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JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Volume 21, Number 2 **Autumn 2022**

Articles

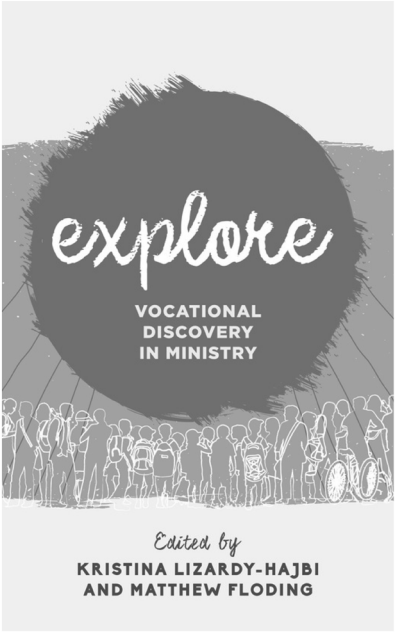
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

ALBAN
AT DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

EXPLORE
Vocational Discovery in Ministry
Edited by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi and Matthew Floding

"The book is accessible, gritty, and honest. It raises good conversation on the multiplicity of vocation and represents the complexity of life, vocation, and constructed meaning that we, in religious and ministerial circles, have known and navigated for some time. Vocation, in this context, is a complicated conversation and we have the beneficial wisdom of this diverse group of authors to articulate this complexity for us in this truth-telling and thought-provoking project."
— Mark Chung Hearn, PhD, Associate Professor and Director of Contextual Education at Church Divinity School of the Pacific

"Diversity of perspectives makes this volume useful for anyone discerning their vocational call to ministry. Readable and relatable, the authors share deeply personal stories of call, from traditional congregational ministry to spiritual, entrepreneurial enterprises. Bold and prophetic, the activity of the Holy Spirit is imbued in the poetry and prose."
— Susan MacAlpine-Gillis, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology at Atlantic School of Theology



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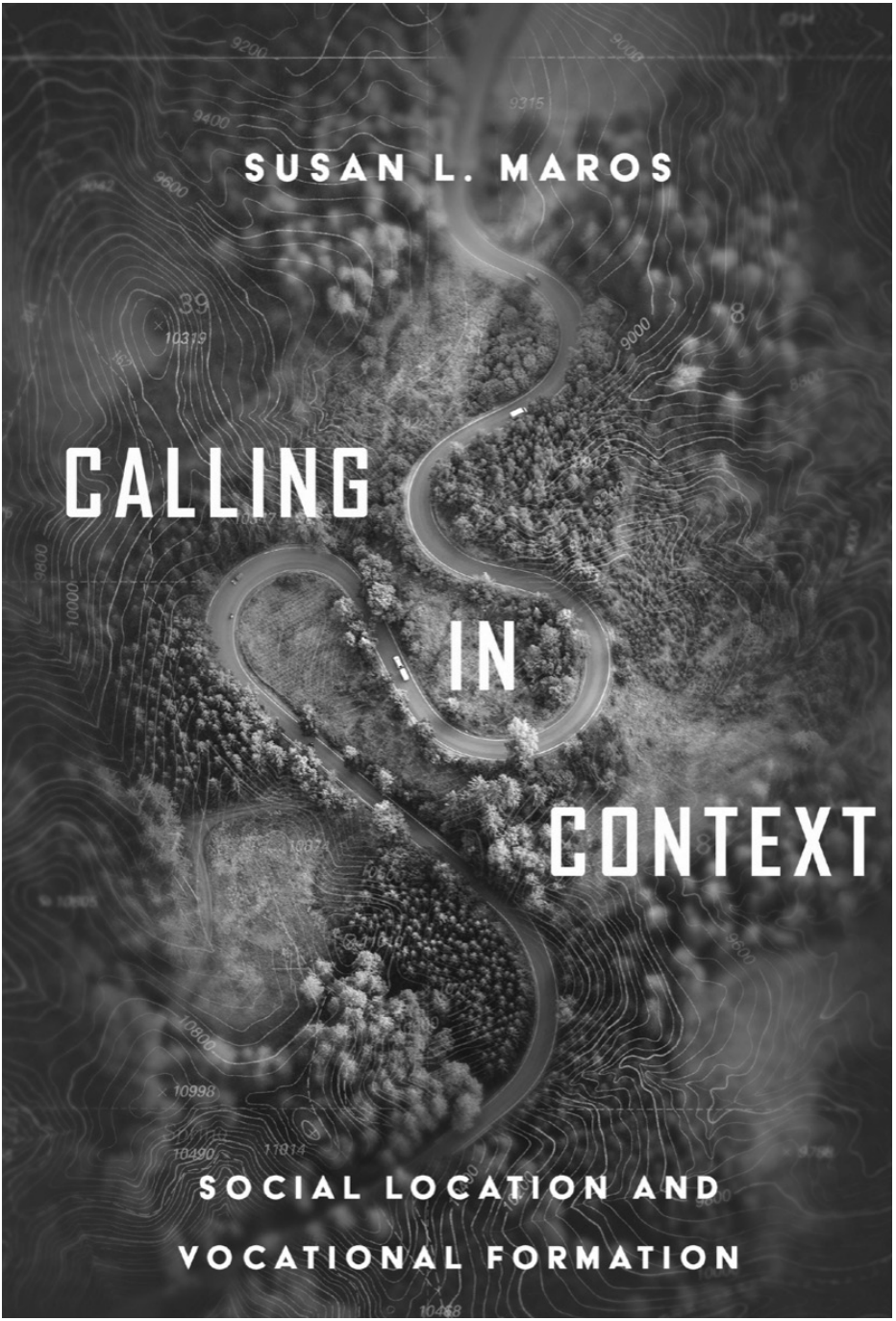
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CALLING IN CONTEXT
SOCIAL LOCATION AND VOCATIONAL FORMATION

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND INTRODUCTION TO AUTUMN 2022 CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY: LEADERSHIP IN AN AGE OF ALIENATION AND ISOLATION

SANDRA SELBY

Abstract

The essays in this edition of the Journal of Religious Leadership relate to the theme, "Connection and Community: Leadership in an Age of Alienation and Isolation," of the Annual Conference of the Academy of Religious Leadership that was held in hybrid format, in person at Minneapolis and online, in April 2022. The presidential address at the Academy of Religious Leadership conference introduced and framed the conference theme that was engaged by individual presenters, a panel, and by communities of practice in facilitated conversations. Several of those conference presentations are included as articles and essays in this journal.

Presidential Address: ARL Annual Conference, April 29, 2022

Disconnection and Despair

My sixteen-hour overnight shift as the on-call chaplain at Cleveland Clinic Akron General Medical Center, a Level-1 trauma center, began quietly enough. I started my shift at 5:00 p.m. with my routine of going through the hospital census and notes from the daytime chaplains, planning my evening schedule of follow-up visits, and making the rounds of the intensive care units in the 500-bed hospital. Then my pager went off. It was the Emergency Department: "Get down here right away; someone's in cardiac arrest!"

Rev. Sandra Selby, DMin., MBA, is pastor of Furnace Street Mission in Akron, Ohio.

Over the next three hours we had eight such patients who presented with varying degrees of severity. These were clearly overdoses, and the level of respiratory distress was unusual. Two of these patients ultimately died. During that month of July 2016, the coroner's office in Summit County, Ohio, where Akron is located, saw fifty-two unexplained deaths in which overdose was suspected.

Eventually, tests revealed the cause of thirty-five of those deaths was carfentanil, a synthetic opioid that is 10,000 times stronger than morphine and one hundred times more potent than fentanyl. Carfentanil is only legal in the United States for veterinary use, to rapidly tranquilize elephants and other large wildlife.[1] In all, 140 people in Summit County died of carfentanil overdose in the six months beginning July 2016.

Overdoses in Summit County already had been increasing at an alarming rate: overdose-related fatalities in 2016 were nearly 300% higher than in 2009. Public health authorities in the United States had been tracking such "deaths of despair:" suicide, drug overdose, or alcoholism. Ohio and its neighboring states are the epicenter for such deaths.

In their 2020 book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism,* Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton explore the underlying trends that caused deaths of despair to triple from 1990-2017 among the category most at risk for such deaths: White people between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four. But deaths of despair are not limited to that cohort. According to Case and Deaton, "In 2017, this midlife age-group had the highest rate of mortality from deaths of despair. But Whites in younger age-groups were also doing badly and their deaths rose even more rapidly, accelerating in the last few years."[2]

Underlying these deaths of despair is a crisis of meaning that is driven by a profound sense of isolation and alienation. In *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters*, Emily Esfahani Smith

[1] Kristy Waite et al, "Carfentanil and Other Opioid Trends in Summit County, Ohio," *Academic Forensic Pathology,* 2017 Dec. 7(4), published online 2017 Dec. 1 https://doi.org/10.23907/2017.053, 634.

[2] Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45.

names four "pillars of meaning:" *belonging* (having relationships of mutual care); *purpose* (a goal or organizing principle aimed at making a difference by contributing to something larger to the self); *transcendence* (the experience of a higher reality or principle that provides a deep connection to others); and *storytelling* (creating a narrative that is a unified whole, allowing us to understand our lives as coherent). According to Smith, "research has shown that among the benefits that come with being in a relationship or group, a sense of belonging [is] the most important driver of meaning."[3]

Lack of belonging and connection, and the inability to build a story of hope, are key drivers of deaths by despair. These are societal issues with which we will be engaging in our time together at this Annual Conference of the Academy of Religious Leadership.

In the at-risk White middle-aged demographic described by Case and Deaton, the crisis of meaning is caused primarily by structural issues in the economy that have eliminated well-paying, secure blue-collar jobs, leading to an accompanying loss of social capital. This crisis of meaning has driven some individuals, especially White men, to seek belonging through joining White supremacy and other hate and antigovernment groups. In his 2018 book, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—and Out Of—Violent Extremism,* Michael Kimmel says that young White men, in particular, are drawn to involvement in violent extremism because of

> …a crisis of meaning. More broadly, it is a crisis of connection, in which we have come to value autonomy and independence to the exclusion of our equally critical need for community and connectedness. And now too many young men feel that the future they felt they were promised, and to which they feel entitled, has been stolen from them. …They feel betrayed, as though they were the victims.[4]

[3] Emily Esfahani Smith, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* (New York: Crown, 2017), 50.

[4] Michael Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—And Out Of—Violent Extremism,* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 232.

Underlying this sense of betrayal is the erosion of the foundations of working-class life in the United States over the past fifty years. Case and Deaton provide this perspective:

> After correction for inflation, the median wages of American men have been stagnant for half a century; for White men without a four-year degree, median earnings lost 13 percent of their purchasing power between 1979 and 2017. Over the same period, national income per head grew by 85 percent. …Since the end of the Great Recession, between January 2010 and January 2019 nearly sixteen million new jobs were created, but fewer than three million were for those without a four-year degree. Only fifty-five thousand were for those with only a high school degree.[5]

At the same time, the sense of belonging and pride that once existed for working-class men and women employed by large corporations has been lost, as many of those jobs have been outsourced. Accompanying this loss of economic security has been an erosion of social capital. According to Case and Deaton,

> Jobs are not just the source of money; they are the basis for the rituals, customs, and routines of working-class life. Destroy work and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive. It is the loss of meaning, of dignity, of pride, and of self-respect that comes with the loss of marriage and of community that brings on despair, not just or even primarily the loss of money.[6]

In this century, the sense of betrayal experienced by the members of the working class due to the loss of economic and social capital has led to a "populist backlash" fueled, in the words of Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel, by a "tyranny of merit"—something to which this well-educated gathering needs to

[5] Case and Deaton, 7.
[6] Case and Deaton, 8.

pay attention. In his book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Sandel comments,

> …the populist backlash [in 2016] was provoked, at least in part, by the galling sense that those who stood astride the hierarchy of merit looked down with disdain on those they considered less accomplished than themselves. This populist complaint is not without warrant. For decades, meritocratic elites intoned the mantra that those who work hard and play by the rules can rise as far as their talents will take them. They did not notice that for those stuck at the bottom or struggling to stay afloat, the rhetoric of rising was less a promise than a taunt.[7]

Given the sense of betrayal and the resentment from loss of economic and social standing among the White working class, it should not be surprising that hate groups, as tracked by the Southern Poverty Law Center, numbered 457 in 1999, peaked at 1,020 in 2018, and now stands at 733. At the same time, antigovernment groups numbered 217 in 1999, peaked at 1,360 in 2012 with the rise of the Tea Party, and now stands at 488.

