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# CHURCH LEADERSHIP AS ADAPTIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN A CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT

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## Abstract

In the Western world, organizations and their forms of leadership are changing dramatically. Churches are no exception to this trend. Pastoral leadership has shifted from people management to organizational management and now to identity management. The social identity theory of leadership provides a helpful lens through which to examine the challenges and tensions of these new forms of pastoral leadership. This article examines congregational identity-building strategies of the apostle Paul and a number of interviewed pastoral leaders in the United States and Europe. It also traces the relationship between the socio-religious identity of the community and the pastor's leader identity. The article explores innovative ways to form community and identity, and demonstrates how the identity-shaping dimension of pastoral leadership is particularly relevant in today's Western, postmodern society.

## Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that organizations and institutions in the Western world are undergoing drastic changes. These changes are fueled by such phenomena as globalization, the development of a knowledge and network society, and continual technological innovation. Organizational scholars like Peter Senge and Michael Marquardt argue that "old," twentieth-century-style organizations are too hierarchical and autocratic, too complex in organizational structure, and too focused on internal consistency and homogeneity to become the

flexible learning organization needed in today's rapidly changing world.<sup>1</sup>

In this new world, the old style organization is no longer able to tap into intrinsic motivation, self-respect, dignity, and curiosity, which cripples the organization's ability to adopt a flexible learning posture toward these rapid societal changes.<sup>2</sup> To remain vital, organizations need to enhance their ability to adapt and innovate by flattening their hierarchy, empowering people within peer-to-peer relationships, creating multidisciplinary teams that function across old departmental boundaries, and adopting a participative style of management.<sup>3</sup> Senge and Marquardt go on to describe how to develop and change organizations, their people, their systems, and their technology so that they become adaptive and innovative learning organizations.

These change processes and their effect on organizations are described abundantly in the literature. For instance, the ARL devoted the 2008 spring conference to the issue of change.<sup>4</sup> At this conference, notably Lisa Withrow discussed societal changes extensively, focusing on global economics, U.S. politics, mainline churches, and theological education.<sup>5</sup> Dutch sociologist Paul Schnabel describes trends in societal change as informalization (relationships becoming less formal and hierarchical), informatization (the increasing role of digital information through technological innovation), individualization (decreasing dependency from other individuals),

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Marquardt, *Building the Learning Organization: Achieving Strategic Advantage Through a Commitment to Learning*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2011), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2006), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Marquardt, 10.

<sup>4</sup> The proceedings were published in the *Journal of Religious Leadership* 7(2) (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Lisa R. Withrow, "Change: Exploring Its Implications for Religious Leadership—A Pedagogical Inquiry," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 7(2) (2008).

internationalization, and intensification (the search for ever-more-intense experiences).<sup>6</sup> This documents the widespread acknowledgement of societal changes in Western countries.

As society changes, so do forms of leadership. The leader can no longer be regarded as the solitary, effective change agent at the top of the hierarchy. Instead, leaders need to negotiate their relationships with followers, they need to lead their organization in its interaction with its immediate environment, and they increasingly need to take into account larger societal issues in order to validate their leadership. Bolden et al., reflect these shifts in leadership perspective in their survey of leadership studies, moving from individual to organizational to societal and then to emerging perspectives.<sup>7</sup> Northouse incorporates these perspectives in successive editions of his widely used textbook *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. The fifth edition (2009) incorporated new chapters on “Authentic Leadership” and “Servant Leadership,” and the seventh edition (2015) adds a chapter on “Adaptive Leadership.”<sup>8</sup>

Although these recent shifts in leadership perspective represent the broad and continuous development of leadership practice, many corporate and church leaders experience them as discontinuous and disruptive. Barbara Kellerman thus writes about the *End of Leadership*, reflecting the historical devolvement of power from the leader to the followers, so that today the leader appears to be at the mercy of the followers instead of vice versa.<sup>9</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Schnabel, *Trends, dilemma's en beleid: Essays over ontwikkelingen op langere termijn* (English translation: *Trends, Dilemmas and Policy: Essays About Long Term Developments*) (Den Haag, Netherlands: SDU Uitgevers, 2000), 20–22. He described Dutch trends, but they are recognizable across Western Europe and North America.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bolden, Jonathan Gosling, Beverley Hawkins, and Scott Taylor, *Exploring Leadership: Individual, Organizational, and Societal Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership* (New York: Harper Business, 2012).

Mosés Naím argues that power as we knew it has effectively disappeared. The diversity and complexity of peoples and products simply overwhelm an organization's instruments of control. Technology makes information widely available such that audiences are no longer captive, and younger generations typically question authority and challenge power more than previous generations.<sup>10</sup> One might argue against Kellerman and Naím that in many organizations, including in churches, leadership and power are practiced as they always were; however, in many places the practice of leadership is changing so dramatically that it is experienced as the end of leadership and power.

Many churches are part of this trend. Jan Hendriks, a Dutch emeritus professor of church development, articulates change factors that he believes significantly disrupt church development strategies. Social differentiation and fragmentation lead to a longing for spirituality; commercialization and mobility lead to a longing for community; yet, suspicion of institutions and authority often lead to superficial and shifting loyalties, thus to "community light."<sup>11</sup> In this new context, pastoral leaders often experience a loss of authority. They can no longer rely on theological or institutional models of leadership, but need to lead as authentic, transparent examples for the community, interpreting and often negotiating the course of the community's spiritual journey. They have become creators of congregational culture.<sup>12</sup> These social changes result in different models of church leadership, shifting from people management in classical paradigms of clergy leadership, to organizational management in late twentieth-century church growth

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<sup>10</sup> Mosés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 54–68.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Hendriks, *Verlangen en vertrouwen: Het hart van gemeenteopbouw* (English translation: *Desire and Trust: The Heart of Church Development*) (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 2008), 32–52.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 130ff.

models, to identity management in newer, emerging models of religious leadership.<sup>13</sup>

