
FLAT WORLD, FLAT LEADERSHIP: THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IDEALS THAT INFORM A PARADIGM FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The changing nature of organizational structures demands that leaders respond to these changes with a leadership philosophy that directs leadership practice in a way that is contextually sensitive to twenty-first century ideals and is effective in empowering those the leader is called to lead. This article offers a philosophical and theological foundation for a style of leadership that is often called flat leadership. It will explore four assumptions that flat leadership makes, four core beliefs that guide its practice, and three applications that leaders must employ if they are going to practice flat leadership effectively.

Introduction

Thomas Friedman advanced the idea that the world was flat in his best-selling book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*.¹ What Friedman means when he says “the world is flat” is that old social, communication, and economic structures that once ruled the world and kept some people in power, while marginalizing others, are

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¹ Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

dying. Friedman posits that the world is no longer driven by Western governments and power structures and the ideologies that undergirded them. The emerging “flat” world is much more diverse, international, and individual.² It is less hierarchical, white, and male. It is an evolving reality that is fueled by a number of factors.³ The effects of this are felt not only on a global level; they trickle down and affect the everyday lives of people. Whether it is in the workplace, the home, or the church, traditional ways of understanding leadership and power are being questioned, and new approaches are developing. Many of these approaches give young people, minorities, and women an opportunity to exercise their voice, pursue their goals, and provide leadership. We can see that challenges to traditional power structures are on the rise. The evidence of this is all around us. It can be found in grassroots political movements like those that motivated the Arab Spring in 2011, that drove the Tea Party movement in the United States, or that brought about a Donald Trump victory in the 2016 presidential election.

A flat world demands a new style of leadership, one that reflects the realities of the changing context in which we live and lead. It must be one that is attuned to the demands of the people that the leader is called to lead. A flat world demands flat leadership. Flat leadership (or shared leadership, mutual leadership) refers to a less hierarchical form of leadership where the structure and practice of leadership are more collaborative and relational than position based. It is an approach to leadership that seeks to collapse the traditional pyramid-shaped flowcharts that generally define the leadership structure of most organizations. A flat-world approach is more reflective of the way the broader culture is developing. It is an approach to leadership that is often misunderstood and

² Friedman, 11.

³ For an in-depth analysis of some of these factors, see Friedman’s book, *The World Is Flat*.

needs clarification so that it can provide a fresh paradigm for church leadership in the twenty-first century.

This article will articulate a philosophical and basic theological rationale for flat leadership by seeking to identify the key assumptions and main ideas that undergird a flat approach to leadership. The article also will address concerns that some might have with this kind of leadership philosophy. Finally, it will provide some reflection on the potential of this approach to inform and strengthen leadership within the context of the North American church and religious organizations.

Core Beliefs of Flat Leadership

The world has changed, and this change is removing hierarchies in human relations.

Some might assume that, despite the significant changes that are taking place in the world, the role of leadership remains largely the same. In fact, a strong, centralized leader with a clear vision and the power to execute that vision is more necessary today than ever. Many people are experiencing the world today on a personal, local, and global level that is dramatically different from the way they experienced it in the past. For most young people, a rapidly changing world is all they have ever known.⁴ One of the realities of this experience is that access to information has empowered people in a way that gives them unprecedented control over their lives. Moisés Naím, in his book *The End of Power*, states "power is spreading, and long-established, big players are increasingly challenged by newer and smaller ones. And those who have power are more constrained in the ways

⁴ For an insightful overview and analysis of the rapidity of change and the consequences, see Thomas Friedman's, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

they can use it."⁵ This should lead us to the understanding that people are experiencing the reality of living in a world where hierarchies and barriers to power are constantly being reordered at the very least, and in many cases, they are being completely removed.