In its analysis of trends in the numbers of such groups, Southern Poverty Law Center states in its recent report, *The Year in Hate & Extremism: 2021*, that with respect to the decline in hate and antigovernment groups over the past three years, in particular, "Rather than demonstrating a decline in the power of the far right, the dropping numbers of organized hate and antigovernment groups suggest that the extremist ideas that mobilize them now operate more openly in the political mainstream."[8] People don't need to join hate groups to find fellow haters.

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[7] Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 72.

[8] Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate & Extremism: 2021* (Montgomery, AL: SPLC, Spring 2022) 4.

When "Belonging" Turns Toxic

The number of hate groups in the United States peaked one year after the "Unite the Right" rally in August 2017, when hundreds of White men, and a few White women, marched through the University of Virginia (of which I'm an alumna) and the city of Charlottesville, ostensibly to protest that City Council decision in February to remove the statue to Robert E. Lee, erected in downtown Charlottesville in 1920.

The choice of Charlottesville as the site of that rally was symbolically significant, as several vectors—some in play for several hundred years, others more recent—converge in that city. These vectors are directly related to the isolation and alienation that either erode community and connection or create forms of community and connection that do not promote the common good.

One of those vectors extends from one of Charlottesville's most famous citizens, Thomas Jefferson. Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States, is on a hilltop a few miles outside Charlottesville. Monticello, which Jefferson designed and lived in, was built by slaves, and its farms and household were sustained by slave labor. One of those slaves, Sally Hemings, bore at least six children fathered by Thomas Jefferson.

From Monticello, Jefferson could see the University of Virginia, which he designed and founded in 1819. The university also was constructed and staffed by slaves. For several years before the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, the university had been planning the construction of a memorial to the 4,000 slaves who worked in the construction and maintenance of the University of Virginia between 1817 and 1864.

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers was completed and dedicated one year ago. The racism that was on display by the White supremacists who marched in "Unite the Right" in August 2017 had its roots in Virginia, where the first slaves had arrived from Africa four hundred years earlier. Slavery's legacy continues in the structural racism that perpetuates racial inequity in the

United States, often isolating African Americans in segregated neighborhoods, and constructing physical and systemic barriers that stifle belonging and community.

According to African American theologian Willie Jennings, "changing the social fabric of this country [with regard to race relations] begins with changing the geographic fabric." He goes on say: "One thing we have to do for wholeness is to ban all gated communities. There should not be any gated communities—they should be illegal."[9] We need to be more intentional about the ways in which space is the locus of community-building, and name how the disruption of space, through the historical practice of redlining, and the current construction of gated communities, disrupts and destroys community.

The Racial Equity Institute states that racial inequity is caused by a racially structured society. Consistent inequities exist in health care, education, law enforcement, child welfare, and finance, to name a few. I say this as we meet in this space, four miles from the place where George Floyd was murdered two years ago.

Compared to Whites, African Americans are 1.5 to 7 times more likely to have bad outcomes across these systems.[10] COVID-19 exacerbated these inequities. The National Urban League's annual report on the *State of Black America* as of 2022 some grim statistics: the median household income for Black people is 37% less than that of White people. Black couples are more than twice as likely as White people to be denied a home improvement loan or a mortgage. Black people have 59% of the medium home equity of White people, and 13% of their wealth.[11]

The Racial Equity Institute's research into racial inequities has identified two core findings with regard to the causes of these racial disparities:

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[9] Interview of Willie Jennings by Matthew Vega, "The Geography of Whiteness," *Christian Century*, November 3, 2021, 27.

[10] Bayard Love and Aleeta Hayes Green, *The Groundwater Approach: Building a Practical Approach to Structural Racism.* The Racial Equity Institute, 5-7.

[11] Michael Warren, Associated Press, "Report: State of Black America is grim," *Akron Beacon Journal, 4/13/22.* The National Urban League report, *State of Black America*, is available at www.stateofblackamerica.org.

- Socioeconomic difference does not explain racial inequity.
- Inequities are caused by systems, regardless of culture or behavior.[12]

In short, the causes of racial inequity are structural and systemic, and can only be alleviated by addressing the structures and systems in health care, education, law enforcement, child welfare, and finance that give rise to those inequities. Naming and working to address racial inequity is the work of religious leaders!

Thomas Jefferson's authorship of the Declaration of Independence and founding of the University of Virginia are two of the three accomplishments he wished to have listed on his epitaph. The third was his authorship in 1777 of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, guaranteeing freedom of the expression of religion and separation of church and state, legislation passed in 1786 by the Virginia General Assembly.

The "Unite the Right" rally in Jefferson's hometown was stridently opposed to religious freedom, with antisemitic signs and chants—"Jews will not replace us!"—Nazi uniforms and salutes. Those antisemitic chants and symbols relate to the "Great Replacement" theory that had its origins in the early twentieth century and was popularized by the French writer Renaud Camus early in this century.

That theory, as adopted by White supremacists, holds that a conspiracy led by Jews and other non-White and non-Christian groups actively seeks to "replace" the dominant Christian, European-origin, White race.[13] More recently, the manifesto posted by the gunman who killed ten people and injured three others in a Tops supermarket in Buffalo on May 14, 2022 included references to the "Great Replacement."[14]

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[12] Love and Green, 8-9.

[13] "The Great Replacement: An Explainer," Anti-Defamation League, 4/19/21, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/great-replacement-explainer?, accessed 6/20/22.

[14] The murders that occurred in Buffalo two weeks after this Presidential Address was delivered at the ARL Conference are referenced here because they were motivated by the Great Replacement conspiracy theory that was behind the antisemitic expressions at the rally in Charlottesville.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, of the 733 hate groups in the United States, nearly 30% are Nazi sympathizers, antisemitic, or anti-Muslim.[15] The Anti-Defamation League reported that antisemitic incidents of assault, vandalism, and harassment increased 34% in 2021, to a level of more than 2,700.[16]

The University of Virginia at which the 2017 rally occurred is also of significance because, as an elite public university, it represents one of the primary elements in our society that is eroding the common good: meritocracy specifically around education, a challenging notion for our gathering of academics and otherwise well-educated people to consider.

As was stated earlier, a perhaps unintended consequence of the elitist rhetoric that "those who work hard and play by the rules can rise as far as their talents will take them," a statement that was especially prevalent during the presidency of Barack Obama, is that it shames those who are not able to attend or complete college, or are unable to get a stable, well-paying job.

Not able to "belong" to and participate in society in the way to which they feel entitled by their White privilege, many instead seek belonging with those who feel victimized by the government and the elites who run it. They join White supremacist and neo-Nazi groups. They march in Charlottesville and, on January 6, 2021, they occupy the Capitol Building.

The Calling of Religious Leaders

Where has the church been in all of this? In his book *Faith After Doubt*, Brian McLaren reports on his own experience in joining other clergy in Charlottesville in August 2017:

> I came face to face with realities I never thought I'd see in the United States: hundreds of young white men (and a few women) carrying Confederate and Nazi flags, chanting hateful slogans as they marched, some

[15] Southern Poverty Law Center, 45.

[16] "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2021," Anti-Defamation League, 4/26/22, https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2021, accessed 6/20/22.

> with baseball bats in hand looking for a fight. I saw angry men with homemade shields throwing punches, lobbing Coke cans filled with cement and bottles filled with urine, and hurling curses, insults, and threats. The "Unite the Right" rally ended with one woman dead, many injured, and the country more divided than ever. …[Afterward] I started doing research on hate groups. …I came across articles by and about several former white supremacist leaders who had defected from the movement. In one interview [on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross], a defector was asked why anyone would join a hateful extremist movement like the one he once helped lead. He answered with three words I'll never forget: meaning, belonging, and purpose. Exactly what religious faith is supposed to provide, I thought. If we humans don't find meaning, belonging, and purpose in healthy forms of spirituality, we'll seek them in unhealthy forms of ideology.[17]

McLaren then quotes Tara Isabella Burton's 2019 *New York Times* op-ed, "The Religious Hunger of the Radical Right":

> Now more than ever, the promises religion has traditionally made—a meaningful world, a viable place in it, a community to share it with, rituals to render ordinary life sacred—are absent from the public sphere. More and more Americans are joining the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated. There are more religious "nones" than Catholics or Evangelicals, and 36 percent of those born after 1981 don't identify with any religion. These new reactionary [Radical Right] movements, with their power to offer answers at once mollifying and vituperative to the chaos of existence,

[17] Brian McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do About It* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2021), 110-111.

> [are] one of many ways that Americans are filling that gap [that religious affiliation once did].[18]

Alienation and isolation destroy connection and community; some would say they threaten to destroy our democracy. Racism, antisemitism, income inequality, class-based resentment, and antigovernment sentiment: these are the vectors that converged in Charlottesville five years ago, on Capitol Hill last year, and in Buffalo this year, and that continue to polarize our country and, closer to home, in some cases our churches and our families. These factors also are in play in Europe, from which two in our Livestream audience are joining us today.

And here I acknowledge that I have not mentioned numerous other causes of the alienation and isolation that exist in our society, underlying some of the trends I have mentioned. One of those is named by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi in the "Podcast on Religious Leadership" that we are introducing at this conference: the profound change over the past several decades in the structure of our families and relationships in this society that is now, as Kristina describes it, "a majority single nation."

We live in an age of alienation and isolation. How do we, as religious leaders, build life-giving connection and community? That is the question that was before the Annual Conference of the Academy of Religious Leadership in April 2022, and that is engaged by the authors in this Autumn 2022 edition of the *Journal of Religious Leadership*.

Connection and Community:
Introducing the Essays in the Autumn 2022 issue of the JRL

Fundamentally, religion is about belonging, connection, and meaning-making, bringing people together in community to explore and celebrate the sacred and sending them forth to join in God's ongoing and transformative work in the world. Facilitating such connection and community is at the core of our work as

[18] Brian McClaren, quoting from Tara Isabella Burton, "The Religious Hunger of the Radical Right," *New York Times*, August 13, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/13/opinion/sunday/religion-extremism-white-supremacy.html.

religious leaders, whether in the academy, the faith community, or the community at large. Essays in this journal originated as presentations and panel discussions at the April 2022 ARL Conference in Minneapolis, MN. This collection of authors examine the ways in which religious leaders are addressing—and in some cases, causing—issues of alienation and isolation in congregations, communities, and the academy. Each essay offers suggestions for how to cultivate and increase connection and community.

Phil Allen describes the ways in which the megachurch's grounding in colonialism and capitalism can be isolating and alienating for congregants and visitors, especially those from marginalized populations. Within the megachurch, colonialism characterizes the motivation for and dynamics of power, while capitalism provides the ethos and impetus for growth and prosperity. In the process, the institution itself is prized over the individual and collective humanity within it. Allen describes how megachurches facilitate practices of empire through the model of "high priest" leadership. He proposes the prophetic leadership of the organic intellectual as an alternative that "flattens" hierarchy and walks alongside the people in solidarity. The organic intellectual leader intentionally decentralizes power, nurturing a sense of belonging while naming and addressing the underlying causes of the social injustice and inequity experienced by many members of the community.