As a consequence, churches are adapting their organizational structure and leadership roles to address the new challenges of this changing social context. In this article, I explore the social identity model of leadership for its ability to respond to this new context. This model describes how people identify with a particular community and, applying it to pastoral leadership, how leaders shape and adapt the socio-religious identity of their religious community to maintain its theological vitality and societal relevance. A vital question is how pastoral leaders can innovate faithfully in adapting the socio-religious identity of their congregations to their changing social context. I will explain the social identity model of leadership, apply it in an analysis of the apostle Paul's leadership in Corinth, and use it to interpret the congregational-building strategies of four pastoral leaders who were interviewed in the United States and Europe. This model of identity leadership enables me to describe how pastoral leaders influence group formation and identification processes, how they strengthen congregational loyalty and member mobilization, and how then they can innovate faithfully with respect to the church's identity as well as their own leader identity. Overall, identity leadership provides a psychological and theological model for contextualizing the practice of Christian leadership, discipleship, and community formation.

### **Social Identity as a Leadership Framework**

A social identity is a psychological sense of *us*, of belonging to a group. This has a cognitive dimension that relates to ideas and concepts by which people categorize themselves as group members, an affective dimension that expresses one's level of emotional attachment to the group,

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<sup>13</sup> Jack Barentsen, "Practising Religious Leadership," in *Routledge Companion to Leadership*, ed. John Storey et al. (London: Routledge, 2015 forthcoming).

and a normative dimension that describes the value one attaches to this group identity.<sup>14</sup> Social identities may refer to general social classifications (ethnicity, gender, age), but our focus is more on social groups or movements defined by common goals, family relationships, a shared point of view, or a hobby. Expressions of social identity, such as a company celebration or a political rally, make a particular social identity salient or relevant in a particular setting. Individuals are generally motivated to identify with particular groups because it gives them a sense of security, belonging, or meaning.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, social identities are often embedded in a number of habits or practices, such as fan behaviors for a group of soccer fans (cheering, the wave), or religious rituals and habits for a religious community.<sup>16</sup>

Individuals have numerous social identities that are relevant in different contexts (family member, employee, neighbor, believer, and so on). These social identities are structured as nested subgroups (nested social identities such as small groups, congregation, and denomination), or in cross-cutting categories (cross-cutting social identities such as family member, employee, and believer).<sup>17</sup> These social identities are continually shaped and adapted in comparison with other relevant groups, to identify the social position of one group in relation to other similar (or not so similar)

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<sup>14</sup> Rupert Brown, *Group Processes: Dynamics Within and Between Groups*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 311.

<sup>15</sup> I refer here to the various motivations for personal identification with a group. For further information, see Vivian L. Vignoles et al., "Beyond Self-Esteem: Influence of Multiple Motives on Identity Construction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90(2) (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Research on communities of practice is particularly relevant. See, for instance, Etienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems," *Organization* 7(2) (2000).

<sup>17</sup> Michael A. Hogg et al., "The Social Identity Perspective: Intergroup Relations, Self-Conception, and Small Groups," *Small Group Research* 35(3) (2004): 261ff.

groups. One's identification with and maintenance of social identities is a highly contextual endeavor.<sup>18</sup>

Leadership represents a particular role in a social group that is shaped by behavior and perception. Members gain influence in the group to the extent that they embody and represent the beliefs and values of the group better or more than other members. Such members are seen as representative or prototypical for the group; they are perceived as "one of us." When such members demonstrate group-oriented behavior, they are seen increasingly as "doing it for us." A member's prototypicality renders this person socially attractive and generates a sense of trust. Soon, other members begin to attribute leadership capacities to these prototypical members, and so new leaders emerge.<sup>19</sup>

Whether such a leadership role is formal or informal, group identity shifts and leadership influence can be lost or gained. Leaders engage in a number of behaviors to maintain their leadership influence. Leaders might accentuate the existing group identity to maintain their own prototypical position within the group, even when the context changes significantly. However, they might conform their behavior and self-presentation to the newly developing prototype. Alternatively, leaders might attempt to redefine group identity in a way that fits better with their own vision and leadership. The ability to engage these identity shifts and influence these identification processes will largely determine the level of continued influence a

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<sup>18</sup> Good introductions to social identity theory are Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), and, applied to organizations, S. Alexander Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Daan van Knippenberg, and David E. Rast, "The Social Identity Theory of Leadership: Theoretical Origins, Research Findings, and Conceptual Developments," *European Review of Social Psychology* 23(1) (2012).

leader has. In this way, a leader not only represents but also shapes and constructs the social identity of the group.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the leader is not simply a representative of the group, caught as it were in a static concept of the group's identity. Nor is the group simply an extension of the vision that the leader proposes at whim. Instead, through various kinds of interaction, leader and group negotiate a relevant meaning of their social identity for a particular time and place. This is where innovation takes place. Typically, leaders need a high level of trust to innovate, which is generated by their prototypicality and group-oriented behavior. In leading social change that requires adapting or even going against current group identity, leaders who have demonstrated group loyalty by prototypical behavior (a) have more innovation credit because they are more trusted to be agents of continuity than other group members, and (b) are less likely to be perceived as deviant than non-prototypical members with the same behaviors. Sometimes, however, a future leader—a leader newly elected or appointed—will have even greater innovation credit to argue against current group identity, because group members assume that the new leader will benefit the group in adapting their changing situation.<sup>21</sup> One might expect, however, that the pro-group behavior of such future leaders will be carefully monitored, because their actual prototypicality has yet to be established.

Consider, for instance, the 2008 election of Barack Obama, who was expected to innovate substantially in the White House and on Capitol Hill precisely because he was a relative outsider. However, he was unable, whatever the reasons, to convert his innovation credit as future leader quickly enough into a unifying vision of American identity

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership Development in Corinth and Ephesus*, vol. 168, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 59–61.