If it is true that people are feeling increasingly empowered, it is hard to believe that many of them will function happily in an organization where little empowerment flows within the culture of that organization. Of course, many examples of traditional organizational cultures can be found where people function happily and the organization continues to thrive in a multiplicity of ways. We live in a transitional time during which it is possible to identify different kinds of effective approaches to leadership. However, in an age when information is a click away, new ideas are generated daily, people are connected 24/7, and authority is looked at with suspicion, we need to ask ourselves "What does it really mean to be in charge?" The answer is...nothing. As author Sally Morgenthaler says, "in a flattened world being in charge is an illusion."⁶ She points out that the empowerment that comes from the multitude of technologies available to us give us the impression that, "[I]t actually matters that we exist, that we live in a certain place and time."⁷ This sense of importance is empowering and provides modern people with an impression that they have the ability to influence, shape, and change things. In a flat world, people are empowered; what we need in Christian organizations is a model of leadership that understands and respects this reality.

⁵ Moisés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms, to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 2013), 1.

⁶ Sally Morgenthaler, "Leadership in a Flattened World" in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007), 176.

⁷ Morgenthaler, 177.

Further, all leadership is contextual. Historic models of church leadership were heavily influenced by the prevailing ideals of leadership and the cultural expectations of their times. Jürgen Moltmann offers a broad-stroked reflection on how context plays a role in shaping leadership philosophy in his book *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*. In this volume, he offers the idea that during its history, the church has seen three historic paradigms of leadership. This began with the hierarchical paradigm inherited from Greco-Roman society where the church believed in a strict hierarchy that was theologically rooted in the Trinitarian life of God (Father—Son—Spirit). The leadership structures of the church reflected this hierarchy with its clear lines of authority and structured leadership (Bishops—Priests—Laity). As the church evolved, the “Christocentric” paradigm appeared and emphasized the headship of Christ in the life of the body. The Reformation emphasized the equality of believers based on the fact that each one is equal in terms of their relationship with Christ. However, there remained a clear, functional distinction between those who were formally trained theologically, the clergy, and the rest of the body. These distinctions, coupled with the hierarchy of European culture, meant that hierarchy remained entrenched in the life of the church.

The third paradigm has to do with the Charismatic distribution of gifts to all members of the body. All gifts are of equal value in all of their various expressions, and the distinctions between clergy and laity are increasingly laid aside. Among Charismatics, “[N]o one has a higher or lower position than anyone else with what he or she can contribute to the community.”⁸ While Moltmann’s

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness Arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2010), 24. For further insight into Moltmann’s ideas here, see Tony Jones, *The Church Is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis, Minn.: JoPa, 2011), 140–45.

categories can be perceived as forced, they remind us that, as the world changes, so do ideas about leadership in the church, both as a response to culture and as an act of theological reflection upon the church in culture. Thus, it is appropriate for us to adapt contemporary approaches to leadership to the context that we find ourselves in. In the context of an information-driven economy and networked culture, leadership needs to adapt to the realities of flat relational structures in communities and organizations.

Interconnectedness calls for a paradigm of leadership that reflects this new reality.

It is becoming more and more apparent that old models of leadership do not work as effectively anymore. Most traditional church institutions are structurally hierarchical and are functionally led by a relatively small board and/or a pastor/leader who is usually someone brought in from outside of the organization/congregation. Power is ultimately limited to a few people. Those who are not part of this leadership structure might have a certain limited input into the way things operate, but their power is modest at best and their influence is dependent upon the gate-keeping instincts of the small group that wields power. Some people are comfortable with maintaining such structures. However, for many, these structures are no longer tolerable, and their functionality is less and less tenable.

The reality of greater interconnectedness between people and information means that leadership structures that reflect these emerging realities are needed. Leadership that reflects the kind of interconnection that marks contemporary culture will be rooted in a relational ecclesiology.