Focus on issues of social justice through Catholic Social Teaching is an important element of leadership and spiritual formation for youth ages 16-22 through the Franciscan CORE Youth Theology Institute at Viterbo University that is led by Emily Dyckman. Through the formation and spiritual practices of Franciscan CORE, youth reflect theologically on core issues of identity, meaning, and purpose in their own lives and in the communities and congregations with which they interact. Dyckman describes how the youth in Franciscan CORE explore new ways of being the church and serving the church, modes of being and serving that are focused on relationships and interconnection rather than on producer/consumer identities, hierarchy, and power.

COVID-19 has presented significant challenges for connection and community. While many churches convened congregants online in response to COVID restrictions, connection and community did not necessarily translate from in-person to online gatherings. Using the Digital Silent Retreats (DSR) as an example, Laura Murray describes "the digital space" as a significant opportunity for Christian engagement and community building. A central focus of this community-building is the practice of hospitality that is modeled by the hosts who lead and guide the DSR's.

Having described the liminal space in which religious and other leaders find themselves today, Lisa Withrow engages the question, "How do we live in a VUCA [volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous] world with intention based on wellbeing while dwelling in liminality for a time?" Withrow outlines how leaders in business, not-for-profits, and the church are navigating this liminal space in new ways appropriate to the VUCA environments in which we live and work. With the old formulaic approaches to leadership not suited to the VUCA world, formational and co-creational approaches are emerging in which the leader forms and holds the container in which the creative, experimental work of the community can take place. Withrow calls the church to move beyond its emphasis on formulaic strategic planning and its building-centered mindset to adopt a learning posture and an openness to working in partnership and networked connection with businesses and other entities who are committed to well being and planetary flourishing.

As a unique feature of the April 2022 Conference, we had a number of panel discussions. Two of these have been fashioned into essays. The first of these is authored by Susan Maros, Jessica Vaughan Lower, and Christopher Brooks, who self-identify as a White educator, a White pastor, and a multi-racial Black-identifying entrepreneur, respectively. They recount and reflect upon the challenges of fostering the capacity of White leaders to work for racial justice. In order to address the pervasive White isolation and White silence in our society, they challenge White religious leaders to initiate discussions about diverse racialized experience within their communities. The panelists describe, from their own

experience, the ways in which the impact of such conversations can strengthen or harm relationships with others in the family, the workplace, and the community.

The panel led by Robert Martin and Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi considers how research by practitioners and scholars can contribute to community and connection, especially when such research occurs across differences of power, status, gender, and other categories of socio-cultural identity. Martin and Lizardy-Hajbi interviewed three White academicians whose research focused on people from very different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds than their own. The panel's conversation focused on the motivations and goals of such research across difference, and how that research is done responsibly, taking into account cultural privilege and the ethical requirement to treat all persons with dignity.

Alienation and isolation are rampant in our society. Racism, income inequality, loss of social capital, class-based resentment, and loneliness abound. We live in liminal space. And it is precisely this liminal "space-between, where there can be neither power nor control,"[19] says our ARL colleague Mark Branson, that is "the essential location within which leaders and the people discern and engage with God."[20] In this issue of JRL, the authors discuss how religious leaders and the people they lead can discern and engage with God to form and strength connection and community in an age of alienation and isolation.

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[19] Mark Branson and Alan Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, & Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2000) 5.
[20] Branson, 193.

Leading for Belonging: The Organic Intellectual as Alternative to Evangelical Megachurch Leadership

Phil Allen Jr.

Abstract

Much of the modern Christian church in the United States is informed and overshadowed by the megachurch model. Its theology, liturgy, and ethics are grounded in a colonialism-capitalism configuration. This framework is not conducive to facilitating a space of belonging for congregants and visitors, especially for those already marginalized in the broader society. The megachurch is led by a senior leadership, namely the lead pastor, whose role is analogous to the high priest role in the biblical narrative. After an analysis of the megachurch, megachurch leadership, and colonial/capitalistic sensibilities, the prophetic leadership of the organic intellectual is offered as an alternative leadership style.

Introduction

As the number of mega churches—mostly White Evangelical churches[1]—in the US grows, one can be deceived into thinking the church in the US is thriving.[2] Aside from church attendance, the

[1] Sarah Burns, "25 Largest Churches in America," October 11, 2017, https://247wallst.com/special-report/2017/10/11/25-largest-churches-in-america/2/. (Accessed March 13, 2022). For more information, see footnote 1a on next page.

[2] Aaron Earls, Lifeway Research, "Megachurches in the US Continue to (Mostly) Grow and Not Just in Size," December 15, 2020, https://research.lifeway.com/2020/12/15/megachurches-continue-to-mostly-grow-and-not-just-in-size/. (Accessed July 25, 2022). For more information, see footnote 2a on next page.

Phil Allen Jr., MAT, is a PhD candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary where he is a Pannell Center for Black Church Studies Fellow

issue of church relevance and effectiveness is of equal concern. The question remains, why are so many of the most influential megachurches in the country silent on social issues? Why are so many nationally known pastors reluctant to engage in the controversial social issues like racial injustice, economic inequities, gender issues involving sexual violations and pay equity, or gun control? The answer is likely found in the influence of neoliberal ideology cloaked in evangelical theology. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political philosophy, has run parallel with the increasing influence of evangelicalism over the past forty-plus years. This ideological underpinning of evangelicalism has charted a course for the church's theology and practice that conflict with the teachings and embodied ministry of Jesus.

The evangelical megachurch needs to counterbalance its myopic view of the gospel and the witness of its ecclesiology. Abuse and neglect (regardless of racial background) at the hands of

[1a] Race (and racism) is inherent to the discussion around megachurches, colonialism, and capitalism. Most megachurches in the US, as Burns indicates, are made up mostly of White congregants and led by White pastors. Colonialism's history is entrenched in White/European supremacy and imposition of violence against people of color while taking control of their lands. Capitalism in the US finds its roots in slavery. This paper, however, is an analysis and critique of the megachurch and its colonialistic and capitalistic sensibilities, and it is beyond the scope and focus of this paper to delve into the racialization of the megachurch. It is, however, at least worth acknowledging the racialized roots of American Christianity conflated with White, male supremacy. As the dominant "brand" of Christianity, the breadth of its influence transcends racial boundaries.

[2a] Also see Maria Baer, Christianity Today, "US Churches are Getting Bigger and Thinking Smaller," November 19, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2020/november-web-exclusives/us-megachurches-multisite-small-group-hartford.html. (Accessed July 25, 2022). It is also important to recognize that this growth of the megachurch is based on pre-COVID 19 statistics. Since the pandemic only a percentage of their pre-COVID attendance statistics according to a Pew report: Justin Nortey, Pew Research Center, "More houses of worship are returning to normal operations, but in-person attendance is unchanged since fall," March 22, 2022 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/. (Accessed July 25, 2022).

church CEO-led leadership, corruption, and an overall difficulty in experiencing the intimacy of community are all universal reasons why the megachurch context is insufficient as a space of discipleship, intimacy, and belonging.

The term "belong" has a range of definitions that should be considered since the idea of belonging is subjective. As a verb it denotes ownership or being in possession of, as well as "to be in relation as a member, to have the proper qualifications, especially social qualifications."[3] Both definitions are being employed, whether consciously or unconsciously, by members of the church and church leadership.

A deeper dive into the term, from a congregant's perspective, may suggest that to belong means more than just membership of a group or community or to be tolerated and accepted by that group or community. It means to be accepted, welcomed, celebrated, and affirmed. It means to be seen and welcomed with hospitality as one who is of the family of God and who is "fully a part."[4] To be *fully* a part, as Miroslav Volf claims, means space is made for the fullness of one's culture, race, gender, etc. and those theological and social issues that affect one's life.

Churches, however, employ the definition of "belong" in terms of church membership and the qualifications being met by individuals and families—attendance, consistent tithing, and serving within the church's context. This "belonging-with-contingencies" is part of the megachurch ethos that undermines ethics stated in churches' vision/mission statements that insist they unconditionally welcome all as those loved by God.

Importantly, the ethic of the megachurch cannot be divorced from the vision and mission of its leaders as leaders curate the space for the megachurch's emergence and flourishing. In this article I argue the evangelical megachurch context and leadership, explicitly and implicitly informed by colonialistic and capitalistic philosophies

[3] Dictionary.com s.v. "belong," https://www.dictionary.com/browse/belong. Accessed April 3, 2022.

[4] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and* Reconciliation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 16, Kindle.

and practices, is deficient in facilitating a space of belonging for many Christians and non-Christians alike. Furthermore, megachurch leadership, analogous to the high priest ministry of the Israelite/Jewish context, must be replaced by organic/subversive intellectual leadership. I intentionally use the word "deficient" as opposed to "incapable" because there are exceptions to the rule where some may indeed feel a sense of community. I will make the case, however, that the rule suggests negative impacts on a considerably high proportion of members and visitors.

The structure of this article begins with a brief summary of what defines or characterizes the megachurch and how colonialism and capitalism are inextricably linked as foundational to its ethos. The article then moves toward identifying how megachurch leadership facilitates its theology, philosophy, and practices of empire. Lastly, organic (subversive) intellectual leadership is analyzed and presented as alternative leadership philosophy more conducive to fostering a space of belonging particularly for those on the margins, grappling with oppressive social issues.

What is the Megachurch?

Megachurches are churches consisting of at least 2,000 people in average weekly attendance.[5] To facilitate the sheer numbers of bodies in the church space requires resources (people, money, facilities, technology) and strategies (programs/ministries, marketing, technological savvy) to successfully continue its operations. Megachurches, as extension of the lead pastor, tend to be built upon a combination of charismatic personality, large events, and a one-size-fits-all (universal) approach to Christianity with an array of ministries intended to meet almost every need of individuals and groups imaginable. This emphasis has the potential to weaken the depth and potency of the ministry in exchange for

[5] Allen Kim, CNN, "What is a megachurch?" April 27, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/27/us/what-is-a-megachurch-explainer/index.html. Accessed July 6, 2022. Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Megachurch Definition," http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html. Accessed July 6, 2022. USA Churches, "Church Sizes," http://www.usachurches.org/church-sizes.htm. Accessed July 6, 2022.

the expanded breadth of its reach designed to appeal to the masses to promote church growth.

According to the Hartford Institute of Religious Research, megachurches can be Protestant and Catholic, but most are nondenominational, conservative, and evangelical.[6] Most megachurches are in the southern US, in suburban communities (74 percent)[7], experience rapid growth (reaching 2,000 in attendance in less than ten years), have a dominant male senior pastor who preaches with an authoritative style.[8] In this context, one can observe access to financial resources and political influence due to location. It is important to note the focus of this article is not on any particular type of megachurch, but on the megachurch ethos itself. Certainly, there are exceptions to every rule and these churches may vary based on ethnic makeup, location, etc., the characteristics of what constitutes the emergence and maintenance of the megachurch are consistent.

The megachurch model relies on the prospects of filling facilities to reach as many people with the gospel message as possible each week. It is not a pastoral model per se, but an evangelistic one. The priority in this model often appears to be the message of the gospel, through preaching and other liturgical practices, reaching the maximal number of recipients.

Given the size of the megachurch and the amount of energy and resources required to achieve its aims, it is not surprising that these ministries have become increasingly insular and less engaging with other churches (due to theological and/or political differences in many cases), especially in terms of worship services, according to Scott Thumma and Warren Byrd.[9] Insularity risks "othering" people and communities that are not members. Othering then fosters competition rather than community, subtle and injurious hostility rather than authentic hospitality. If one does not subscribe

[6] Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Megachurch Definition."
[7] Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 9.
[8] Hartford Institute of Religious Research, "Megachurch Definition."
[9] Scott Thumma and Warren Byrd, *Recent Shifts in America's Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Report* (The Beck Group, 2015), 10.

to the doctrines and priorities of the leader, it may be implied they do not belong in that space.