<sup>21</sup> Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast, "Social Identity Theory of Leadership," 274–76.



to become the new prototypical leader for a new generation. Consequently, he lost trust and social attraction more quickly than others, because in the perception of many, his performance only emphasized his status as relative outsider.

This brief exposition of social identity theory, and its extension into leadership theory and innovation, provide sufficient basis for the study that follows. When speaking of the social identity of churches and other religious groups, I will now speak of *socio-religious identity* to reflect that these types of group identity have both social and religious dimensions.

### **Paul's Innovative Leadership, Understood as Identity Construction**

One way to evaluate the usefulness of this social identity theory of leadership is to test its use in the analysis of biblical texts. An excellent illustration comes from the apostle Paul's ongoing negotiations with the Corinthian believers about the socio-religious identity (SRI) of their growing community and his leadership role in it.

Shortly after Paul's (and also Apollos's) departure from Corinth, where they had founded a Christian community, this community appeared divided into subgroups: "each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:12).<sup>22</sup> Paul labels this phenomenon as *divisions* and *quarreling* (vv. 10–11), as *jealousy* and *strife* (1 Cor. 3:3). These subgroups arose primarily because of social rather than theological or doctrinal distinctions.<sup>23</sup> As the church grew beyond the original house church community through the input of several itinerant leaders, tensions arose over how to keep the developing subgroups connected. The

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<sup>22</sup> Scripture references are taken from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> For an extensive discussion, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Text Commentary (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2000), 121–33.

Corinthian believers were familiar with loyalty toward the few elite patrons of the city, as well as with the elite's inclination to sponsor traveling philosopher-teachers, the so-called sophists, to enliven their public discussions and dinner parties.<sup>24</sup> For most people, these customs demanded that they openly and sometimes vociferously expressed support for their own patron at the expense of other patrons and their clients, in an attempt to defend and even enhance their patron's status in the city. It is likely that this pattern of rivalry became a model for the church as it grew too large for one single-house community. To be part of this growing network of Christian communities meant engaging in mutual rivalry as the accepted method for proving one's membership in the network—not unlike sport fans today who demonstrate their loyalty to the sport (and not just to their own club) by engaging in rivalry with supporters from rival teams.

In terms of social identity theory, the structuring of Christian communities as a set of nested identities was strongly influenced by values and beliefs derived from cross-cutting identities (the believer's social identity as patron, client, and so on).<sup>25</sup> Paul responded by criticizing their use of cultural values and behavioral patterns and by revaluing certain dimensions of Christian belief. In doing so, Paul clarified and accentuated his vision of the community's identity and function that he had initially taught—what in terms of social identity theory, we would call its socio-religious identity (SRI)—and he extended it to apply to the new situation of a set of faith communities together making up the church in Corinth. In the process, Paul presented himself as prototypical of this view of SRI,

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<sup>24</sup> See John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth*, vol. 75, JSNT Supplement Series (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6*, 2nd ed., Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> For the full argument, see Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*, 78–80, 86.

so that he could reclaim his leadership role in Corinth, and thus address the concerns of the entire community, not only of the subgroup that favored his leadership. Let me explain.

Consider how Paul reconstructs the socio-religious identity of the Corinthian church.<sup>26</sup> True wisdom is found in Christ, not in Greek philosophy, while the true power of God becomes visible in the crucifixion, not in miraculous signs (1 Cor. 1:22–24). Moreover, the appeal of the Christian message does not lie in eloquence or superior logic, but in the crucified Christ whom Paul presented to them in personal weakness and fear (1 Cor. 2:1–5). The message of the crucified Christ is not ratified or supported by respected patrons who count as authorities in this world, but is revealed through the Spirit to Paul and those who love God (1 Cor. 2:7–10). Paul is evidently well aware of key cultural influences from Greek as well as Jewish cross-cutting identities that influence the identification and mobilization strategies of a number of the Corinthian believers. Even in these few passages, Paul responds by highlighting key aspects of the life of Christ and his own apostolic ministry in Corinth to cast a vision of SRI that unites the growing church around the life pattern of the crucified Christ. This is not a general theological statement on the nature of the church, but a contextual argument to attempt to rescue the church's identity from cultural captivity to some dimensions of Greek and Jewish social identities that seriously divided the Corinthian church.

Consider next how Paul represents himself as prototypical leader for his view on the SRI of the church. He connects the message about the crucified Christ explicitly to his own ministry of proclamation in Corinth, to his apparent feelings of weakness and fear (not surprising after the persecutions he suffered on the way to Corinth), and to the revelations of this gospel he received and then transmitted (see the passages referenced previously). Paul

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<sup>26</sup> Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*, 92–95.

implies that, for Corinth, no one can produce a more reliable claim to proclaim the true gospel than Paul himself. Furthermore, Paul reconstructs Christian leader identity in terms of loyalty to God as ultimate patron and judge, rather than in terms of loyalty to enhance the status and honor of local patrons and their philosopher guests. Paul and Apollos are not to be perceived as honor competitors on the circuit of traveling sophists, nor as great leaders, but merely as servants of God as supreme Patron over all, though each worker has a distinct function with an appropriate reward as God's coworker (1 Cor. 3:5–9). God alone is the One who evaluates everyone's work. Honor or judgment comes from Him, not from human leaders, nor from their clients (1 Cor. 3:12–15). Leaders are only "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," and are also subject to judgment or commendation from God (1 Cor. 4:1, 5). In this way, Paul constructs a leader identity that is modeled on the life of Christ, that parallels his own apostolic ministry, and that contrasts with the leader identity of Corinth's elite that focused on sustaining the dependencies of patronage, on competing for honor to stay at the top of the pyramid, and on maintaining elite status rather than serving the community.