The term *relational ecclesiology* was employed by Moltmann in his book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. For Tony Jones, Moltmann's concept means that the

“church is defined by its relationships.”⁹ This includes external relationships as well as the internal ones that take place among people of a specific congregation. A relational ecclesiology is based on the relational nature of the triune God and the idea that Christ came to reconcile relationships. Most notably for our purposes in this article: Jesus came to reconcile the relationship between God and human beings as well as human beings with other human beings. Thus, leadership structures should facilitate this kind of relationality. That is, the way we do things should engender the development of a relational ecclesiology and contribute to God’s work of healing relationships. As Jones rightly notes, “our ecclesial practices must be judged on that basis.”¹⁰ Thus, the move to a flattened approach to leadership that reflects the need for interconnectedness is not only intrinsic to contemporary culture but also a deeply theological paradigm that reflects the intentions of God in redeeming creation as depicted in the biblical story.

Leadership Changes

Some may perceive that flat leadership is akin to no leadership. This is not the case; leadership is still necessary. It is a misunderstanding of the concept of flat leadership to think that it eradicates the need for good leadership. Flat leadership does not mean there are no leaders, but how you become a leader, how you stay a leader, and what you do as a leader changes significantly.

Strong leaders and effective leadership teams are still needed to take responsibility within the life of a congregation or organization. Gifted, charismatic leaders will always find a place to employ their abilities to give leadership to churches and other kinds of organizations. The contributions of particularly gifted leaders are needed as much as ever. However, how leadership is exercised is what has changed. As Lori Cox Han explains, “leadership

⁹ Jones, 159.

¹⁰ Jones, 161.

has historically been defined on male, not female, terms. Whether in politics, business or military circles within the United States, strong leadership is defined as an attempt to exert one's will over a particular situation."¹¹ This is the approach to leadership that flat leadership challenges.

That said, flat leadership is open to the criticism that malaise could possibly take over, and the lack of a leadership structure, or the lack of strong directional leadership, might lead the church or organization into a state of ineffectiveness coupled with a lack of productivity. Naím reflects on the possibility that the loss of a centralized leadership structure can be a problem when he writes, "the excessive dilution of power and the inability of leading actors to lead are as dangerous as the excessive concentration of power in a few hands."¹² He goes on to state, "[W]hen power becomes so constrained, paralysis ensues and stability, predictability, safety, and material prosperity suffer."¹³ However, this kind of scenario does not have to be the norm. In flattened structures, those who can drive the process, offer brilliant ideas, propose ways forward, and manage things with excellence are still needed. These skills are still necessary for the growth and development of the church or organization. Again, it is not the absence of these things that defines flat leadership; rather, it is how they are exercised. The mark of true leadership will often be how a person is perceived to exercise his or her leadership skills. Leaders will find their place in leadership because they are perceived to be people of integrity and compassion, and people who truly want the best for others. They will rise to leadership through the collective affirmation of their peers and those they are

¹¹ Lori Cox Han, "Presidential Leadership: Governance from a Woman's Perspective," in *Anticipating Madam President*, ed. Robert P. and Ann Gordon Watson (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003), 169.

¹² Naím, 224.

¹³ Naím, 225.

being called to lead. Their leadership will be maintained through these same means.

Tim Keel offers an example of how strong leadership can still be exercised in a flat structure in his book *Intuitive Leadership* when he reflects upon his experience of participating in a ministry to university students called Icthus. This ministry was led entirely by volunteers.

Our structure was very loose. Our structure had very little distance between top and bottom. In a very real sense, it was flat. That does not mean it was without authority. There was a leadership structure that perpetuated itself from the inside out: student leaders recognized student leaders and invited into a leadership *core*—a group of people who lived in all the same ways as their peers and sought to steward the life of the community in simple ways. There was generally no sense of *us* and *them*, either between the student leaders and the student participants or between the Icthus community and the broader life of the campus.¹⁴

What Keel describes is a group that acknowledges the need for leaders, chooses them based upon their personal suitability for leadership within the group, and expects that the leaders will function in a way that shares power and gives room for everyone in the group to exercise their own power appropriately. This reflects the necessity for leadership while also illustrating how the role and function of a leader can be carried out in today's cultural context.