It is worth noting that while much attention is placed on the megachurch, the analysis and critique is focused on the megachurch model (ethos and leadership). The model itself may also be observed in smaller churches who have adopted the model with aspirations of growing and becoming "mega." The advantage, however, for smaller churches as it relates to fostering belonging is that they are still small enough to provide intimate community where congregants are more likely to be seen and known. Furthermore, by nature of its size, smaller churches provide less opportunities for congregants to be onlookers, as Tim Keller, former pastor of Redeemer Church in New York City, suggests, "There is less dependence on staff" as the church must rely on "a greater percentage of laypersons' gifts and talents."[10] The smaller churches that are not influenced by the aims and methods of the megachurch, are more capable of curating spaces for "thick communities," as Keller asserts.[11]

In defense of the megachurch model, Thumma and Dave Travis write plainly, "Beyond the raw numbers and power of these churches, we believe that megachurches, their practices, and their leaders are the most influential contemporary dynamic in American religion [for better or for worse]."[12] They make a shortsighted claim: "A large part of the resistance to megachurches comes from leaders" of denominations, seminaries, and religious presses and publishing "who see their own influence waning…We are convinced that the mistaken impressions about megachurches have arisen, not

[10] Leah MarieAnn Klett, The Christian Post, "Tim Keller reflects on 'design deficits' in megachurches: Poor places for formation and pastoral care," April 8, 2022, https://www.christianpost.com/news/tim-keller-shares-the-design-deficits-in-megachurches.html. (Accessed July 29, 2022).

[11] Klett, "Tim Keller reflects on 'design deficits' in megachurches: Poor places for formation and pastoral care."

[12] Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Biggest* Churches (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 2.

necessarily due to jealousy, spite, or mean-spiritedness, but because of ignorance."[13]

What is problematic about this statement and its apparent bias in defense of the megachurch is that "resistance to megachurches" is not exclusive to religious leaders whose influence is waning. Church leaders on staff and congregants who have endured church hurt in these spaces and who struggle to be seen and experience a felt sense of belonging, respectively, also have grievances (although this may be lost in the statistics reflecting continued growth in church attendance). Millennials have long been dissatisfied with and, in fact, uninterested in using funds to build bigger buildings and satisfy what they might perceive as exorbitant pastor salaries in place of meeting social needs like homelessness.

Resistance to the church might also be a natural occurrence in this cycle of the church's life. Phyllis Tickle, in *The Great Emergence,* examines the dramatic change in the church that occurs every 500 years or so.[14] Not that the megachurch has been around and thrived for 500 years, but if this is in fact an emergence of a new kind of faith practice then it is fair to believe that even methods, styles, and liturgies that have thrived even twenty or thirty years prior would be impacted by the shift. Millennials desire more intimate community and "the beauty of the liturgical tradition"…that gives "rhythm

[13] Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myth*, 2. My (Phil Allen) observations on the megachurch ethos is not from a place of ignorance, but inside experience. I have spent sixteen years in the megachurch context as a parishioner and a pastor on staff. I lead a thriving young adult ministry employing some of the megachurch strategies of church/ministry growth. I preached from the main platform on Sundays more often than any other associate pastor on staff during that period. I was invited to preach at many megachurches in the Southern California area, particularly around the Los Angeles suburbs. I have many associates leading megachurches, on staff at these ministries, and attending and serving in these spaces. I know the blueprint. I know the motivations, the conversations in pastoral meetings, the rigid rules that all must adhere to for the sake of the church's continued success. I understand what it feels like in my body to be one of a handful of pastors of color in a predominately white religious context and even the only African American pastor on staff. Ignorance does not factor into the perspective, commentary, and research for this article.

[14] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 17.

and a contour to [their] lives."[15] David Kinnaman, in his data-driven book *You Lost Me*, writes, "A generation of young Christians believes that the churches in which they were raised are *not safe and hospitable* places to express doubt [emphasis added]."[16] This is an important observation because the continued success and growth of churches employing the megachurch model necessitates buy-in on all levels—theologically, politically, and socially—especially in the rigid, patriarchal organization of evangelical church spaces. Theological doubt could potentially disrupt continuity of messaging and unity throughout the body of believers. Thumma and Travis fail to recognize the broader resistance to the megachurch, especially in evangelical spaces, beyond what they perceive to be jealous sentiments of leaders outside of the megachurch.

Colonialism and Neoliberal Capitalism

In this article, colonialism is indicative of the influence and aspirations of *power* within the megachurch ethos and leadership, while capitalism provides the underlying motivation and framework for church growth and *prosperity.* These twin philosophies of colonialism (power) and capitalism (prosperity) have been combined to create a formidable barrier to the church's capacity or willingness to intimately and effectively see, nurture, and prize individual and collective humanity over prioritizing the institution. This is of utmost importance when considering the megachurch is not just influential within the church but, whether popular among non-Christians or not, it continues to be influential in the broader society.

Colonialism and capitalism, as philosophies of empire, together thrive on vulnerable people and spaces as mutually reinforcing philosophies. The instincts of power (whether political, corporate,

[15] Mark Woods, Christian Today, "Brandon Robertson: Why millennials are leaving megachurches and discovering liturgy," June 10, 2016, https://www.christiantoday.com/article/brandan-robertson-why-millennials-are-leaving-megachurches-and-discovering-liturgy/88076.htm. (Accessed July 29, 2022).

[16] David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church… And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 11.

or religious) and the allure of prosperity in the megachurch space provides a setting primed for the exploitation of people while refining the mechanisms of the institution. On one hand, there are two distinct forms of global colonialism: settler colonialism imposed upon Indigenous people of North America, and there is the "coloniality of power established in the Americas of the South in the sixteenth century (both of which intersected violently with African bodies)."[17]

This article has a dual focus as it relates to the characteristics or ethos of the megachurch model: *settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism*. The legacy of settler colonialism is "the expansion of European corporations, backed by government armies into foreign areas, with subsequent expropriation of lands and resources [and bodies]."[18] Neoliberal capitalism, as Adam Kotsko asserts, "is more than simply a formula for economic policy. It aspires to be a complete way of life and a wholistic worldview…"[19] [Neoliberal] capitalism, argued here as fundamental to megachurch philosophy, must be taken seriously as "its *own* theology, centered on money as the… 'ultimate concern,'"[20] given the orientation of its worship liturgy, administration, and doctrine.

Colonialism

There are three patterns under which the colonialist frame can be observed asserting itself in the evangelical megachurch space: conquest/domination of a sovereign, forced assimilation of indigenous groups, and displacement/replacement social structures. "Colonialism is the practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another."[21] This practice of *domination* involves the process of European settlement and

[17] Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 16, Kindle Edition.
[18] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 16, Kindle Edition.
[19] Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), Loc. 130, Kindle Edition.
[20] Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, Loc. 1198 of 3496, Kindle Edition.
[21] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Colonialism," Plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism. Accessed April 2, 2022.

political control over the rest of the world—exercise of sovereign power, including the Americas, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia.[22] The settlement of Europeans on other lands deemed unoccupied because people groups indigenous to the lands were considered savages and barbarians.[23]

These categories were intended to be immutable, justifying the colonialist imagination and reinforcing the European mission to conquer global real estate under the guise of civilizing the world. Justification for sovereign dominance of vulnerable lands and people was rationalized by the notion that these groups were incapable of self-governing and "needed" European paternalism to become a civilized community. Ironically, "[t]he system of colonial domination, which involved some combination of slavery, quasi-feudal forced labor, or expropriation of property, is antithetical to the basic Enlightenment principle that each individual is capable of reason and self-government."[24]

Whether it was Christopher Columbus (Spain), Prince Henry the Navigator (Portugal), or British representatives for their global colonizing efforts, they were never independent of the sovereigns they represented. They superintended the process in foreign lands at the behest of their respective sovereigns. In this sense, colonialism is essentially about assertion and expansion of an empire over distant spaces and "othered" bodies with forms of "violence as a means to avaricious ends."[25] In its most rudimentary form, dominance is

[22] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Colonialism."
[23] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), Loc. 2299 of 8980, Kindle Edition. According to Jennings there were three hierarchized categories of barbarians who were colonized in different ways. Barbarian (a) were "the highest in civilization and development." They were civil beings and were not to be converted to Christianity by force, by reason would suffice. Barbarian (b) "lacked a system of writing, philosophy, and civil wisdom, but they have a system of government marked by defined leaders, custom, law, and social order. They have innate abilities and simply needed to be cultivated." Barbarian (c) "were those peoples who live like wild animals, hunting and gathering in packs and having no governmental sensibility or system of writing. They hardly have human feelings…" Loc. 2299-2313 of 8980.
[24] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Colonialism."
[25] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination,* Loc. 3755 of 8980, Kindle Edition.

about power relations most often inextricably linked to economic interests of one group at the expense of the more vulnerable in the inequitable relationship. Unfortunately, religion has been complicit in the violence and proliferation of colonization that produced loss of land, new kinds of people, and death (of lives, minds, and cultural identity and expressions).[26]

European colonialism was, and continues to be, inextricably tied to Christianity. "Nonbelievers had legitimate dominion over themselves and their property, but this dominion was abrogated if they proved incapable of governing themselves according to principles that every reasonable person would recognize."[27] Conversion meant fostering allegiance to the faith and to the colonizing nation. This conversion was accomplished through force or reason. No matter the method of *coerced assimilation* or acculturation, the implications on indigenous lands and peoples were devastating with its legacy still observed today.

Christianity, in the colonizer's mind, validated practices of colonialism. That is, Christianity provided the moral grounding for conquest of lands and domination of peoples through the "conversion" tactics of stripping away of indigenous identities and cultural expressions in a binary framing that does not allow for space to be both Christian and "other." Indigenous people must become Christian in faith (immediately) and European in culture (progressively). This converted people group (or person) is docile and subjugated, apathetic to critical thinking and resistance, and zealous for the culture, identity, and theology they have been both coerced and seduced (both expressions of power) to embrace.

In the colonialist frame violence was appropriate when indigenous people were declared to have violated natural laws or the law of nations.[28] Colonial violence is not limited to physical

[26] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, Loc. 2965 of 8980, Kindle Edition.
[27] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Colonialism."
[28] Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism: Early Modern Liberal Roots of Natural Law, "Natural Law and the Law of Nations," http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/law-of-nations. Accessed March 12, 2022. Law of Nations here defined as the law of nature of individuals in the state of nature applied to states. Essentially it is "applying the law of nature…founded on right reason."

but includes psychological, intellectual, and the violence of cultural annihilation. Any group reasonably considered to be incapable of self-government, by nature needed the Euro-Christianization of colonialism for their own good.

Willie Jennings demonstrates, in one chapter of *The Christian Imagination*, the colonialist framework through the representation of a young Jesuit Spaniard named José de Acosta Porres. Acosta embodied, by conditioning, the colonialist disposition and enacted what Jennings calls the tragedy of Christian transposition inside the colonialist frame. While settler colonialism requires the movement and settlement of the dominant European onto foreign land, it also requires the cultural and intellectual movement of indigenous peoples toward the colonizer. Jennings writes, "Acosta [colonizer] stands conceptually in one place and demands that 'the barbarians' move toward him."[29] In other words, Acosta as the colonialist representative, maintains mastery of and standard for what it meant to *be* Christian, in fact, what it meant to *be* human. This position forces indigenous movement intellectually, theologically, morally, as well as physically (positioned to now serve European wellbeing).

