimes this ambiguity is evoked intentionally for the sake of status change or movement of consciousness, and sometimes it simply is the consequential process of natural transition.

*Liminality* is a word coined by Arnold Van Gennep, based on his ethnographic work on rites of passage, in which he describes a middle, transitional space and time between two states of being or status—a limbo state marked by fluidity and ambiguity.<sup>6</sup> This liminal phase forms part of a pattern of interdependence among individuals, society, and nature in which

The universe itself is governed by a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/liminal](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/liminal) (Accessed January 31, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1909. Reprint, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity.<sup>7</sup>

Victor Turner, a Scottish cultural anthropologist best known for his research on symbols, rituals, and rites of passage in the 1960s, continued ethnographic work and widened the scope of Van Gennep's concept. He saw rituals as evolutionary processes, moving individuals or groups from one state to another, with focus on the space-time continuum in the midst of the transition required for regenerative renewal. In other words, liminality has spatial and temporal dimensions that are, as Turner is often quoted, "betwixt and between,"<sup>8</sup> frequently found in rites of passage and also in conflicted situations when work is being done between problem or crisis and resolution. The paradox of liminal space is that in it, a person or a group is simultaneously looking back to the prior state or status while also looking forward to the unfolding of a new state or status. Turner's studies in rites of passage describe such paradoxes through "coming of age" ceremonies: a young person remembers and comes from childhood and is looking at adulthood at the same time, but is not quite in either state.<sup>9</sup>

Turner's notion about liminality is significant for problem solving, which requires attention to the transitional process between problem and solution. A liminal leader realizes that conflicts are in play, minor or major, in the midst of the vast majority of transitions. When conflict is significant, it creates a dissonant situation, where parties or factors involved are "off balance" and not completely in control of their own thoughts and feelings, or indeed, the

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<sup>7</sup> Van Gennep, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Periods in *Les Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93ff., and "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1969), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Turner, Roger D. Abrahams, and Alfred Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Piscataway, N.J.: Aldine Transaction, Reprint edition, 1995), 96ff.

trajectory of the work ahead. Dissonance can escalate to disruption, or crisis, where “business as usual” becomes interrupted and frameworks for relationships or functions no longer apply in the disrupted state. Imagine a conveyor belt breaking in a manufacturing setting; all production grinds to a halt from an episodic crisis. If the conveyor breaks regularly, much more than merely fixing the belt must be done. Whole systems of production might need to be reworked before output reaches former levels. A leader-manager might hold meetings to fix or manage the production problem. A liminal leader wonders if this is an opportunity to think about a new way forward that might increase production altogether by thinking about alternative methods of production, or even whether this opportunity might present a chance to rethink whether the right goods are being produced. A transformative liminal leader goes even further and uses the inherent tension of the in-between space-time to foster creativity for potential solutions, scenarios, or renewed identities for the future, and then facilitates movement toward these potentialities at just the right time.

Likewise, in ministry or in not-for-profit organizations, when dissonance or a crisis occurs, a liminal leader will be involved in such disruption in a particular way. Rather than mere problem solving to move quickly to a short-term solution, this type of leader will live in a liminal phase for a time—a time “betwixt and between” the starting point and the resolution—to allow for creative thinking and relationship building in the midst of tensions and dislocation, with persons or ideas. This complex temporal and spatial practice, where groups move into a new identity as an imaginative collective, or individuals explore metaphor and imagination to understand their present position further, is also a holding phase where much reflective activity occurs. Solving problems is a focus that is never far away for most leaders, but the emphasis of the transformative liminal leader is on keeping the complexity of the problem alive with enough time and quality attention to create deep, sustainable solutions. Liminal leaders foster this resolution-oriented

activity from previous status to new threshold through data gathering but also through perspective seeking and support, while encouraging experimentation with inklings of potential resulting scenarios. The work occurs in tension, but this tension is creative, moving from one point to another, often involving conflicting ideas, different perspectives, and diverse identities. For churches and other religious organizations, this type of liminal space has been theorized by Baker as a hybrid third space, in which they engage fully, deeply, and collectively with this diversity through reflective encounters.<sup>10</sup>