Belief in the Significance of the Individual

At the center of the flat leadership paradigm is a core belief that people can be trusted and will flourish when given power. Flat leadership as a philosophy of leadership is the antithesis of the idea that people need to be told what to do by someone who knows better. Rather, it flows from a belief that, if people are given the right resources,

¹⁴ Keel, 70.

encouragement, atmosphere, and accountability, they will be able to make a genuine contribution to the organization or church.

For many Christians, this belief cuts hard against at least two traditional theological beliefs. First, it does not square well with the traditional doctrine of original sin, which tells us that people are sinful and cannot be trusted to do the right thing. Giving individuals power is sure to lead to problems because, left to themselves, people tend to do the wrong, even corrupt, thing. While it falls outside of the purview of this article to engage in an extensive argument on this point of Christian theology, suffice it to say that a flat leadership paradigm flows from a belief that people are not thoroughly corrupted by sin and that they are capable of doing good when they are empowered and valued.

Second, some might think that giving too much value to the individual is to cut against the Christian ethic that emphasizes humility and making oneself lesser so that Jesus can become greater. This is indeed an important part of Christian belief, and one that we should all aspire to, but the idea that an individual has value and can contribute to the good of a group does not undercut the need for humility. It also does not allow individuals to selfishly pursue their own agenda just because they are given a measure of power.

The creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 clearly teaches that people have value in God's economy and that we are each called to partner with God in the forming and stewardship of creation (Gen. 1:27–28). The narrative of Genesis offers a vision of the importance of the individual as it establishes the uniqueness of the original couple as created in the image of God and as those called to partner with God in the cultivation and development of creation (Gen. 2:15). Their role matters; they are significant. To value individuals does not mean that persons should see themselves as better, or more important, than others, but

that they (and we) should see all individuals as potentially significant contributors to the ongoing work of God in this world.

Some may fret about the emphasis on the individual at the expense of the community as a whole. This is a misunderstanding of how flat leadership works. It is totally dependent on the community and the individuals in the community subordinating themselves to the larger concerns of the community that they are a part of. But also, no strong theology of community can exist without a robust theology of the individual. A theology that values other-centeredness, love for one another, and respect for the other can grow only if we are convinced that each individual matters because people are created in God's image. People are valuable as individuals, and this is what makes the community important. It is a place that nurtures and empowers individuals to grow into their God-given identity and contribute to the community and indeed the world. Flat leadership functions on this premise.

Robert Safian understands this when he says that people "need to be empowered to act, to solve problems they encounter unexpectedly. This kind of openness requires not just free-flowing information but a new kind of collaborative trust."¹⁵ This kind of trust must be tied to a belief in the value, potential, and significance of each individual who is participating in the process of guiding the organization or church.

Belief in Collective Intelligence

Related to the previous point, but adding to it, is the idea that individuals are at their best when working together with others and that a group will get it right most of the time. This does not exclude the possibility that groups can collectively go terribly wrong. History is full of such examples. However, the belief that people are better

¹⁵ Robert Safian, "Secrets of the Flux Leader." *Fast Company* 170 (2012), 101.

together, working collaboratively, is fundamental to the flat leadership philosophy. It eschews the idea that an individual leader, no matter how gifted, is more capable of providing good leadership than a collective of people can. History may be full of examples of groups of people who went wrong, but it is equally full of examples of individual leaders who went wrong and then led a group of people in a destructive direction. In fact, many times when groups went down a destructive path, it is because they were led by a charismatic leader who held unchecked influence over the group. Collective intelligence believes that collaboration and a pooling of the intelligence resident in the group will assure right thinking and a positive future far more than placing trust in one person or a small group of people. Together people will make good decisions most of the time. We are collectively more intelligent.