The imperative condition of "emigration from the home country"[30] to occupy indigenous land is the violence of colonialism that would later be the active metaphor for the kinds of violence (assimilation/acculturation or displacement/replacement) observed in the evangelical megachurch ethic. Colonialism *displaces* and *replaces* the native reality in every way. It is a displacement of people on their lands, their theology/spirituality, and their self-understanding. Each is replaced with a disorienting colonialist version that has reinforced their less-than-humanness or accentuated imagined deficiencies in their humanity that reasonably justifies the salvific imposition of governance, theology, and identity, in other words, a justification of complete dominance and *the creation of a new kind of people* on a new land. This colonialist frame is so pervasive that, once normalized, any counternarrative or resistance

[29] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, Loc. 2366 of 8980, Kindle Edition.
[30] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 16, Kindle Edition.

is a form of heresy that only generates more violence. The cycle of conquest, assimilation, and displacement-replacement (of resisters) continues as manifestations of colonial power. The colonialist frame fosters violence at worst, hostility at best, but is certainly a barrier to a sense of belonging as it alienates those who belong, the natives of the land/space.

Structures of displacement/replacement are arrangements built into and reinforced by the language, liturgy (religious and secular), social hierarchy, and institutional affiliations and partnerships. They are structures of erasure observed in patterns of the coloniality of power— "patterns of extermination, pillage, enslavement, racialization, dehumanization, and power."[31] New occupiers mean new governance, new economies, and new theologies (ways of seeing God, self, and the other)—a new vision, and thus, a new mission for society. A new mission in colonialism envisions indigenous persons devolving from human to commodity, from brothers and sisters to instruments of production for the betterment of sovereign power.

Neoliberal Capitalism

Capitalism is woven into the Western megachurch philosophy and theology. It is so tightly woven and uncritically accepted that one can hardly discern one from the other. A new kind of gospel that demands allegiance emerges from this disciplining entanglement. Capitalism, in a broader sense, as defined by Max Weber, is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise. "For it must be so: In a wholly capitalistic order of society, an individual capitalistic enterprise which did not take advantage of its opportunities for profit-making would be doomed to extinction."[32] The principles of capitalism keep the megachurch alive.

The megachurch model is a commercialized and corporatized form of ministry that fosters and benefits from a necessarily consumeristic culture by which capitalistic sensibilities thrive.

[31] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality,* 16, Kindle Edition.
[32] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Angelico Press, 2014), 17, Kindle Edition.

David Harvey is correct when he claims, "Neoliberalization is, in short, the financialization of everything."[33] It is, however, a microcosm of the broader prosperity-driven US "consumer society, and that extends to the acquiring of cultural goods—like religion—as well as material possessions."[34]

To further underscore the analogous relationship between neoliberalism and the megachurch ethos I will adopt Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda's four market myths of globalization in *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* to demonstrate how the "invisible hand" of the free market, as a trait of neoliberalism and globalization, operates stealthily even within the church. In her analysis of globalization Moe-Lobeda identifies *four myths of the free market*:

1) growth benefits all,
2) freedom is market freedom,
3) humans are *Homo economicus*, and
4) corporate-driven, finance-driven globalization is inevitable.[35]

I will focus my attention on three of the four myths that I believe are relevant for this article*: growth benefits all*, *humans are* Homo economicus, and *corporate-driven, finance-driven globalization is inevitable*. These myths not only inform the megachurch ethos, they also incentivize buy-in from church leaders and congregants.

Moe-Lobeda challenges the claim that *growth in market-driven globalization benefits all*.[36] She says that growth, as calculated by Gross Domestic Product, does not account for distribution of wealth and income, nor does it account for the social and ecological cost of growth as it fails to distinguish between destructive and sustaining ecological activity.[37] Likewise, growth in the megachurch does not benefit all because it does not account for the material cost of infrastructure—which is part of its allure—nor does it account for the social and spiritual cost of the loss of community in the

[33] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32, Kindle Edition.
[34] Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 3, Kindle Edition.
[35] Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 48-63.
[36] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 48.
[37] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 49.

midst of the hustle and bustle pace of the *mega* aspect of church; it is quite easy to be invisible. The continual growth, whether rapid or slow, if it is noticeable, seduces many into believing God's presence and favor is upon that ministry and thus upon them.

The megachurch model envisions *human beings are Homo economicus*. In other words, humans are consumeristic and competitive, rather than cooperative, and autonomous, rational beings rather than beings-in-community.[38] For Moe-Lobeda this is problematic because, "Human worth is placed in relationship to buying power."[39] It is not so much that humans are consumeristic by nature and competitive, but that humans are vulnerable to being caught in the cycle of consumerism. In fact, J.K. Smith asserts that humans are not *Homo economicus*, but more *Homo liturgicus*—liturgical by nature because "we are what we love and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends."[40] Neoliberal capitalism, collaborating with the gospel message it shapes, takes advantage of this consumeristic cycle to discipline the whole of an individual and group's life. Margaret Thatcher said, "Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul."[41]

The megachurch model, unfortunately, has participated consciously and unconsciously in reproducing the consumeristic, materialistic culture that goes against the grain of what Smith and Moe-Lobeda say is what is meant to be human. This is done in many church spaces through preaching neoliberal prosperity gospel. Subsequently, members are valued based on their ability to regularly attend, serve, and give. Overworked volunteers are commended and valued more for their service and higher money donors have perks and privileges that most members aren't afforded. Volunteerism and tithing, part of a works-based faith, are designated for this buying power. They lure people into investing their energies in consumeristic efforts to affirm their worth before God.

[38] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 59.
[39] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 60.
[40] J.K. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 40, Kindle Edition.
[41] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 23. Kindle Edition.

Interestingly, congregants participate in the capitalistic-oriented megachurch ethos as *Homo economicus* and *Homo liturgicus*. The service, tithing, and other forms of volunteerism are reflections of *Homo liturgicus*. But because of what they provide the church (attendance, giving, service) for its operations and prosperity, and because of what they have been taught to receive from God in return, they are *Homo economicus* (products and producers).

Lastly, the final myth/ideology observed is *corporate and finance-driven globalization is inevitable*. This thinking attempts to convince people that they *must* participate. The megachurch model is so influential that it convinces Christians that this is how church is "done," and there is no legitimate alternative. Neoliberalism, just as Moe-Lobeda describes globalization, is an all-life-consuming ethos. Designed to appear natural. If it is natural, it is less likely to be resisted and alternative models, theologies, and philosophies of ministry will inevitably be marginalized. John McMurtry writes:

> As with other social-value programs, the doctrine of "the global free market itself does not recognize ideology as ideology, but rather perceives of its prescriptions as a form of natural necessity. It is promulgated, indeed, as a 'post-ideological' recognition of law-like truth. Yet, at the same time, any opposition or attempted alternative to this necessary truth is militantly attacked. Ordinary people everywhere are required to make necessary sacrifices to its demands. Miracle economies and future prosperity are then promised to those who compete hardest to win."[42]

The competition, though it is subconscious, is not so much for capital accumulation for one's life, but for accumulating more of God's favor over one's life, which includes acquisition of (eternal) blessings. Regarding this absolutizing social-economic

[42] John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998), 43.

structure, Lee contends, "Neoliberals created a social euphoria."[43] The megachurch mimics this ideology. It brands itself by the way in which it programmatizes and produces this spiritual and social euphoria.

Moe-Lobeda's claim is that these four myths of the free market disable moral agency. She defines moral agency as such:

> Moral agency…is understood as the power to embody active love for creation, including self, others, and non-human, creation. Moral agency suggests the power to orient life around the ongoing well-being of communities and the Earth community, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable. Moral agency is the power to live toward social structures, relationships, policies, and lifestyles that build communities characterized by ecological sustainability and social justice.[44]

Ideological myths constitute the underpinnings and form the foundation for a neoliberal superstructure that has positioned itself as the essential pillar that holds up society. When utilizing them to frame the megachurch model these myths bear undeniable "fruit." They are likened to what is "demonic" (metaphorically speaking) about the megachurch ethos and what needs to be exorcised from its ecclesiology. Although the overlapping traits of the megachurch model and neoliberal globalization as described by Moe-Lobeda are what need to be clearly understood, they make up the ideology that undergird practices—consumerism, individualism, nationalism, and demonization. Each of the ideological categories identified here have been dangerously associated with the megachurch pastor in the US. Adherence compromises the space of belonging and hospitality, causing some to retreat, but it also conditions many congregants to be unable to discern the toxicity of such rhetoric and ideology posing as theology.

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[43] Hak Joon Lee, *The Great World House: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Global Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2011), 153.
[44] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 65.

The Hillsong Experience

The colonialist-capitalist framework can be observed in the ministry philosophy and ethics of Hillsong Church. In March 2022, just days before the premiere of a documentary exposing scandals, misconduct, and corruption in the global phenomenon that is Hillsong Church, its founder and lead pastor Brian Houston resigned.[45] His resignation came two months after he initially stepped down from ministry duties in January 2022.[46] Scandal, misconduct, and corruption are not new vices to the Church. But the prevalence of scandal, misconduct, and corruption in Hillsong and other megachurches raises the question as to whether the megachurch context and ethos, with access and affiliation to political and corporate entities and figures, make leaders more susceptible to scandal, misconduct, and corruption and its congregants more vulnerable to trauma, alienation, exploitation, and disillusionment about God. Hillsong is not an extreme version of the megachurch. Rather, it is the quintessential model for the modern megachurch that has acquired extreme power and prosperity.

The documentary presented historical context to explain the roots of the church before it became a megachurch and before the name change to Hillsong with reporting and testimonies from journalists, authors, and former members and volunteers, all familiar with the inner workings of the church. It went on to reveal the influences that contributed to the ministry philosophy that produces the fruit observed by millions globally. What began as a "warm, friendly family environment…somewhere in the late eighties changed," said former member and author Tanya Levin.[47] It is important to note that those significant influences included the Pentecostal movements and prosperity gospel movement in which during the 1980s, the evangelical movement (an umbrella

[45] Dan Johnstone, executive producer, *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed*, Discovery +, 2022. Accessed March 11, 2022.
[46] The Hill, "Hillsong megachurch founder resigns following misconduct investigation," March 23, 2022, https://news.yahoo.com/hillsong-megachurch-founder-resigns-following-214558871.html?fr=yhssrp_catchall. Accessed March 30, 2022.
[47] Johnstone, *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed,* Ep. 1.

category under which the two movements fall) became much more global and corporate.[48] Hillsong, therefore, was a product of this American megachurch model.

Hillsong emerged as more than a church, but a corporation expanding its reach beyond the mother church location (Sydney, Australia) to "planting" churches all over Australia and eventually around the world. Church growth has a specific meaning in the Hillsong megachurch context. The twin goals of church growth are both geographical (conquering spaces "for the kingdom") and monetary (to fund the system and the expansion). Christian blogger Bruce Herwig was candid in his assessment of Hillsong when he claimed, "The aim of the game is to get the money out of the people…it's just about growth, it's about expansion."[49] The formula for growth and ultimately success is an insidious ethic of monetization. Increased attendance equals increased conversions. Increased conversions equal increased donations, tithes, and offerings.

Another benefit of increased attendance is greater profitability on merchandise from CDs to clothing to music. Often congregants are manipulated (at times guilted and shamed) into giving and their donations are framed to the public as people's *willingness* and *faithfulness* to give. This framing further reinforces the illusion of collective bliss and approval from the people and evidence of a ministry "blessed" by God because of its financial success. The Hillsong formula includes leveraging the success of its music department—the church changed its name to Hillsong to capitalize off the name recognition and branding—to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue.[50]

Church planting or church expansion, as modeled by Hillsong, appears to be less about the spread of the gospel as much as it is about the conquest of spaces even at the expense of smaller churches. If it were about spreading the gospel, then should not the goal be to come alongside churches and Christian organizations

[48] Johnstone, *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed,* Ep. 1.
[49] Johnstone, *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed,* Ep. 1.
[50] Johnstone, *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed,* Ep. 1.

already present in the areas where new megachurch satellites are being planted and resource those existing ministries who are already doing the work of spreading the gospel?