This all-too-brief exposition enables a renewed perspective on Paul as innovative leader. Paul was faced with the unprecedented development of a multi-congregation church in a Greco-Roman colonial city that adopted Greco-Roman cultural and Jewish religious patterns for belonging, cohesion, and stability. When this occurred, Paul retrieved and developed dimensions of the life of Christ to address this new situation. This was a substantial cultural innovation over current patterns of community formation. It was also a religious innovation, because Paul developed new arguments and insights from familiar religious themes such as Christ's crucifixion, divine revelation, and divine judgment, in order to advance community formation and leadership development. That is, Paul is a guardian of the apostolic "Jesus tradition" and a

social and religious innovator. Moreover, he presented a strong argument to advocate his own apostolic leadership role in Corinth, in harmony with what I have labeled his vision of SRI and in a challenging situation where his leadership had been relegated to merely that of a subgroup leader. Paul extended this argument considerably in 2 Corinthians, since the first version failed to convince the Corinthian church.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that this social identity perspective on 1 Corinthians is not a projection of a modern leadership grid on the biblical text that stands at odds with the normal methods and results of biblical exegesis. Rather, I would argue that this approach opens up dimensions of the exegesis of 1 Corinthians that previously remained obscure. This approach is dependent on a thorough understanding of the text itself, so it builds on the results of lexicographical, grammatical, and discourse analysis. Moreover, this approach is dependent on understanding the text in its historical and cultural context, so it integrates results from historical and anthropological studies of ancient Middle Eastern culture. A social identity approach then builds on these levels of understanding by analyzing how the text functioned in the social interaction and leadership discourse of that occasion. What cultural and religious factors might have shaped the identification of believers with their community? How did Paul want to influence that process? What options did the Corinthian leaders present to the community, and how did Paul enhance or resist them? Was Paul successful? Although we cannot answer all of these questions based only on the text of 1 Corinthians, this analysis shows how this letter functioned in Paul's communication as a leadership tool to shape the community's socio-religious identity. It also shows how he attempted to influence the identification and

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<sup>27</sup> See my paper "Paul's Authority Claims and Their Reception in 2 Corinthians," presented at the *SBL International Meeting, Program Unit "Authority and Influence in Biblical Texts"* (St. Andrews, 2013).

mobilization processes of the community. Thus, a social identity approach does not substitute for earlier forms of exegesis. Rather, it enhances and integrates them into a fuller perspective on social interaction and social construction in Paul's context, including the construction of leadership roles and identities in Corinth by Paul and by his opponents. In biblical studies, this represents an innovative approach that is slowly gaining attention in the field.<sup>28</sup>

For our (practical theological) study of present-day church leadership, I conclude from this brief exposition that pastoral leaders are called to construct, adapt, and negotiate the SRI of their congregations by renewing their reflections on the Jesus tradition as they interact with their social reality. Such a task of identity leadership calls pastoral leaders to maintain theological vitality and social relevance in their particular social and religious context. This must be done while simultaneously managing and adapting their own leadership role in order to faithfully navigate the community through tumultuous times.

### **Pastoral Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction**

Thus far, I have provided a brief overview of the social identity theory of leadership and applied it to an analysis of a particular phase of Paul's leadership in Corinth. The lens of identity leadership enables us to understand the identity-shaping dimension of Paul's leadership as he argued for innovative ways to shape their community and develop their leadership, both adopting and resisting the influence of Greco-Roman and Jewish social identities. Throughout his career, Paul continued to develop his views on the social and religious identity of his communities and on the role

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, see the programmatic handbook by J. Brian Tucker and A. Baker Coleman, eds., *Handbook on Social Identity and the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), to which I contributed "Stereotyping and Institutionalization as Indications of Leadership Maintenance in the Pastoral Epistles: 1 Timothy as a Test Case" (pp. 389–406).

and structures of leadership to be adopted.<sup>29</sup> This is not to imply that Paul consciously used something like our twenty-first century social identity theory of leadership. Rather, it implies that some dimensions of Paul's leadership can best be fruitfully analyzed and understood by using that theory, just like many successful leaders today manage the identity of their organization quite well, even if they have no knowledge of the theory. In other words, the social identity model of leadership is an academic leadership theory that offers a descriptive tool to analyze dimensions of leadership practice that other theories leave untouched.

Ironically, today Paul is often viewed popularly as the key example of leadership in the bible, as if he presented a once-for-all leadership model, frozen in time as it were, to imitate and apply directly in our churches today. Such direct imitation, however, is impossible, because contemporary (Western) churches and leaders are vastly different from those in the first century. If one overlooks (or is unaware of) the cultural gap of two millennia and applies Paul's leadership as a cookie-cutter model, one is unconsciously selective in the leadership elements to be imitated, often unintentionally projecting modern leadership concepts onto biblical examples. But at least we can learn this: that pastoral leadership implies faithful innovation in order to shape the SRI of modern churches in a way that is faithful to fresh understandings of the "Jesus tradition" and relevant to the new challenges of our changing social contexts.

A similar portrayal of pastoral leadership as adaptive identity construction comes from Hagley.<sup>30</sup> He appreciates

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<sup>29</sup> I have described this development by moving from a study of 1–2 Corinthians to a study of Ephesians and 1–2 Timothy, which are part of the Pauline tradition (see Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*). Historical arguments indicate that it is not as unlikely as often maintained that Paul himself might have authored these documents.

<sup>30</sup> Scott J. Hagley, "Improv in the Streets: Missional Leadership as Public Improvisational Identity Formation," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 7(2) (2008).

and critiques Lesslie Newbigin's insights into the historical and cultural embedding of the gospel, and supports Newbigin's challenge to present the gospel as a public truth claim in today's pluralist culture. However, Newbigin's epistemological framework still contains vestiges of modernism, because he does not take sufficiently into account that community formation and identity construction do not take place in isolation (that is, inside the church, an organization, or a company). Rather, they take place in the midst of society with all its voices pulling at us. Hagley then uses insights from the literature on organizational sense making and corporate identity to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of organizations. He applies this to a church setting and argues that missional leadership "is an improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid, public, and gospel-shaped identity."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Hagley reaches conclusions similar to ours in conceiving of missional leadership as the improvisation and cultivation of religious identities, but through a theological and social scientific trajectory that leaves the concept of identity rather diffuse. I have contributed explicit reflections on the concept and content of social identity and applied these reflections in the analysis of a biblical text.