Perspective-seeking action in a context of supporting transformation in liminal spaces is essential for movement. Persons who find themselves in this discomfiting reality embody a variety of geographies and social locations. One answer does not fit all perspectives. Therefore, liminal leadership spends a significant amount of time in disrupted space, providing avenues for interconnection regarding memory, identity, and narrative that each person brings. Liminal leaders are acutely aware that points of intersection and departure are both found in this spatial-temporal practice, so they must create a lightly held holding place for the hybridity of the experience there. Some people might come into the border zones of disruption, believing that they are in exile from all that they have known. Others might find opportunity for pilgrimage into new ways of being or functioning. Appropriation of memory might shift, and identity might be called into question for individuals or for a group. Whatever the case, the leader calls forth a conversation that begins a new narrative, based on dialogue between the perspectives present, drawing participants forth to a threshold of shifted, or even new alignments or foci. However, this process also involves empowering participants to reflect on and therefore more fully (and critically) understand their own religious identities, perspectives, and traditions.

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<sup>10</sup> See Christopher R. Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007).

In the midst of this messy process, liminal leaders support the potential for movement and the people who are experiencing the process. Without a framework of trust in the spatial-temporal practice of liminality, challenges will not be addressed in a helpful manner that moves forward in a transformative way. Allaying anxiety about conflict or threat is a primary navigational function for liminal leaders in disrupted space and time, while at the same time, holding in creative tension the diversity of voices and perspectives. Certainly, support connects directly to perspective seeking and problem solving. Without some sense of fostering authentic value for all people's voices while attending to a trajectory that moves the organization collectively forward, liminal leadership can become stuck space where movement grinds to a halt. Frustration can lead to chronic conflict, rather than the transformation that beckons.

When engaging with McKinsey & Company's collated criteria, transformative liminal leaders *may* be results oriented in some form, but this orientation requires careful and critical theological reflection on the nature of the results sought. Despite liminality being perceived as nebulous space with its own chaotic character, it also potentially provides a threshold into a new space, pathway, resolution, or orientation. However, any route out of this space requires some form of reorientation or reintegration of what the ultimate aim or the highest values are for the organization.<sup>11</sup> Not-for-profit organizations and religious organizations frequently intend to influence the wider world with visions for creating change for the better, with their vision for change shaped by their founding values and belief structures. However, the disruption of liminal spaces and times can challenge such organizations to reexamine their vision and the means of realizing it as they rethink their hoped-for

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<sup>11</sup> This process has some strong resonances with research and writing on learning organizations in the tradition of Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1978). See also Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organisation* (London: Random House, 2006).



future based on their highest values, foundational beliefs, and the contexts in which they live.

Ultimately, liminal space for Christian faith-based leadership involves engaging with the creativity of a God beyond known reality, who is already at work in those situations and places. Part of the dissonance in liminal space can be understood as part of a creative process deeply influenced by a Higher Power, who breaks into our carefully crafted plans, targets, and predefined ideas of what might count as “results.” For Christians, it could be argued that Jesus provides the ultimate example of a liminal leader, who through the incarnation broke into human existence and transformed his disciples’ understanding of how God works—through transformative relationships with individuals and challenge to misused power, and through teachings that demonstrated the value of those considered outsiders: Samaritans, women, the chronically ill, and so on. The impermanence of liminal space allows room for emphasis on new kinds of God-movement that can lead to surprises, new relational proximities, and new narratives. Points of departure held in positive tension with points of intersection allow the liminal leader to name the “spark” of Presence that makes liminal space “thin.”<sup>12</sup> The thinness between Divine Presence and human beings fortifies the journey through dislocation, dissonance, and disruption into something new. In such a context, understanding liminal leadership as focusing only on achieving predefined results is highly problematic because the nature of such engagement cannot define results from the outset; however, it does not take away the sense of an orientation toward an ultimate journey informed by that religious faith, in which the current state is only one place in time on that journey. Indeed, such dwelling in the “between-spaces” might be understood as wilderness spatial-temporal existence, essential for transformation as religious persons follow the Divine call.