Colonial sensibilities, however, instinctively aim to dominate space and the capitalistic tendencies necessarily create competition.[51] The colonialism/capitalism configuration provides insights for understanding and critiquing the megachurch model and leadership. In this case, with the conflation of the two, the Christian mission is distorted and undermined and co-opted for corporate and potentially political advantages that while foreign to the gospel, have been heretically woven into the fabric of its message.

Megachurch Leadership: Senior Pastor as High Priest

Megachurch leadership stewards the culture of empire—conflation of capitalism and colonialism—experienced within the megachurch structure. Ecclesiology in this space is adapted to facilitate the ethos. Often a pastor's political affiliation and corresponding relationships to political power influence his or her theology and ethics. It is not that pastors in the evangelical space are not political, it is that they are selectively political, speaking to issues that interest their "base" of congregants.

The evangelical tendency to restrict messaging to individual salvation, discipleship, and prosperity through meritocracy undermines the biblical theme of community and prevents an imagination that acknowledges the fullness of the effects of sin on humanity that includes structural and social sins beyond individual sin. The whole of evangelical theology is directed toward God's activities in the life of the individual but fragments the whole of social reality. "Theological cause without [a wholistic understanding of] social political reality is only of interest to a professional religionist [the high priest/megachurch leader]…"[52]

[51] Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), Loc. 192 of 3496, Kindle Edition.

[52] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 5, Kindle Edition.

The senior pastor, functioning as a CEO of the organization, is analogous to the high priest and his role in the life of the Jewish faith community as articulate in the biblical narrative. The ministry of the high priest, as documented in Scripture, is observed in the modern megachurch model and is descriptive of megachurch leadership: (1) in leading the liturgical functions mediating between humanity and the divine, though lacking pastoral initiative,[53] (2) in supervising and prioritizing building church/temple infrastructure, (3) in their intimate relationship with civic/sovereign/political power, and (4) in the built in relational distance between leader and congregants.

For the purposes of this article, the high priest during the Second Temple is the focus of my analysis, though the lineage of the priesthood is traced back to Aaron during the period of the Israelite wilderness experience.

The high priest's primary role in the Israelite community was to *lead the people as mediator between humanity and the divine* in worship of Yahweh. Ezra 3:2 describes Joshua, after returning to Jerusalem after the Israelite exile to Babylon, "with his fellow priests" as building "the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as written in the law of Moses the man of God." Essentially, the high priest was the worship leader. Through his lineage (monarchy and post-exilic eras) or through royal assignment (e.g., during the time of Herod), he was anointed, or appointed, respectively, to the privileged role of high priest to approach God on behalf of the people during times of worship.

Often considered just the preacher of the modern megachurch worship service, the lead pastor is really in charge of the entire worship service (although he or she delegates aspects of the service to others). This is not a criticism as much as it is an observation. The high priest's efforts in leading worship dangerously invites (among the immature congregants) veneration for God with veneration for the person with "holy" access to God as mediator between the divine and humanity. While it is an important part of pastoral ministry, it

[53] Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1.

is the least relational and humanizing of pastoral responsibilities. A sense of hospitality may be a felt experience in the church's liturgy, but community and belonging requires proximity beyond the worship platform.

Because of the inherited anointing (and in later years, appointed role) the high priest holds pseudo-sovereign rule within the context of the community of worshippers.[54] In response to the exercise of this kind of power and influence, the people feel as though they must participate uncritically in the liturgy while adhering to the doctrines that underscore. Jewish worshippers did not want to find themselves outside of God's grace. The appearance of this kind of power disciplines buy-in among the people.

To draw upon Michel Foucault, there are two kinds of power at play inherent to the person and function of the high priest: sovereign power and disciplinary power. Although the concept of power is omnipresent in social relations, sovereign power, according to Foucault is power concentrated in one person who has the right to punish—to take life or to let one live.[55] Of course, this sovereignty was not his alone, he was merely a representative of the sovereign God. The high priest acknowledged and determined (according to the law) if a person could be in fellowship with the community or not, in other words, if they were clean or unclean. His authority was (pseudo)sovereign since other than the king, members of the congregation were deterred by the law and norms not to challenge.

Disciplinary power of the high priest also can be observed in the worship community. A Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power is an ideal complement to the American individualism that has permeated Christian theology (personal faith, responsibility, and discipleship). With disciplinary power "we are never dealing with a mass, with a group, or even, to tell the truth, with a

[54] I used pseudo-sovereign to describe the power held by the high priest is always shared with the king. However, within the worship community, as the mediator between God and humanity, he holds a kind of sovereign power.
[55] Michel Foucault, translated by Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 48, Kindle Edition.

multiplicity: we are only dealing with individuals."[56] "Disciplinary power 'makes' individuals….[it] produces individuals as its objects, objectives, and instruments."[57]

Not only can the high priest potentially manipulate liturgy and Scripture to discipline congregants, but he can do so to the degree that they begin to internalize the practices and doctrines, and discipline practice upon them becomes self-discipline. This is typically achieved through hierarchical observation (the Panopticon) that "induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power…surveillance is permanent in its effects."[58] Instead of the all-seeing eye inside the Panopticon structure of a prison yard, an all-seeing God is watching to be sure one serves, tithes, does not view pornography, etc.

Megachurch pastor Creflo Dollar recently admitted his teachings on tithing were wrong.[59] While he is not responsible for the actions of other clergy, his stature in the church lends credibility to the disciplining doctrine that many have come to embrace and live by. One pastor reinforces this messaging so much that he refused to officiate the funeral service of a member because she had not been current on her tithing.[60] The question is not whether this is right, but to what degree this negatively affects and further disciplines other members who would desire to remain in the good graces of the pastor and be able to obtain his services when needed.

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[56] Marcelo Hoffman, "Disciplinary Power," in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* ed. by Dianna Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2014), 27, Kindle Edition. See Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-1974*, J. Lagrange (ed.), G. Burchell (trans.) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 75.

[57] Hoffman, "Disciplinary Power," in *Michel Foucault*, 28, Kindle Edition. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 170.

[58] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200, Kindle Edition.

[59] Leonardo Blair, Christian Post, "Televangelist Creflo Dollar says teachings on tithing "not correct', but won't apologize to followers," July 5, 2022, https://www.christianpost.com/news/televangelist-creflo-dollar-says-tithing-teachings-not-correct.html?clickType=link-topbar-news. Accessed July 6, 2022.

[60] Blair, Christian Post, "Televangelist Creflo Dollar says teachings on tithing "not correct', but won't apologize to followers."

Beyond the altar, "the temple-building efforts were placed under priestly supervision."[61] The high priest is assigned the role of *supervising and prioritizing building the infrastructure*. The "building project" is afforded primacy in the high priest leadership model. The sanctuary as the location where Divine presence resides or visits is of utmost priority. In fact, "the first task facing Joshua and other leaders upon arriving at Jerusalem was to build a temple where sacrificial worship of Israel's God could resume."[62] What is problematic is that, while this may have been the belief for ancient Israelites, God's presence cannot be confined to a structure. Perpetuating this theology then assigns special and exclusive status to the building/campus and the leader who has specific access to God as a guardian of the building. What is problematic about this aspect of the high priest ministry is the potential for commodifying and exploiting the people for the sake of building, expanding, or beautifying the worship facilities. A congregant's value is directly associated with their willingness and capacity to contribute to funds and services that construct or maintain facilities. One's humanity is forfeited as it is viewed through a capitalistic lens.

The high priest held just such an important position within the ancient Jewish faith community. "The high priest appears to have assumed an expanded role under these circumstances. …He not only had responsibility for supervising construction of the temple (compare Ezra 3:9), but he also undertook some judicial duties that had once been the prerogative of the king."[63] Zechariah identified the twin collaborative powerbrokers of the priest (Joshua) and the king (Zerubbabel) as the "sons of the oil (4:9)."[64] His position and eventual responsibilities were inextricably tied to royal and political power. "With the loss of kingship, the high priest became an important political figure in his own right, the recognized head of the people in the eyes of foreign rulers."[65] By the first century CE,

[61] Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests*, 20.
[62] James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priest After the* Exile (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 1.
[63] VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas,* 23.
[64] VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas,* 36-37.
[65] Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests,* 7.

high priests were appointed by the king rather than by the means of what was commonly understood to be by inheritance through priestly lineage.[66]

One by-product of the megachurch senior leaders is his or her access to cultural and political power. Often the megachurch pastor is assigned celebrity status by congregants and followers outside their church community. His or her stature attracts the attention, formal "partnerships," and informal relationships of political, corporate, and celebrity figures. Before long, the interests of these figures and the entities they may represent intersect with and influence the talking points of theology and the practices in the liturgy of the megachurch leader.

As is the case of Hillsong, sermons avoid controversial topics to take on the role of comforting the majority group and those who donate the largest sum of money. This universal messaging is often at the expense of already marginalized groups within the church who desire to have their concerns addressed; this may indicate feeling seen and cared for by the pastor. Miroslav Volf identifies the universalist approach that many megachurches have adopted as part of their ecclesiology to appeal to a diverse assembly without offending any group in particular.

The universalist approach says, "We should control the unchecked proliferation of differences, and support the spread of universal values—religious values or Enlightenment values—which alone can guarantee the peaceful co-existence of people; affirmation of differences without common values will lead to chaos and war rather than to rich and fruitful diversity."[67] This megachurch practice does not foster a sense of belonging for those perceived "others" who enter a homogenous space.[68]

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[66] Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests*, 5.

[67] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace:* 20, Kindle Edition.

[68] Burns, 24/7 Wall St., "25 Largest Churches in America," Burns writes that the majority of megachurches in the US are led by White leadership, and the white experience assumes the role of the universal human experience, universality generally appeases White congregants and protects their comfort, while marginalizing the particularities of other groups of worshipers.

The high priest had restrictions with whom he was allowed to have close interaction. He could not touch anyone or anything that was considered unclean. "If a leper ventured into the sanctuary and a priest came in contact with them, or if he was unclean for any other reason, when discovered, he had to be taken out and killed."[69] This mandate creates a physical and a psychological buffer around the high priest preventing contact with those who are diseased, women after childbirth, or women at the time of menstruation. A high priest leadership model maintains distance between the priest and "sinners" that constitute the congregation. High priest leadership withdraws and delegates the intimate interaction of pastoral care to pastors and leaders lower in the hierarchy.

High priest ministry, heavily influenced by power in the form of monetary and political sources of power, strives to perpetuate religious institutions that depend upon population (and thus financial) growth and uncontroversial messaging that appeases power. *Prophetic ministry is the alternative leadership* that offers a potential space of belonging for those already on the margins of both the broader society and that specific church community. Walter Brueggemann defines this prophetic ministry as "the task… to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[70] The language that Brueggemann uses—"nurture," "nourish," and "evoke a consciousness"—is antithetical to the language of empire inherent to the megachurch model. It is language that invites critical and expansive thinking, nondominant perspectives to deepen theology and ethics of the church, and a type of political voice/theology that is inclusive of the vulnerable ("the least of these"). It is this prophetic quality that the organic intellectual offers to the church.

[69] Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 61.
[70] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2, Kindle Edition.

Alternative Leadership of Organic Intellectuals

Whether a megachurch (or midsize and small churches with megachurch aspirations) continues to function according to its colonialist and capitalist ethos or attempts to change course is contingent upon the leadership's agenda. Leadership in the church prizes the entity/empire he or she has built or one that is willing to sacrifice all that he or she has built for the sake of the community they serve, fostering a space of belonging. Leadership in the church also thrives in the hierarchical structure that creates distance between pastor and congregant, and leadership flattens the hierarchy and immerses themselves among the people. The latter does so because they are *of* the people by birth or by choice. The latter distinguishes the leadership of the organic intellectual from the customary megachurch CEO-like leadership style.

Organic intellectual is a term coined by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci who found it problematic that the "intellectuals" of middle-class society were detached from the working class, thus weakening revolutionary socialism.[71] The reason why the organic intellectual as a leadership style is relevant is because she or he embodies solidarity with the people and instinctively disrupts the kind of theological hegemony, manipulation, and often oppressive and abusive modes of power observed in megachurch leadership.