A great temptation today when information is so readily available is to look to the outsider to provide wisdom and answers. We believe that the guru has some kind of universal insight that we need to address the local challenges that we face. Thus, we seek out the latest best-selling author or chase the newest leadership fad as the way forward for our congregation. We tend to believe that real wisdom is possessed by a small number of people, and that the key to finding answers and solving problems is finding the right person to guide us. However, most often the right answer can be found when we ask those who are directly affected by the challenge and who have a stake in finding the right answer.¹⁶

Frank Barrett, in his book *Say Yes to the Mess*, reiterates this perspective when he writes that “innovative breakthroughs are far more likely to result from social relationships, from conversations and dialogues between

¹⁶ See Keel, 202. Keel draws from James Surowiecki’s book, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York, N.Y.: Anchor, 2005).

diverse groups with divergent skills, than they are from individual strokes of genius.”¹⁷

To emphasize, collective intelligence does not mean that there is no place for persons offering educated and expert opinions that may in fact give guidance to others. But it recognizes that any one of us could be that person at any given time. It also affirms the idea that wisdom comes from the collective intelligence of a group far more often than it will come from an individual or a small group of individuals. Collective intelligence is crucial to effective leadership, and thus it takes seriously ideas like community, relationship, listening, and mutuality, all of which are in tune with the overall tenor of contemporary culture and the direction that it is going.

Belief that Leadership Is About Giving Power Away

Power is inevitable. Power is everywhere. In every sphere of human relationship, power is present—the office, the home, the classroom, the little league, the school yard. We do not exist without the presence of power. Leaders are given power. To a large degree, leadership is about power. This is not wrong; it is simply the way it is. However, for many this means “elevator thinking,” that is, living with an obsession with “who is coming up and who is going down.”¹⁸ Christian leadership in general, and flat leadership in particular, are not about gaining power, hoarding power, or keeping power. It is about giving power away. The leader’s ultimate job is to find ways to give power to others and to find ways to empower the people he or she works with. This idea in no way assumes that the amount of power is finite and leaders are tasked with the job of giving their own quotient away and then moving on to something else. Generally, when leaders empower others, it leads to their own power being

¹⁷ Frank J. Barrett, *Say Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazẓ* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 123.

¹⁸ Naím, 234.

replenished and even increased as those around them grow in their trust for the leader and enthusiasm of working with him or her. Flat leadership is, in essence, about leaders understanding this and living into it.

This also reflects the reality that leadership is primarily about helping to create a culture more than it is about making decisions or giving directions. The culture that often prevails in traditional organizations is one that is about getting the three Rs right—rules, roles, and responsibilities. It is thought that if we get these right, innovation and productivity will follow. Although, as Barrett observes, generally results go in the exact opposite direction.¹⁹ Flat leaders understand that their primary work is to create a culture quite different from the one typified by the three Rs. Their work is to equip and empower those around them, individuals and teams who go further and do better than they ever could have had they not been able to participate in the culture of this church or organization. Flat leaders are engineers who ask, “How can we create a culture that empowers people to use their gifts, take responsibility, and serve to the best of their abilities?” Flat leaders are resource people and permission givers. They are cultural architects who find joy in giving their power to those around them.

Saffian writes about how this works itself out in practice as people are given power to make decisions for the organization in areas that they have direct contact in without having to go up “the chain of command for approval.”²⁰ They are empowered to lead and to take serious ownership for their areas of responsibility, which flow from a “new kind of collaborative trust” that is rooted in a vision of shared power and leadership.²¹

Tim Keel asks the questions that are crucial to church leadership in the current milieu when he writes:

¹⁹ Barrett, 78.

²⁰ Saffian, 102.

²¹ Saffian, 102.