### **Empirical Work on Innovative Pastoral Identity Leadership**

I now turn to the field research I have conducted by interviewing pastoral leaders in different countries. The question arises as to whether the above perspectives on pastoral leadership in terms of adaptive identity construction are a helpful way to understand actual pastoral leadership practice.

My first field research efforts focused on understanding changes in pastoral leadership practice, and I conducted ten interviews with pastors in three different countries (the

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<sup>31</sup> Hagley, 84.



United States, Germany, and Slovakia) of about an hour and a half each. The aim was to discover what changes they had experienced over the last decade of their pastoral ministry. Key categories for the semi-structured interviews were: changes in their leadership tasks and skills, to what extent they perceived these changes in relation to societal changes, changes in the influence and authority of their leadership and in the “follower” expression of voice and dissent, and changes in the public dimension of their pastoral leadership. The interviews concluded with a look at the person of the pastor, their moral challenges, and their sense of spirituality. The selection of these pastors depended primarily on the coincidence of my presence during various educational visits and does not serve as a representative sampling for any particular denomination, age group, gender, country, region, or culture.

### **Innovation and the Rhetoric of Change**

From this context of discovery, I report some observations from my comparison of the interviews of two pastors in a fast-growing metropolitan area of just under one million people on the East Coast of the United States. Both pastors were around forty years of age, serving in churches that are more than one hundred years old, with church boards where many members were substantially older than these pastors. Both pastors had been called to their churches about three or four years before the time of the interview, with the explicit charge to bring change to their respective churches. Their general approach to leadership was collaborative, often speaking of shared leadership, which they interpreted as a fitting response to their context of a church with a substantial local heritage and a much older board. One pastor served in a Presbyterian church, the other in a Baptist church.

When I asked about how their pastoral leadership had changed, the Presbyterian pastor responded that “tasks have not changed all that much.” Pastoral leadership still focuses on the big four (worship, care, mission, and

learning). Some of the labels today are different (*spiritual formation* or *discipleship* instead of *education*), and the level of “clout within the larger community” is somewhat less. But the core tasks have remained the same, “as going back to Acts basically, but it is more the style of how you lead, it is more collaborative” that is different for today, he reported. “I’m very collaborative,” developing a “team church mentality.”<sup>32</sup>

When asked the same question, the Baptist pastor responded that pastoral leadership today is “an entirely different ballgame than a generation or even a decade ago.” He emphasized the generational difference, exercising leadership very much “side by side” in a team-oriented approach, often asking “what can I do for you” rather than assigning tasks. Work committees are called ministry teams. He prefers to call himself lead pastor to focus attention on discipleship and team work, and refrains from using his official title of senior pastor, which he associates more with directive leadership, and which, in his perception, most members would not think fitting for a pastor of his age. They are no longer the white suburban church, which dates back to when they moved from downtown to the outlying area; they are a multicultural church with people from every walk of life and every continent. He preaches differently, using more narrative than “verse-by-verse expository,” and uses technology to help people stay connected in new ways.

Interestingly, the Presbyterian pastor emphasized foundational continuity in pastoral leadership, and his perception of changes related mostly to leadership style. The Baptist pastor emphasized cultural shifts, technological changes, and a profound discontinuity in pastoral leadership. Yet, both pastors were called to bring change to their congregations, and both pastors brought about similar changes: supporting various worship styles and communities, growing more diverse demographically,

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<sup>32</sup> Quotes taken from interview transcripts and from personal interview notes written shortly after each interview.

conceiving of ministry in terms of discipleship, leading more collaboratively in teams with shared leadership, and occasionally relabeling a particular aspect of ministry to fit better with the newly developing vision for ministry.

It appears, then, that their leadership goals (change), style (collaborative), and framing (relabeling) are fairly similar, while they speak very differently about continuity and discontinuity with their church tradition. Is this mostly a rhetorical difference in how they present their own leadership? Does their discourse perhaps point to different leadership styles, in spite of the appearance of similarity? Which other factors might explain this?

The interviews themselves do not directly answer this question.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, part of an answer can be provided by connecting their leader discourse with their church identities. The Presbyterian pastor represents a church with a respected local history, which is visible not only in its historical sanctuary, but also in the civic roles that this pastor and his predecessors have played in their city. Moreover, the Presbyterian denomination to which the church belongs has a deep commitment to denominational confessions and church order, as rooted in their theological understanding of ministry. It thus becomes part of their socio-religious identity to measure contemporary change against the revered values and narratives of the past, including the church's respected position and role in civic society. Change can then be conceived as mostly incremental adaptation to a new situation, even though some ministry structures are contemporary. This church clearly does not live in its past, but has found a way to mobilize its past as it innovates in the current context. The

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<sup>33</sup> Moreover, no interviews were conducted with board or church members by way of triangulation to obtain different perspectives on their pastor's leadership. The field research presented in this paper is limited to the self-perception of these leaders; a fuller, more ethnographic description of their leadership would present an enriched, more embodied picture of these churches and their leadership, but requires substantially more resources than were available at that point.

strength for this innovation is fundamentally rooted in maintaining continuity with their historical narratives and civic role.