Cornel West, in his analysis of Martin Luther King Jr. as "the most significant and successful organic *intellectual* in American history," identifies the organic intellectual as one who "links the life of the mind to social change."[72] Essentially, organic intellectuals are associated with movements that bring about transformation within societies negotiating on behalf of the working class, the category of people who make up a portion of the congregants. This is only satisfied by being aligned with the working class, seeing them, hearing them, knowing them, and connecting the gospel to the issues that affect their lives in all their particularities beyond universal, abstract messages.

[71] Steve Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 83.

[72] Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis of American Religion and American* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 3.

Organic intellectual leadership emerges as the anti-hegemonic witness among those who discern an incompatibility between the liturgical colonialism and capitalistic sensibilities of the megachurch and that of the church Jesus inaugurated. "They must be willing to participate in the struggle for hegemony…. Whereas previous intellectuals relied on their sophistication and eloquence, the organic intellectual must actively participate in practical life, 'as constructor, organizer, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator.'"[73]

Applied to pastoral leadership, it is more than inspirational preaching or casting a "kingdom" vision through biblical teaching, but it is being present to feel and share the burden of the people. It is leadership that prizes the people over the profitability of the organization/empire. This is the witness of Foucault's pastoral power that Jennings brings to the forefront when he asserts, "It is a form of power that looks after not just the whole community but each individual in particular, during his entire life."[74] The pastoral power of organic intellectuals does not sacrifice the communal for the individual but holds them in tension.

The organic intellectual engages in postcolonializing activities, according to Emmanuel Y. Lartey. He describes postcolonializing activities as such:

> [A]ctivities [that] betray an interested commitment to involvement with the issues and subjects affected by oppressive colonizing actions, and are engaged in with the express intention of seeking transformed existence for all…[they] are deeply interactional and intersubjective. They emphasize the social and global nature of phenomena and encourage approaches to subjects that engage interactively with all people's experience in the discourse on any subject….

[73] Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 85.
[74] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, Loc. 2410 of 8980, Kindle Edition.

> Relationality is valued especially when it is set within an ethical framework of equality and respect.[75]

Lartey describes the essence of the organic intellectual as an agent of postcolonializing work. This is the intentionality required for nurturing belonging. However, postcolonializing praxis may exact a high price, for it requires current megachurch leadership to be willing to undermine the success of what they have already built.

Organic intellectual and postcolonializing work may come from outside of the evangelical megachurch structure. It takes alternative leadership (in style and in personnel) to offer alternative, decolonialized liturgical spaces. It is, in fact, the model of Jesus as the alternative leader to the power structures of Jewish leadership of his day. Yet, the organic intellectual may also emerge out of the megachurch context itself. The individual(s) who sits uncomfortably among the megachurch community troubled by the doctrines, practices, and maybe even their own (and their neighbor's) invisibility, can be moved to critique and resist the church's status quo.

Organic intellectuals, by nature and passion, are incompatible with the megachurch ethos. She or he must be willing to seek, nurture, and occupy spaces not taken up by the colonialist/capitalist intersectionality. Fred Moten, in *The Undercommons*, expounds upon Franz Fanon's critique of colonialism by asserting Fanon "wants not the end of colonialism but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense. In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism."[76] In other words, the organic intellectual embodies the "other" in terms

[75] Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Postcolonializing God: New Perspectives on Pastoral and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), Loc. 221 of 3036, Kindle Edition.

[76] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), 5, Kindle Edition.

of lived reality, ideology, worldview, and teleology or vision of what the community ought to become.

Organic intellectuals see bodies rather than count bodies. They honor bodies rather than appropriate bodies. This means that relief for the poor, however, is not just in charity, but it necessarily includes the work of justice and equity advocacy to alter the conditions that cause many to become and live in poverty in the first place (this is the focus and priority that the evangelical megachurch lacks).

Organic intellectuals are like what Moten identifies as "subversive intellectuals." In Moten's thought, those intellectuals are "neither trying to extend the [institution] nor change the [institution]…she wants to be in the world, in the world with others and making the world anew."[77] What distinguishes the organic/subversive intellectual is *location*. He or she is rooted in a location that allows them to feel the lives (suffering and joy) of those seeking to belong. He or she joins them in their fugitivity, that is, their state of exodus from colonialism and capitalism's collaborative ethos that dehumanizes, marginalizes, and forgets their bodies.

The organic/subversive intellectual may arise from the megachurch context, but she or he cannot remain there. Organic/subversive intellectual's path in the modern institution is "to abuse [church's] hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of."[78] This mission will necessarily force the organic/subversive intellectual to spaces outside of the megachurch context to curate an alternative space of belonging and discipleship that the megachurch, by design, cannot (or at least is severely limited) produce.

Brueggemann locates the prophetic (subversive) ministry within the ministry of Moses. Prophecy, he claims, "comes from the covenantal tradition of Moses,"[79] not the high priest. Moses re-entered Egypt, confronting Pharoah, from the outside and had a vision for the people of God to break the Egyptian boundaries

[77] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 6, Kindle Edition.
[78] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 12, Kindle Edition.
[79] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 5, Kindle Edition.

(power structures) toward an alternative life outside of those structures. His initial instructions from Yahweh were so that the people could worship him (Exodus 3:12).

The organic intellectual must subvert the ideological framework of the megachurch that prioritizes the institution—its organizational hierarchy, facilities, and even attractiveness—to prize the people. In practical terms, the organic/subversive intellectual cannot and must not perpetuate the inclination to ceaseless "economize…all *for the glory of God*."[80] This is the work of decoloniality. According to Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, decoloniality has 500 years of history and "has been a component part of (trans)local struggles, movements, and actions to resist and refuse the legacies and ongoing relations of power established by external and internal colonialism."[81] While it is a disorienting force to the megachurch, it is reorienting for those who are from the margins in some way (race, gender, sexual orientation, differently abled, etc.). "Rather than resistance, there is the work of "'re-existence'…'the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity.'"[82] Belonging invites re-existence beyond being a commodified body (in service, in number for attendance records, symbol of tithing figure). The organic intellectual offers decolonizing, subversive, prophetic ministry that disrupts colonialistic-capitalistic sensibilities and reorients the people toward a more just, equitable, compassionate, and inclusive alternative for community.

What does that alternative "Church" look like today? Is it individual families being the Church at home in prayer, worship, encouragement, and play? Is it a group of families deciding to be the Church in their community, building relationships of edification and accountability, hope and strength? Might it be small gatherings in the traditional building where people's faces

[80] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons,* Loc. 1198 of 3496, Kindle Edition.
[81] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 15, Kindle Edition.
[82] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 3, Kindle Edition. See Adolo Albán Achinte, "Interculturalidad sin decolonialidad? Colonialidades circulantes y practices de re-existencia," in Diversidad, interculturalidad y construcción de ciudad, ed. Wilmer Villa and Arturo Grueso (Bogotá: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional/Alcaldía Mayor, 2008), 85-86.

and names are known, where they are welcomed on Sundays they attend and where they are noticed and missed when they do not?

Could the church look radically different like a group of runners, bikers, hikers who gather weekly for their own unique liturgy in the most unexpected places? Or is it a social justice movement ignited by an instance or perpetuated injustice of a person or a group of people, but one that is sustained by the fire of the Holy Spirit to get justice while not neglecting the formation of a new humanity into a beloved community?

Leaders who organically emerge from their location and communities must not allow the community to become bloated with success (for the sake of reputation and influence) and bodies (for the sake of attendance and funding). Intentionality in mentoring and preparing other leaders to shepherd a group as it splinters off once the church reaches a certain predetermined size (e.g., 200 or 300 members/weekly attenders). In this way, the church continues to grow and multiply, without becoming too large for a group of pastors to effectively shepherd them.

Of course, this is a very idealistic approach as any group is susceptible to divisions among leaders and forming factions among them (even the early church could not avoid this according to 1 Corinthians 1). These intentionally smaller churches inherit the DNA of the organic/subversive intellectuals who are not prone to be beholden to the responsibilities of maintaining the enormous size of the megachurch and all that that implies. It is reminiscent of the community organizing, building, training, and resourcing that Jesus demonstrated as a grass roots alternative to the religious establishment led by the Pharisees and the high priest of his day.

Conclusion

There is no perfect Church, nor is there a perfect church leader. Thousands of people gathering to hear the gospel message is not a failed attempt at being the church. Obviously, there is biblical precedence for such events. However, building a ministry model to sustain the event week in and week out is a distorted view of what the church is ordained to be. Amid the production, the pace, corporate atmosphere, and the marketing strategies, what is too

often lost is intimacy, being seen, known, and heard. While the evangelistic message of the gospel may be reaching the masses, belonging is elusive for many among the masses. Colonialism and capitalism fostering the ethics of dominance and commercialization, respectively, facilitate a space within the megachurch orbit for the violence of alienation and assimilation that is more hostile than hospitable. The leadership style and mission of the organic intellectual is the antithesis of the current evangelical megachurch leadership and is needed to shift the trajectory of the Church to becoming more of place of belonging than one of invisibility.

Organic intellectuals are formed from the margins and by the marginalized. There is doctrine and ethics that emerge from the people who perpetually navigate social suffering. He or she understands in his or her body what is necessary to experience a sense of belonging as well as a theology integrated into a social theory that is liberating and equitable and drawn the wisdom and love of God.

It is not to say that the organic intellectual could not be seduced by the trappings of potential megachurch power and prosperity. It is to say that the organic intellectual, by nature and by formation, tends to be true to the people and the prophetic, subversive ministry that addresses the root causes of injustice and social inequities and the needs of the people. Once this is no longer true, he or she ceases to be an organic intellectual. Even Jesus spoke to thousands yet invested most of his time in the few.

The organic intellectual must provide spaces of worship and community outside of the megachurch context. The megachurch and the organic/subversive intellectual are incompatible forces. Belonging will and must occur outside those walls of the "mega" institution.

DEVELOPING YOUNG ADULT LEADERS FOR THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

EMILY A. DYKMAN

Abstract

Franciscan CORE Youth Theology Institute at Viterbo University, La Crosse, Wisconsin, offers a space to increase awareness of social justice issues with the purpose of developing empathy, especially toward the marginalized and vulnerable. Franciscan Compassion, Outreach, Reflection, Experience (CORE) is part of a larger movement of institutes, funded by a Lilly Endowment grant, that seek to empower a generation of leaders firmly grounded in faith traditions, but creative in their solutions to the brokenness of the world. This paper will suggest new ways of naming church and insights gained through intentional leadership formation and theological reflection practices with youth ages 16-22 with a particular focus on developing identity, belonging, and purpose.

Introduction

Franciscan CORE summer youth theology institute is a five-day summer service opportunity in June offering education, experience, and reflection that grounds young people in the Catholic tradition to be leaders for the church and the world. During a week-long gathering, 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students are exposed to themes of Catholic Social Teaching such as human dignity, solidarity, and care for creation as well as important episodes in the life of St. Francis of Assisi that formed his sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. A Lilly Endowment Youth Theology Network grant allowed Viterbo University to launch the institute in 2017.

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What do we need to do to raise a generation of youth to be leaders for the church and for the world? Several insights have emerged from our experiences with Franciscan CORE but none more important than this realization: In many instances, these young people have been searching for a place to belong within their established traditions but often have been considered "not-quite" or "second-tier" leaders. I found that these teens are inspired and ready to be empowered, to use their creativity and thoughtful experiences to work for the sake of the Kingdom. Unfortunately, it is not always the case that their church communities have recognized that readiness. Often, we restrict young people, mistakenly thinking they could not want to be involved in the mundane work of the church, and we do not usually take the time to invite them and then listen deeply to their experience. We are quick to assume a lack of preparation or a lack of understanding.