How willing are we to do the hard and long-term work of creativity and contextual engagement? Will we create systems and structures that allow for new imaginations to emerge? Moreover, will we step aside and allow those people who are already engaged in this kind of work an opportunity to lead us and develop new frameworks that help us to identify and release our communities to be responsive to God's creative activity around us? How highly do we value control, and what is the cost we are willing to pay to continue to hold it in our hands alone?²²

Reflections for Church Leadership

Reflecting on the assumptions and beliefs of flat leadership and determining a way forward is necessary in order for religious organizations to keep up with the pace of change in the world that we find ourselves in. However, the way forward presents its own set of challenges. Keel points out that “many of us feel the reverberations of such transformation shaking the foundations beneath our feet” yet “we have a difficult time imagining what the implications might be for our churches, our ministries, and ourselves”²³ However, leaders must embrace three implications of the changing landscape of leadership if they are to be effective in implementing a flat style of leadership that will serve people effectively in this new context.

It All Starts with Leadership

It is important to recognize that the most significant change agent in established churches is the appointed or perceived leader. John Maxwell states that, if you “change the leader, [you will] change the organization. Everything

²² Keel, 209.

²³ Keel, 188.

risers and falls on leadership!”²⁴ He notes that organizations often do not change because the leader is unwilling to change. Morgenthaler offers that this can be an issue of ego. She notes that, in order for churches to begin to truly embrace flat leadership, we need to come to a place where leaders “will finally dump the myth of the great man, park their egos, and follow the one Great Man [Jesus] into the relinquishment of power.”²⁵ Keel goes on to say that “we have to be willing to relinquish something we have grown quite fond of, if not addicted to. Is it surprising to you that the thing is power?”²⁶ His reason for saying this is that “often it is our power, our previous successes, and the very ways in which we have heard and observed God’s activity in the past that become stumbling blocks for engaging God in the present.”²⁷

A paradigm shift away from hierarchies means that contemporary leaders must let go of their egos and their sense of self-worth that comes from being the person at the top of an organizational chart. Letting go of ego means that leaders in a flat world must embrace vulnerability. In the past, leaders were affirmed for what they knew, or their cognitive skill set. This is no longer enough. It is vital that leaders learn to engage the hearts of those they lead as well as their own hearts. People know that leaders are not perfect, and it is necessary for leaders to accept this. People are no longer looking for leaders who are the best. They want leaders who are humble and real.

Share Decision-Making

An interconnected world demands shared decision-making. In a flat world, leaders cannot live in a domain where only a select few make the decisions. Modern

²⁴ John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson: 1993), 49.

²⁵ Morgenthaler, 186.

²⁶ Keel, 97.

²⁷ Keel, 98.

leadership structures that limit power and authority to an exclusive group of people are driving youth and young adults away from those organizations. A recent report on faith trends among Canadian young people entitled *Hemorrhaging Faith* noted, “to the emerging generation, being an inclusive faith community means offering a place of belonging to all people regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, education, etc.”²⁸ Leaders will do well to pay attention to this and begin to create inclusive leadership structures that allow for wider engagement in the decision-making apparatus of the organization or church.

It is a long-held belief that leaders are the decision-makers because they have the answers. Yet, this assumption is no longer valid. In a world that has embraced the belief of collective intelligence, no single person or small group of people can be the sole source of answers. Leaders in this new world must recognize that they are surrounded by a group of people that are an incredible resource. Collectively, we know way more than any one person could ever know. “Leaders must come to accept that all areas of leadership need to be shared, including the most public aspects—preaching, teaching, and leading worship.”²⁹

Acts 15 is an example of how shared decision-making can happen. The entire church came together to address a divisive problem and arrive at a solution. Although not everyone present in this passage contributed, it is a stark contrast to many contemporary churches in which decisions are made behind closed doors with only a select few present. Leaders will do well to create space where all

²⁸ James Penner, Rachel Harder, Erika Anderson, Bruno Desorcy, and Rick Hiemstra, *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why & When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying & Returning to the Church*, (Toronto, Ontario: EFC Youth; Young Adult Ministry Roundtable: 2013), 60.