The Baptist pastor represents a church that has few denominational confessions and little formal church order, which is also rooted in their theological understanding of ministry. The church left its historical building when it moved out of town to what later became the suburbs. Its pastors did not participate in the civic establishment to the same degree that the Presbyterian and other mainline church pastors did. With its traditional emphasis on evangelism and conversion, Baptist identity contains elements of resistance against the social establishment and elite power structures, ministering to different classes of people. Even though Baptists have their own theological traditions and historical figures, change and innovation are intimately connected to their conversionist theology. Thus, resistance and transformation are key components of Baptist identity, and pastoral leadership in this context gains credibility by embodying and representing these values, which in turn represents a Baptist mode of valuing historical narratives and theological traditions.<sup>34</sup>

These differences in leader discourse about how to conceive of changes in pastoral leadership do not seem to reflect differences in job description, nor different degrees of willingness or resistance to change, nor even different levels of change instituted by these leaders. Rather, they reflect different socio-religious identities within which these two pastoral leaders function. This not only reflects their awareness, intentional and intuitive, of how their church values its historical connections, but also serves as a way to maintain their own prototypicality, and hence their own leadership influence in their own context. The Presbyterian pastor identified more with the traditions of church and

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<sup>34</sup> This presentation of Presbyterian and Baptist identity is brief and sketchy, but it is sufficient to relate leader discourse to church identity. A thorough exposition and documentation of these identities goes beyond the scope of this paper.

civic establishment, and needed to present himself as the continuation of those traditions in order to be seen as a credible change agent. The Baptist pastor identified more with conversion, change, and discipleship, because he needed to be perceived as embodying radical change and innovation in his own person and leadership to be seen as a credible change agent.

Another remarkable feature of these two situations is that both pastors reported that they represented themselves and were perceived by their future boards as unlikely candidates when they first applied for their pastoral position. They were too young and too different culturally, denominationally, and theologically, to fit with what these churches seemed to represent. Therefore, they reported having made no attempt to impress the search committees and boards with lengthy qualifications and grand visions of ministry, as might otherwise be expected to highlight the cultural and theological fit of their candidacy with the church's preferred pastoral profile. Instead, they simply shared their views, and even their differences, giving themselves permission to present a personal vision of ministry whatever the level of fit with the church's profile, thus creating a sense of transparency and authenticity for the leadership style they would advocate.

The theory indicates that typically, leaders need a high level of trust in order to innovate, which implies that prototypical leaders are positioned better for leading innovation than non-prototypical leaders. One could conclude, then, that both of the interviewed pastors might not have enough trust to generate such change. Indeed, their behavior might even have been considered deviant if they had come up from within the ranks of their own church, because they would have been flagged as young leaders without sufficient innovation credit and without the required investment in each respected tradition. This would have been a greater challenge for the Baptist pastor, because prior to his pastorate in the Baptist church, he was affiliated with the Presbyterian tradition. Yet, they were

given the mandate as future leaders<sup>35</sup> to bring change. I interpret this mandate as evidence that their transparent, authentic vision of ministry was perceived as a fitting proposal for the changes that the current boards already felt to be necessary, as evidenced by the changes already initiated in both churches in the decade preceding the call of the pastors. Moreover, the unlikely candidate profile might have offered opportunities to encourage these future leaders to argue against current group identity in a way that currently invested leaders could not argue without damaging their leadership influence. Thus, the innovation credit attributed to these two pastors was probably higher precisely because of their unlikely candidate profile. They offered the promise of innovation in a way that prototypical leaders, whether from within the congregation or from broader denominational networks, could not match.

After being called to their churches, these pastors reportedly implemented a more collaborative style of leadership, team ministry, and discipleship that adapted each church's identity in crucial areas. That is, they adapted the SRI of their church to the new context in ways that had already been anticipated by the boards in the changes these boards had initiated in the decade before they called these pastors. Thus, the identity construction of the new pastors matched and extended the identity construction of the board in the previous decade.

As this change process continued, these new pastors developed and crafted a personal connection with their church's valued narratives and theological traditions. That is, as explained previously, they represented their leadership to the congregation in such a way that they would be perceived as embodying and championing the values and beliefs of their community. This personal connection along with their new leadership style now demonstrates that they have become an example or a prototype for their adapted

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<sup>35</sup> See the theoretical exposition above in the section "Social Identity as a Leadership Framework."

vision of the church's SRI. Consequently, their current leadership status no longer relies primarily on the innovation credit of their original unlikely candidate profile but is increasingly based on their prototypicality in an adapted vision of church identity. That is, they have become insiders not by virtue of their leadership position, but by the way they have adapted the church's SRI to match the board's vision for change as well as their own preferred leader identity.<sup>36</sup>

This analysis shows how the social identity theory of leadership can help make sense of processes of leadership and organizational change in a way that respects the complexity of how leaders, boards, and churches relate to one another and to their social context. The limitation of this field work is that, so far, only the pastors have been interviewed, and only once. Further investigation of a broader range of participants in their socio-religious context in a full-fledged case study of leadership practice would be helpful in validating this line of analysis.

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Innovation**

After additional change interviews with several senior church leaders in Southern Germany and Slovakia, I was struck by the very different context and development of leadership in these two regions that were markedly different from the United States and from one another, even though many similar themes came to the surface (collaboration, focus on discipleship, social engagement). Clearly, it would not be possible to speak about universal or even Western societal changes in pastoral leadership. This finding led me to adjust my approach to the interviews, adapting life story

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<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, upon reading the first version of this article, the Presbyterian pastor reported that he had since moved to another church, because he ran into a ceiling of how much change the board and the congregation could tolerate. Evidently, this pastor's desire for change exceeded his board's and congregation's desire. He anticipated losing his prototypical leadership role, because he recognized that he could not adapt the congregational SRI any further, nor was he willing to adapt his own preferred leader identity.

interviews to leadership biography interviews.<sup>37</sup> These interviews focus on a pastor's theological training and first leadership situation, and how he or she has subsequently developed in leadership over the course of his or her career.

One such interview was conducted with Pastor H of a church in the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands that had resulted from a merger of two conservative local churches. Pastor H, in his middle fifties at the time of the interview, appears to be effective in leading his merged congregation in changing from a modern, institutional *modus operandi* to a more socially engaged *modus* with gift-oriented participation. He was hardly able to do so in his first church. This first church was located in a rural area of the Netherlands, with long-established traditions and a strong board structure. He realized quickly that as a young seminary graduate, he was not going to be able to create any significant change, so he positioned himself as a critical outsider who, in his role as pastor, could at least ask critical (theological) questions as discussions and decisions presented themselves in the meetings. "More than once," he explained, "I have seen decisions change," in this very expression testifying to his role as the critical outsider-expert.