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<sup>12</sup> *Thin space* is a term attributed to the Celtic understanding of earthly, temporal space and heavenly, nontemporal space meeting, where one encounters self and beyond-self at the same time.

Creating steps that help move people forward through unknown, dissonant spaces on their respective journeys (and enable the connection between individual lives and journeys together in mutual relationship) is part of the threshold work that occurs in liminal space. How does one move forward in developing a pattern of life and work? How does an organization not only resolve problems but also foster new perspectives and influences altogether, while living in integrity with its foundational values and beliefs? Only good leadership that is aware of the transformative virtues of liminal space can fashion this work to make it most productive as it moves into its new iteration within rapidly changing societies and cultures.

## Two Examples

This transformation-focused liminal leadership, attuned to complex spatial practice in the liminal border zones of space-time that cut across previous categories, identities, and experiences, can be illustrated in two experiences of such leadership. This section will begin by considering the liminal leadership role of facilitating antiracism movements in the realm of one theological school in higher education in the United States, before going on to consider the liminal ministry of deacons who are involved in processes of transformational change in the British Methodist Church.

### *Anti-Racism Task Force*

In the United States, much-needed and overdue attention is being paid to the violence against nondominant racial groups<sup>13</sup> brought about in many cases by racial discrimination, including profiling by some armed security and police officers and often backed by the media and the judicial system. Movements such as “Black Lives Matter”

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<sup>13</sup> As authors from different countries, we note the different and often contested use of terminology within and between different contexts, and particularly between the United States (where this phrase is one preferred usage) and the United Kingdom (where this phrase would not be in widespread use, and alternative terms would be more common).

and organizers for civil rights are in the news on a regular basis. The Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) understands that part of seminary life is to be engaged in the world's pain, which includes the theological community seeking to contribute to sustainable justice for all living beings who find themselves in dangerous, marginal places.

Within MTSO, an Anti-Racism Task Force has been established, which is doing liminal work, exhibiting the leadership characteristics discussed above in the McKinsey study (problem solving, perspective seeking, supporting, result orientation), while also walking in disrupted space and time filled with tension. The Task Force acknowledges that for African Americans and Native Americans, this disruption is centuries-old, and it can be argued that living in "between" space has become a way of life for generations. Nondominant peoples live with their own cultural norms, through families and/or communities, while negotiating a dominant norm that might not speak to or be relevant for their lived experience. Traversing border zones are daily, if not hourly, experiences for nondominant peoples. Therefore, in response to this situation, the Task Force seeks to name the problems of racism and a wider sense of danger experienced by many nondominant peoples, and collate data to inform movement/action. The Task Force is particularly involved in gathering perspectives from its members and external constituencies, and seeking to support those who have been harmed and their families. The aim of the Task Force is to make a difference to people experiencing racialized violence as part of movements working toward sustainable justice. To do so, "social justice theatre" events, marches at the state and national capital, written responses to shootings and killings, student-faculty conversations, and faculty development regarding attention to race relations in coursework all feature in the Task Force's work. Throughout this leadership work, a sense of liminal leadership is breaking forth as members invite conversations on and off campus where the rooms are tense and the perspectives about racialized violence are not shared easily and often are not congruent. Within these liminal spaces, questions often arise

from those in dominant roles or who inhabit dominant cultures, such as the following: Why can't you stop being angry/difficult/self-focused? Why can't we all just get along [and keep things the way they are set up now]? When are you going to get over the past?