²⁹ Bill Easum and Dave Travis, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches that Work* (Loveland, Colo.: Group: 2003), 42.

members of the church or organization can speak to the decisions that are being made. Consider opening the doors to your most sacred meetings to allow a wider range of voices to hear and to be heard.

This will be a scary change for many and will lead to a feeling of insecurity. Yet, leaders who can move past the sense of insecurity that may come from flat leadership will soon realize that they are far more influential, and the organization is far more effective, when they are engaging a wider spectrum of their constituency.

Give Power Away

How people become leaders has changed. At one point, leadership was given through titles, and those titles came with power. A flat world has shifted this approach to power. It now comes not from keeping as much power as you can, but, rather, through giving it away to others. Keel reminds us that “the posture of suspicion that postmoderns assume toward modernity illustrates how disempowered people have felt because of the real ways they have struggled to be acknowledged and heard as something other than a cog in the machinery over which they have no control.”³⁰ Allowing others to make key decisions will be an important part of leading in a flat world. It will also restore trust in those who are following as they begin to be used as more than just a cog. Moving toward a more flattened style of leadership will force us to look for nontraditional leadership styles, gifts, and aptitudes among a variety of people, some of whom may not initially seem to have something to contribute. Leading with an eye toward finding leaders in a variety of different places and then taking the risk to empower those who emerge is a key orientation for leaders to take in this day and age.

³⁰ Keel, 115.

Flat leadership creates that opportunity for everyone, not just the traditional white male leader. In this sense, as William Kondrath points out, it might be that women tend to more naturally operate from a flat leadership paradigm. Women “are more likely to attempt to share power, ensure that everyone’s voice is heard, be comfortable with ambiguous situations, and avoid unilateral stands that lead to win/lose conflicts.”³¹

However, Norma Cook Everist cautions that “issues of power are always present.”³² Even when churches begin to share power, they can encounter issues associated with women being trivialized, welcomed to the table simply to serve in a token role, or ignored by the established leaders. Everist suggests that “in order for full partnership to be realized the formerly powerful and the newly powerful need to listen to each other, but also to use power in new, mutually respectful and energizing ways.”³³ Margaret Wheatley explains that this “isn’t about getting people to like each other or feel good. It’s about creating the means for problems to get solved, for teams to function well.”³⁴ Wheatley sums up the opportunity we now have to share power in that “if we can come together as never before and work together to understand the complexity of current systems, if we can develop trust and respect for one another, then we have a chance of discovering solutions that truly work. But we must abandon our practices of distrust, fragmentation, and control.”³⁵

³¹ William Kondrath, *God’s Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 2008), 173.

³² Everist, Norma Cook, “Gender, Power and Leadership,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 1(2) (Fall 2002), 45–67.

³³ Everist, 57.

³⁴ Margaret Wheatley and Debbie Frieze, “Leadership in the Age of Complexity: From Hero to Host,” *Resurgence Magazine* (January/February 2011). Available online at <http://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Leadership-in-Age-of-Complexity.pdf>.

³⁵ Wheatley and Frieze, “Complexity,” 46.

Conclusion

Philosopher-theologian and emerging church pioneer Peter Rollins uses the illustration of a donut to describe how leadership should function. At the center of a donut there is nothing. The donut is held together not by a strong center but by the outer ring. It is not dependent on some kind of core; it is dependent on its cohesion around the outside. In this sense, the church is dependent on its relational life for its structure more than on some leaders who are at the center drawing everything together.³⁶ In other words, a centralized vision of leadership is not essential. Perhaps things work best when we are all on the edges, doing our specific part to hold things together and keep the mission moving forward. We are not held together by a central figure or figures who we rely on to tell us what to do and how to think. Instead, everyone has to take responsibility for the good of the whole. Without this broad sense of responsibility, the whole will fall apart. We need everyone to lead. This is a vision for leadership in a flat world.

³⁶ Rollins describes this idea on a DVD that is part of the book *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2011).