This posture has become the central mode of his leadership in subsequent ministries (two churches and army chaplaincy), and it now enables him to function as change agent in his present church. In this church, the merger had resulted in a church with an increased diversity in the membership and with a commitment to move forward together, but yet without a clear common tradition.<sup>38</sup> His

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<sup>37</sup> For similar methodological adaptations, see Boas Shamir, Hava Dayan-Horesh, and Dalya Adler, "Leading by Biography: Towards a Life-Story Approach to the Study of Leadership," *Leadership* 1(1) (2005); and Tony J. Watson, "Narrative, Life Story and Manager Identity: A Case Study in Autobiographical Identity Work," *Human Relations* 62(3) (2009).

<sup>38</sup> The clearly Reformed orientation of the two local churches that merged represents a significant common tradition, but these churches represented



leadership style of reading the Bible together, asking questions, and discerning the leading of the Spirit together (often in public, dialogical forms), combined with his aversion for authoritative or directive leadership, provided the platform needed to bring people together and weld a common vision. When asked about the future of pastoral leadership, he responded that “we need more leaders who are able to do nothing,” that is, leaders who are driven not by strategic planning and mobilizing volunteers, but who can draw alongside people to help them discern and decide with spiritual and theological integrity. This style makes it possible for him to function with a great deal of transparency and authenticity, at times and at key moments sharing publicly with the congregation his own deep wrestling over which course to take.

While in his first church, Pastor H could not effect change, because he was perceived by the local, and heavily invested, leaders as too young, too inexperienced, and not sufficiently locally rooted to earn the trust needed for innovation; yet, he brought some change through his critical but respectful posture. Thus, during his initial years of service, he did not develop into the prototypical leader needed for innovation in that particular situation. On the other hand, in his current ministry, his style of questioning based on careful Bible reading together and of discerning the Spirit’s leading in dialogue, turned him into a prototypical leader for a community that itself was searching for its identity. This is not to idealize the situation, for many members in this merged congregation had strong allegiance to sometimes competing church traditions. However, the situation that resulted from the merger presented a moment in time at which this pastor could present his own leadership style as a prototype for how the community could advance. This appealed to a sufficiently large section of the congregation to bring about

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two denominations with distinct forms of Reformed orthodoxy. It is against this background that the lack of common tradition should be understood.

a change in the SRI of the congregation. This turned his own leadership into the prototypical model for the community, thus rooting his leadership increasingly in various segments of the community. In this context, his leader identity as navigator and not as captain, as guide and not as expedition leader, made sense for a community that itself was navigating difficult waters of identity construction. It created an adapted version of the church's SRI and embedded his own leadership more firmly within the congregation.

A striking contrast comes from an interview with Pastor M, in his late forties and serving in a broadly Reformed tradition in the Netherlands. His first church, also located in a rural, conservative setting, had been through a series of events that had impressed upon the board the need to initiate change. When they called this man to his first pastorate, he was able to inspire people toward change by inviting them to conferences or by sharing publications. Thus, the specific sources of inspiration came from outside the church, while the ground for change had been fertilized before this pastor's arrival. He stepped into this situation as a broker of change under the leadership of the board. It does not appear that Pastor M developed in his leadership role to become a prototypical leader for that community, yet he experienced the role of change agent for about six years, which gave him much personal fulfillment.

His next pastorate was in a local rural congregation of the newly merged Protestant Church of the Netherlands. In this church, a majority of members came from the relatively liberal Dutch Reformed Church, while a significant minority came from a more conservative branch of the Reformed tradition.<sup>39</sup> Soon after his arrival, it turned out

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<sup>39</sup> These are, respectively, the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* and the *Gereformeerde Kerk*, two competing branches within the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands and that merged into the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, with the Lutheran church in the Netherlands as third and smallest partner. It is unknown whether in Pastor M's location the Lutheran church had any representatives.

that Pastor M was called—not formally, but implicitly—to represent and safeguard the interests of the more conservative segment of the church, while another colleague represented the liberal segment.<sup>40</sup> Little if any teamwork developed between Pastor M and his colleague, who regularly criticized Pastor M in board meetings and even publicly scorned some of his conservative theological positions. His earlier experiences as change agent were not effective in bridging the differences in this congregation, nor did he see how to defend himself against these criticisms without further polarizing this already-divided community. Basically, the board and these pastors operated with a SRI that emphasized the many colors of the congregation, which was formally expressed in calling two pastors of different theological orientations to represent the two major segments. Thus, the polarization between the two segments became part of the church's SRI, without substantial effort to develop a less competitive identity for the entire church.

In this congregation, as reported by Pastor M,<sup>41</sup> identity formation focused on profiling subgroup identities.<sup>42</sup> The more liberal pastor appears to have functioned as prototypical leader for the liberal segment of the church. He publicly defended their interests by derogating the interests of the conservative subgroup and demonstrating

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<sup>40</sup> In many Reformed churches in the Netherlands, multiple pastors often function at an equal level of seniority under supervision of the elder board, that is, without a hierarchy of senior pastor, and so on.

<sup>41</sup> Upon reading the first version of this article, Pastor M requested (and rightfully so) to clarify that neither his colleague nor any board or church members have been interviewed, and that the above perspective is my interpretation of his personal leadership story.