In response, Anti-Racism Task Force members, including students, administrators, alumni, and faculty of different "races" and Christian beliefs ranging from evangelical to near-agnostic, have gathered information and data about violence against people of color in the United States, seeking perspectives from front-line protestors, academics, authors, media, and organizations focused on sustainable justice. The Task Force has an assigned member monitoring the news and also changes in community movements reported through social media, where people have experienced violence. She then reports back to Task Force members. Implicit acknowledgement of points of intersection regarding violence against people of different backgrounds occurs; points of departure are more explicit when people on the Task Force from different cultures view events and responses differently.

This space created by the Task Force is liminal in that it is complex, and it involves differing memory and identity narratives and interruptions of notions each member carries in her or his embodied social location. Different perspectives on the issues before the group are essential for its healthy functioning. The liminal does not attempt to equalize ideas; instead, it endeavors to build an equity of difference where ideas are considered in the experiential context from whence they are generated. Even in the midst of conflict, liminal leadership within the Task Force is invested in diversity as an attribute rather than a barrier in the life of the theological school. Its work functions in the liminal space-time within the group itself, throughout MTSO, and in the wider community, providing transformative moments and movements along the way.

Because this attitude toward difference is essential in the working space, a risk-safety balance, though fluid, necessarily exists in the group. Relaxing the need for static norms while

keeping a loose holding place or scaffolding (a place of potential) allows for support and trust even in the midst of disagreement and challenge. Difference is not an issue to manage but a simple, yet at the same time complex presence that *is*. A supportive environment arises when individuals are committed to weaving together stories and conversation from different perspectives, good listening, and creativity. Prayer life together, even in the midst of theological difference, has become another way in which Task Force members live in a supportive space. From these elements come meaning-making action-ideas, but not quick fixes or opportunistic jumps at a circumstance. Thus, sustainability of the work is born in the liminal space and time, enough to unfold resulting actions that are likely more effective than working quickly toward an end goal, which in turn lessens discourse and the possibility for change more widely. Through liminal leadership, the liminal space-time evolves, and through such space-time, for the theological school, understandings of sustainable justice become movements.

The Task Force continues to change in its membership as students graduate, or faculty and staff take on other priorities. At this point, the group finds that people are requesting to come to the meetings to find out how community actions, such as campaigns, rallies, films, debates, social justice theatre, and training for white people about their own racism is created, can affect change. Critical reflection, collaborative learning, and the characteristics of effective leadership all swirl together in these meetings; the liminal leadership has learned how to foster and “hold” this unruly complexity with the goal of changing the school, and ultimately, the ministry and social structures in the region to make them sustainable and just.

*British Methodist Deacons*

Alan Roxburgh, a writer, teacher, and consultant with The Missional Network in Canada, has analyzed how the church’s position in wider society has moved into liminal space, requiring a different form of leadership:

Liminality requires leaders with the theological, political, and social skills to elicit the new *communitas*.... It also requires leaders who listen to the voices from the edge. This is where the apostle, the prophet, and the poet are found...[whose] ears must be attuned not primarily to the popular, the latest trend, or the expert, but to those who recognize that marginality is the church's reality. By the water of Babylon there is no way back to the old Jerusalem. Liminality requires a different kind of leader if congregations are to be encountered by and encounter our culture with the gospel.<sup>14</sup>

Although Roxburgh speaks primarily of pastors taking on this leadership role, other authors such as Clark<sup>15</sup> and many Christian denominations have begun to draw on renewed understandings of the diaconate as making a particular contribution, working alongside other ordained and lay leaders. This section draws on recent research into the ministry of deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain<sup>16</sup> to explore how they can embody a form of transformational liminal leadership. The liminal nature of deacons' ministries is beginning to be recognized in leading publications on the diaconate; for example, Rosalind Brown, writing in an Anglican context, describes deacons as "liminal people who are comfortable living on boundaries."<sup>17</sup> The liminal nature of this ministry explains much of why it is challenging and often controversial, within and between denominations and

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<sup>14</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>15</sup> See David Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom: Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity* (Peterborough, U.K.: Epworth, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> See Andrew Orton and Todd Stockdale, *Making Connections: Exploring Methodist Deacons' Perspectives on Contemporary Diaconal Ministry* (Durham, U.K.: Sacristy Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Rosalind Brown, *Being a Deacon Today: Exploring a Distinctive Ministry in the Church and in the World* (Norwich, U.K.: Canterbury Press, 2005), xiii.

in wider society, yet brings with it the potential to make a highly significant contribution to the future of the Church.<sup>18</sup>

The first sense of liminal leadership within deacons' ministries arises from their position "betwixt and between" churches and communities. Whether the deacon's role in this liminal position is understood as a bridge, an ambassador, or some other related metaphor, deacons frequently understand their roles as connecting different and perhaps disparate groups. Common descriptions of their role included "standing in the doorway of the church," keeping the door open both ways.<sup>19</sup> However, deacons in Orton and Stockdale's research emphasized that this liminal role was not just a static one on the threshold, but involved a constant movement of coming out from and going back into the Church. By moving between and through these liminal spaces, they sought to create hybrid points of connection, which allowed transformational relationships to grow.

A second, related understanding of transformational liminal leadership stems from the deacons' focus on identifying with and working among individuals and groups that have been marginalized from either the church and/or wider society. A key aspect of this role emphasizes connecting with those "on the edge" of churches and wider communities, reaching out and expressing solidarity with those who feel excluded, marginalized, or lonely, as well as those experiencing poverty, injustice, and other detrimental circumstances. By leading others to create spaces that reach out, include, value, and welcome such individuals and groups, deacons also create new opportunities for encounter, which could transform not just the lives of those included, but also the Church as a whole. The importance of this focus is well described by Alison MacRae in the context of

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Orton, "The Diverse and Contested Diaconate: Why Understanding This Ministry Is Crucial to the Future of the Church," *Journal of Practical Theology* 16(2) (2012): 260–284.

<sup>19</sup> See the deacon page of the Methodist Church in Britain: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/ministers-and-office-holders/leadership-and-ministry/deacons> (Accessed January 26, 2015).

deacons in the Uniting Church in Australia. She draws on Roxburgh's work to describe how, by listening to those in marginal situations, deacons

may present significant challenges and will mean that we are required to listen again to those voices which emanate...from outside the perceived mainstream of tradition, and to recognize that the power of the "liminal space" lies in its ability to subvert and transform from the outside.<sup>20</sup>

This form of liminal leadership, by creating opportunities for wider engagement and relationship, can be important in stimulating a process of transformation of the Church. For example, liminal leadership can create pockets of innovation within the fostered liminal spaces that enable new expressions of Church to become established through the inclusion of such groups,<sup>21</sup> although such forms often face challenges in becoming fully recognized by conserving members of established churches.

A third sense of liminality embodied in deacons' ministerial leadership is the perception of diaconal status and the role itself that is neither "one thing or the other," in terms of lay/ordained, secular social worker/traditional church presbyter, or some other set of categories that are otherwise understood in a polarized way. One of the most frequently voiced frustrations by the Methodist deacons in Orton's research was when they were repeatedly asked in congregations: When are you going to become a *proper* minister? Why didn't you want to be a proper minister? What exactly does a deacon do? Many other denominations have also been "wrestling with the diaconate," as Avis<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alison McRae, *De-Centred Ministry: A Diaconal View of Mission and Church* (Melbourne, Aus.: Melbourne College of Divinity, 2009), 180–181; citing Roxburgh, 47–48. D.Min. thesis available:

[http://repository.divinity.edu.au/4/1/Alison\\_McRae\\_Thesis\\_copy\\_1\\_pdf.pdf](http://repository.divinity.edu.au/4/1/Alison_McRae_Thesis_copy_1_pdf.pdf) (Accessed January 26, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> For example, in the United Kingdom, see the Fresh Expressions guide, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide>. (Accessed January 26, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Paul Avis, "Wrestling with the Diaconate," *Ecclesiology* 5(1) (2009): 3–6.