<sup>42</sup> Research on intergroup leadership offers helpful insights on this type of situation. See Michael A. Hogg, Daan van Knippenberg, and David E. Rast, "Intergroup Leadership in Organizations: Leading Across Group and Organizational Boundaries," *Academy of Management Review* 37(2) (2012); and Todd L. Pittinsky, ed. *Crossing the Divide: Intergroup Leadership in a World of Difference (Leadership for the Common Good)* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

the superiority of his more liberal convictions (at least in the eyes of his own subgroup members). As majority leader, he engaged in social competition<sup>43</sup> with the minority group for influence and resources, and he could afford not to treat minority group members fairly.

Pastor M wanted to view himself as pastor of the entire congregation, and thus did not respond to the challenge of social competition, nor could he as minority leader afford (or want) to treat majority members disrespectfully. Thus, he did not function as prototypical leader for the conservative subgroup and felt trapped in the expectations (from the board, his colleague, and perhaps segments of the congregation) into fulfilling a role that he considered inappropriate.

This effectively undermined any potential for leadership because it eroded his ability to build trust as the emerging prototypical leader, and he intuitively knew that he needed such trust to innovate. Liberal subgroup members probably did not perceive Pastor M as prototypical, nor as able to represent this subgroup's interests. However, members of the conservative subgroup would not easily have perceived him as prototypical, because he did not defend their cause in social competition, and even treated liberal subgroup members fairly in spite of their unfair treatment of conservative subgroup members. Even the changes Pastor M might have proposed would have been eyed suspiciously as potential accommodation to the majority liberal subgroup. His focus on more traditional aspects of pastoral ministry, such as pastoral care and the ministry of the

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<sup>43</sup> *Social competition* is a specific strategy for social interaction when two groups of different status compete for social space. Majority groups, with the prospect of dominating the entire group, often engage in open competition, while minority groups do not have the same resources to better their lot, and might then engage in social creativity, meaning they will seek to reinterpret the situation to arrive at a changed and more positive self-perspective. If this, too, is unlikely to be successful, individual members may engage in social mobility, leaving the group in search of better opportunities. See Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*, 48–49 and the psychological literature cited there.

Word, did not salvage the situation, because his liberal colleague occasionally disparaged this type of leadership. In other words, Pastor M's leader identity was seriously mismatched with the leader identity that was expected in a SRI with competition and rivalry as basic ingredients. Furthermore, he was unable to adapt the church's SRI to a less competitive model that would mobilize the entire community, not just one of its segments. In the end, Pastor M exercised the strategy of social mobility and left that church and the denomination for an evangelical church.<sup>44</sup>

These two leadership biography interviews show opportunities and limitations for adaptive socio-religious identity construction of the churches involved. Successful innovation might occur when several factors come together. A primary factor is perhaps the church's readiness to change,<sup>45</sup> but an equally important factor is the leader identity that a pastor has developed at that particular stage of his or her career. In addition, it appears that some pastors grow adept at influencing group dynamics and patterns of socio-religious identification, while other pastors have some difficulty recognizing such identification patterns and how they influence their leadership. In that respect, a crucial factor for innovation is a pastor's readiness to act and be perceived as model or prototype for the community and his or her ability to adapt his or her personal leader identity to accomplish this. Typically, theological education trains future pastors to understand and uphold particular versions of SRI, but in today's world of growing pluralism, an understanding of identity

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<sup>44</sup> This evangelical church was, unfortunately, also divided, with a conservative evangelical subgroup that was suspicious of the Reformed background of Pastor M.

<sup>45</sup> The importance of this readiness to change was demonstrated in contacts with respondents after the interviews. One respondent, not reported in this article, resigned from his church within months after the interview because his orientation to change did not match the congregation's willingness (among other factors). Another respondent accepted a call to another church within a year after the interview, sensing that he had reached the ceiling of the congregation's readiness to change.

dynamics and identity leadership is a key tool for balanced and fruitful leadership.

## Summary and Conclusions

In this article, I have described broad societal changes in leadership as they affect our churches, and proposed a social identity model of leadership to provide a theoretical framework for understanding innovation as adaptive identity construction. Innovation relates to the socio-religious identity of the faith community, and pastoral leaders are instrumental in envisioning, shaping, and adapting that SRI as they connect their spiritual resources with their church's role in society. Thus, they maintain the theological vitality and the social relevance of their church identity.

Pastoral leaders are vulnerable in this process, because shifting constructions of identity may result in increased or decreased prototypicality and leadership influence. They need to maintain or adjust their own prototypicality in the process of innovation. I have shown how the apostle Paul and a number of contemporary pastors have wrestled with adapting the identity of their churches while simultaneously positioning themselves as prototypical leaders of their communities. This complex process of identity leadership has its share of limitations and frustrations, but also of successful transformations and personal fulfillment.

A social identity approach to pastoral leadership requires further theological reflection. While the identity of the church is often considered a divine gift, it is equally a call to socio-religious construction in a particular context and with a particular group of people. This requires the ability to not only interpret Christian sources, but also the social and religious phenomena of our society. These interpretations, in turn, serve to position the church in a credible fashion in its society as well as to position the leader as embodiment and model of the beliefs and values of the church's identity. A pastoral leader, then, is not simply an interpretive guide, but embodies these

interpretations in his or her interactions within and outside of the community in a manner that makes him or her a community model or prototype for the current (or changing) vision of the church's identity.

These reflections are the beginning of a normative praxis model of pastoral identity leadership. Further qualitative research through interviews with pastoral leaders in various contexts is needed to provide a fuller description of scenarios of pastoral identity leadership. Ideally, case studies should be developed to investigate particular leadership contexts more broadly, attending to the leader as well as the board and the members, the church as community, and the church's social and civic context. The aim would be to produce insights and guidelines for pastoral identity leadership that can be used in theological education, life-long learning, and other training programs for religious leadership.

This is, of course, not the only proposal for current changes in pastoral leadership. But considering the dramatic societal changes of the twenty-first century, and the direction of leadership studies generally, the question of identity is bound to grow in prominence and importance. Pastoral leaders need to learn to understand identity dynamics, to grow in their ability to influence them, and to be able to position themselves intentionally in these processes of adaptive identity construction.

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