describes it, not least in terms of whether this Order is to be understood in terms of lay or ordained ministry. The World Council of Churches' *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*<sup>23</sup> document notes a range of different denominational positions on the status of deacons, and historical studies of some denominational positions note how a particular denomination's position has shifted over time.<sup>24</sup> Historically, within the Methodist Church in Britain, the Methodist Diaconal Order could be understood as experiencing a collective "rite of passage" transition themselves: originally being created as a religious order for women only, they transitioned through a liminal status before also becoming fully recognized by the Methodist Church as an ordained order of ministry that now includes both women and men. In other denominations, such as the Anglican Church, being a deacon is a liminal space in a different sense, as most people enter the diaconate en route to ordination as a priest, while technically retaining their status as a deacon even after subsequent ordination to the priesthood.<sup>25</sup> In fact, for both denominations, liminal periods where women led within the diaconate proved transformational for the wider denomination, eventually realizing the significant contribution that women could make in a wider range of leadership roles (including other ordained roles) as well.<sup>26</sup>

Liminal leadership for the deacon has transformation at its center. The deacon lives liminally, while also calling the Church to be liminal in its faith and work. Within a deacon's

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<sup>23</sup> World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, 1982), 21–25.

<sup>24</sup> See Maurice W. Staton, "The Development of Diaconal Ministry in the Methodist Church: A Historical and Theological Study" (Ph.D. thesis, Leeds: Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> For a good explanation of the Anglican position, see Steven Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions: Ordination and Leadership in the Local Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Staton, referencing Francis, L. J. and M. Robbins, *The Long Diaconate: 1987–1994. Women Deacons and the Delayed Journey to Priesthood* (Leominster, U.K.: Gracewing, 1999).

ministry, this in-betweenness has both constructive and less positive manifestations. For example, on a constructive note in the study, the fact that some lay people did not see deacons as having the same status as a presbyter meant that deacons appeared more accessible to these lay people; these deacons were then able to say more easily to lay people something to the effect of, “If I can do this, so can you!” However, deacons expressed concern over the risk that being a liminal leader “out on the edge” could easily lead them to become “stuck out on a limb” by themselves if they weren’t careful, lacking wider Church connections and support.<sup>27</sup>

As diaconal ministries in the process of renewal continue to generate much debate across the world, the different dimensions of their liminality and their significance as transformative liminal leaders are worth analyzing further, not least in terms of related implications for practice. It appears that the ambiguity and even contestation created by the liminality of the deacon’s leadership role frequently challenges many of the concepts and categories otherwise bestowed upon leaders, as well as assumptions about what Church should be or should look like. Paradoxically, this ambiguity opens the door for deacons to achieve their ministry goals and results in complex spatial and temporal practices of ministerial work. Furthermore, their engagement in radical forms of service and witness crosses boundaries between different understandings of mission, evangelism, social service, and discipleship. Within their liminal role, the deacons’ narratives in the research issued a challenge to the results-focused narratives of secular leadership theory. They repeatedly emphasized the importance of their presence and service being unconditional, given the power imbalances and related ethical dimensions of their work. They emphatically rejected any understanding of their role that reduced it to maintaining the status quo by just recruiting “bums on pews” for existing forms of Church. However, by modeling integrity in connecting their faith with their everyday

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<sup>27</sup> Orton and Stockdale, 70–73.

ministry, and living creatively in ways that refused to be squashed into any particular category or box, they sought to foster opportunities and create spaces for renewed connections, relationships, and forms of Church to emerge. Paradoxically, in many of the accounts these deacons gave of “good practice,” it was often because of their insistence on a gracious, unconditional ministry, while being clear about their own faith, that new opportunities to share and live the Gospel opened up in response to spontaneous requests from those with whom they engaged.

### **The Significance of Liminal Leadership**

Liminal leadership is not for the faint of heart. The characteristics exhibited by this kind of leadership, for particular times and places in the life of ministries and organizations, must embrace a clear sense of self while at the same time exhibit a dogged willingness to be challenged and changed. A willingness to live with ambiguity, dissonance, and conflict is essential for the effectiveness of liminal leadership. The results orientation is focused not on numbers or particular pre-set achievements, but on transformative movement that transitions individuals and groups from one point to another as they grow in their life, faith, and work, often in ways that surprise those involved.

Because transition is often conducted poorly in groups or organizations, often with little sense of safety or agency for those involved or affected, liminal leadership is necessary to provide an alternative path forward that navigates the tension between safety and risk, norms and creativity, tradition and new opportunity, center and margin, and structure and organic process. Sustainable development for the better requires significant time and messiness in the process that is “betwixt and between” the former status or situation and the one yet-to-come. Liminal space-time does not eschew strategic planning, but it does call into question predetermined results chasing and unyielding checklists of action items to meet identified goals without attention to transitions, relationships, and changes of context, either internal or external. Liminal leadership attends to this space

and time so that alternative points of encounter can move persons beyond stances, polarizations, or entrenchment into a creative learning and growth process through which, as Christians would understand it, the Spirit can move and transform us, individually and collectively. This process lends itself to sustainable change and continued evolution of organizations in ways that strategic planning alone cannot.

### Further Questions

We have argued that much could be learned from further development of liminal leadership models and methods, and how it can be transformative in religious organizations. Many questions remain, as well as areas of further inquiry that could be explored. This article has explored briefly only two examples; the study of other examples of liminal leadership in action would be enlightening, particularly in considering those instances where it has and has not achieved the transformative potential it has. One further area of inquiry would be to explore the relationship between ongoing cycles of change and processes of transformational change in relation to liminal leadership. Chaos theory<sup>28</sup> attends to chaos and reorganization cycles, where each reorganization yields more complex organisms or atomic structures. However, what happens in the chaos to begin the reorganization could be considered liminal space. Likewise, the cycle of change seems to incorporate periods of relative stability followed by crisis or chaos followed again by stability. Is the role of liminal leadership particularly acute within such threshold times, or as constant change is becoming an organizational norm, is liminal leadership required at all times? What is the relationship between liminal leaders and those in more traditional leadership roles? How do such liminal leaders manage their sense of identity and orientation when

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<sup>28</sup> See Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity: A Platform for Designing Business Architecture* (Burlington, Mass.: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2011); also Jennifer Wells, *Complexity and Sustainability* (Routledge Studies in Ecological Economics), (New York: Routledge, 2013).

constantly inhabiting and moving between liminal spaces? How do liminal leaders develop, and what skills and characteristics are important for them to foster? Studying these issues and the related ways in which liminal leaders develop in response to them would offer much fruit for the academy, management consultants/trainers, and those leading organizations in this fast-evolving world. For Christian religious organizations in particular, which draw on their own rich theological traditions in this field, there is much that could help them respond to their current dislocated position in relating to their contemporary context.

## Conclusion

We have argued that authentic interaction and the development of sustainable futures within religious organizations and wider society requires liminal leadership where leaders create spatial-temporal conversation among diverse persons at points of interaction, conflict, and transition. This characteristic of leadership is directly tied to the spaces and times leaders foster for the work of moving from one status or point to another with intentionality, but which paradoxically may depend on the ability to remain within the uncertainty of the liminal space for a time, not least to determine a common vision for the direction of travel. Transformation occurs when liminal leaders focus on the creativity found in these transitions, which Christians believe is also rooted in and fostered by God. Border zones are blurred, and borders (signified by rigid understandings of norms, roles, and values of social location) become permeable or even uprooted. In the resulting, more fluid context, the work of problem solving, seeking different perspectives, supporting, and aiming for results all comes together in new ways, particularly opening an attentiveness within Christian organizations to the movement of God in the midst of the complexity, co-creating a new path together. A new resilience to cope with and grow in response to the changing circumstances is born for the work ahead as people move from the liminal space, a transformative wilderness, into a new future. Liminal leadership supports this potential

by working to engage people in this depth of transformative change in sustainable, life-giving, and interdependent ways.

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