Surprisingly, Franciscan CORE has been what can be described as church-building for young people. Many teenagers already are deeply engaged in leadership in many other areas of their lives and are not only ready but interested in being engaged by the church. CORE has provided a community and a process to discover and experiment with their capacity for church participation and leadership. Based on our experience, I believe we need to change our language about leadership to better connect with youth of our church. Franciscan CORE helps us reconstruct leadership language in important ways.

Themes: Identity, Belonging, and Purpose

One of the key resources that informed my work with youth emerged from the work of the Fuller Youth Institute. The institute is a branch of Fuller Theological Seminary, which has been engaged in the work of creating tools for those working to equip young leaders. One project was *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager.* In this book, authors Powell and Griffin methodically guide the reader to understand the importance of forming conversations around Identity, Belonging, and Purpose. It is their work that informed my own reflection on the Franciscan CORE institute. Their definitions of identity, belonging, and purpose are simple but

profoundly important: "Identity is our view of ourselves, Belonging is our connection with others, and Purpose is our contribution to the world."[1]

Powell and Griffin define identity as one's view of oneself.[2] That seems like a simple concept; however, identity is quite complex. At one time, a youth may be attempting to navigate identity through five or six different cultural labels, all of which are valid and intertwined. The goal in working through questions of identity with youth is not to unravel the multiple identities to choose only one, but to help the young person recognize the connections, embrace the complexity, and begin to work toward some harmony while also developing some comfort with the tension that might exist.

The difficult questions of identity need to be met with grace, vulnerability, and nonjudgement. An important facet of the Roman Catholic tradition is to draw together seemingly conflicting ideas and allow the tension between them to exist, assisting in the negotiation of reality. This tension, though often difficult to maintain, is a necessary component of the discernment. Throughout the tradition one finds regular reference to the idea of maintaining both/and rather than determining either/or. The process of claiming identity is more than meeting young people where they are and includes a need to introduce discernment as a practice in uncovering components of a young person's identity that they may not yet have noticed.

Jeremy Paul Myers asserts that identity is always forming and shifting, but no one is ever without a sense of identity.[3] He argues, and I would agree, that it is important that we recognize youth as fully human, fully capable of being given leadership opportunities even if they are still in need of further development…because aren't we all? Myers suggests an approach to identity that is more about awareness than a search. He writes, "The challenge for young

[1] Kara Powell and Brad Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 35.
[2] Powell and Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager,* 35.
[3] Jeremy Paul Myers, *Liberating Youth from Adolescence,* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 90.

people is not to go find who they are but to discover and trust who they have always been."[4]

We discover identity through relationships that serve as mirrors to better understand what is being revealed. Identity discovery, rather than formation, is vital in offering all people a pathway toward belonging and purpose. Formation implies the development of something that may not have been present while discovery focuses first on what is already present, though possibly underdeveloped in the individual.

Belonging is a key connector between identity and purpose. Springtide Research, led by Josh Packard, defines belongingness as "the state or feeling of connectedness that arises when seen, known, and accepted by others."[5] Packard's definition makes clear the connection between identity and belonging. Identity involves the development of self-understanding. Belonging begins with that self-understanding being recognized and affirmed by others. As noted previously, though, identity can be complicated and complex in its multifaceted nature. The tension that exists among various facets of identity can often become a detriment to one's sense of belonging. However, one way to remedy the tension or at least resolve some of it is through storytelling. The practice of storytelling, which requires vulnerability, becomes a method with which to make sense of how one's identity fits within a larger narrative. Storytelling also allows one to imagine commonalities with others that might not be readily apparent without the sharing another's narrative.

In his work with Springtide Research, Josh Packard notes that the process of belonging carries with it a need to be noticed, named, and known. Many teens do not see church as a place they belong to. They feel church is a community that their parents or grandparents belong to, but they are only simply present. If we take the belonging process seriously, it requires us, as church, to be intentional about noticing, naming, and knowing our young people. Belonging requires building relationships. It cannot fall

[4] Myers, *Liberating Youth from Adolescence,* 24.
[5] Josh Packard, et. al., *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation,* (Bloomington, MN, 2020), 7.

upon a few within the church to take on this responsibility, but it must be the work of the church as a whole. Packard and his research team study young people (ages 13-25) to understand and honor their experience of community, identity, and meaning. Their findings are encouraging and frightening. What most is troubling is that attending religious gatherings makes little difference in a sense of belonging for young people. This seems to be supported by my own conversations with young people about the experience of belonging.

Purpose is defined as how one recognizes their contribution to the world.[6] The recognition of purpose often is accompanied by intentional discernment processes, but the reality is that this component of equipping young leaders relies deeply on a focus and attention to identity and belonging. One's sense of purpose must be grounded in identity and belonging. In the past, many churches spent great amounts of energy focused on assisting the discovery of purpose, but assuming that identity had already been discovered and belonging was taken for granted. As noted earlier, today's young people are less likely to name church as a place of belonging.

Focusing attention on purpose without the intentional work being done to assist youth in the development needed to understand identity and belonging results in many young people locating their sense of belonging outside the church with missed opportunities to utilize their passion on behalf of the church. Intentional, careful discernment often has been overlooked and instead it is assumed that the church exists as it has always existed in people's lives. This had led to surprise in many congregations when young people prioritize other activities ahead of participation in their faith community. The church needs to be intentional about the cultural space it occupies, especially among young people. The unconventional context of CORE affords an opportunity to be as intentional about every aspect of our community as we are able.

[6] Powell and Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager,* 35.

Theoretical Frameworks

A key theorist of culture, Edgar Schein discusses the ways symbols, artifacts, and rituals defined groups.[7] The theory proposed by Schein and applied to this discussion recognizes that church communities no longer hold the assumed cultural space they held in the past. As a place of meaning making, the church has been replaced by other organizations in many cases. What had in previous generations been the sole locus of discerning values, justice, and morality, is now one of many. This reality requires churches to consider a change in cultural norm, not as an attempt to be attractional, but because past methods are no longer as compelling. It can become problematic when the meaning of cultural symbols and norms are not maintained but assumed. We live in an age when espoused practices are often questioned and many churches have not articulated well relevant meaning.

Forming culture happens with or without the intentional work of leaders. Over the past two years, we experienced significant change in cultural norms, but many of the changes occurred with little or no choice. Change theory offers a way of understanding those changes that are thrust upon a community as well as those that a community chooses to step toward. Cultural change does not have to be a movement away from current practice but could also be a more authentic reengagement of tradition rooted in better understanding of the existing culture. I would argue that this is the success of the YTN programs. Faith in young people is being engaged by offering a space to dig into belief and behavior in a way that is meant to be analytical rather than prescriptive. By making sense of the traditions and culture in which one is embedded, one is afforded an opportunity, then, to choose an engagement.

A final theoretical frame that grounds this research is related to leadership. Peter Northouse defines leadership as a *process of influence*.[8] Use of this definition opens the possibility for leadership to be mentored and developed over time. Rather than young

[7] Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership,* 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

[8] Peter Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice,* 6th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013).

people being lesser leaders, they are leaders who are developing and learning through direct experience. Servant Leadership is a model for leadership that seeks to shift the locus of power and authority within a system. The values inherent within the model result in a system that has the potential to refocus power and authority from positional to personal. When this model of leadership is linked with Christian values, one might utilize the gospel message of love as the source of one's relational connection. At all levels of the organization, love of others becomes the motivation for decision-making and action. One does not need to have specific positional power to act on the gospel mandate to love.

Throughout these theoretical frames, relationship has emerged as a common theme. This is a grounding principle that is inherently present in the work of the church and finds its roots in the Christian assertion of a relational God. Catherine Mowry LaCugna writes of Trinity in this way: "The point of Trinitarian theology is to convey that it is the essence or heart of God to be in relationship to other persons; that there is no room for division or inequality or hierarchy in God."[9] This inclusivity of the Trinity takes form in our human relationships as well. At its best, the recognition of the *imago Dei* becomes a starting point for inclusion and relationship. This vision of communion is a reminder of God's intent for humanity to be in relationship.

Expanding on this starting point, a theology of covenant defines the nature of relationships present throughout salvation history. The covenant God forms with God's people is one that carries an obligation of those within to be a blessing to the world through acts of justice and prayer. This obligation, which takes form in human relationships, is chronicled throughout scripture and is often a story of near misses. We read of a human community that strives to keep the covenant with God, but often is wrapped in power, wealth, greed, and brokenness. Salvation history reminds us, though, that God maintains the covenant, God continues to love humanity, despite its brokenness and sinfulness. Striving to

[9] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective,* 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 106.

perfect relationships, to love fully as modeled by Christ, becomes the heart and root of vocation for the Christian.

The biblical narrative offers us many examples of the way in which identity and purpose emerge as a by-product of God's call, often in an incomplete or uncertain form. When we consider the story of Moses, Joshua, or any of the prophets, we find individuals whose response to God's call is a recognition of overwhelm, a sense of unpreparedness, and doubting that one can do what God expects.

This call and honoring the unprepared seems to challenge the very model that often is applied to adolescents. In *Liberating Youth from Adolescence*, Myers notes that we often presume the incomplete or unprepared nature of the developing young person equates with a lack of something.[10] Using biblical stories as a starting point, God provides for each one called all that was needed to fill the gaps. Moses was given a spokesperson in Aaron, Joshua was offered years of mentoring by Moses, the prophets were filled with a spirit that gave them courage to take the risk of speaking truth. Our assumption that young people are not ready to lead is quite short-sighted.

The work of Franciscan CORE has, from its beginning, sought to engage pilgrims[11] and mentors in the work of identity, belonging and purpose. We were convinced that offering teens a better grounding and understanding of why it is imperative for Christians to serve and the values that are embedded in that service, their commitment would become even stronger. We know that many are engaged in service because they enjoy it, or they think it is expected of them, or to fulfill a requirement for school or church. However, we wanted them to have a theological grounding that would embed the value of service in such a way that it became a virtue or habit, a part of their identity or something inherent in the way that they look at the world around them.

[10] Myers, *Liberating Youth from Adolescence*, 12.

[11] Our use of this title is to designate our participants as those engaged on a spiritual journey that continues when they leave our space.

St. Francis of Assisi[12] lived 1182-1226 when the feudal system was falling, a merchant class began to rise, and there was a stark division between the haves and have-nots. Culture, in general, was focused on amassing wealth and influence. Francis was the son of a cloth merchant who was rising quickly in power within the city of Assisi. What history has taught us, though, is that this wealth was typically amassed on the backs of the poor. Standard economic practice was to devalue coins when paying so that the poor would remain poor, but the merchant class continued to rise.[13]

Added to this economic system was a constant presence of war. In his late teens, Francis longed to join with the other young men in Assisi to fight against neighboring Perugia. He saw the role of knight as one that allowed him to practice chivalry and prove his merit to the community. His father used his position of power and his wealth to outfit Francis for war. His first opportunity to fight found Francis captured and imprisoned by the knights of Perugia, but not without first watching his childhood friend killed on the battlefield next to him. This experience led to the beginning of a period of conversion for Francis in which he became starkly aware of the pain and suffering of the poor, but also began to question the path that had been set before him by his father, a path of wealth, prosperity, and power. Over the next few years, Francis began to relinquish his place, publicly disowning his father and all that his family could offer him and leaving the protection of the city of Assisi to live a life of service to the poor and outcasts.

[12] Why St. Francis? First, it is important to note that Francis is not meant to replace Christ as a model. Instead, we recognize in the story of Francis a struggle to name and claim identity, belonging, and purpose in someone who, though alive 800 years ago, lived a life very similar to many young people. The story of Francis makes clear that he was committed to Gospel-living even when he was uncertain what that meant for the ways that he engaged with the world around him.

[13] It was common for those with wealth to remove the precious metal from coins and pay their workers with the less precious metal thereby keeping them in a situation in which their money was always worth less. This built up an economic system in which the poor, though capable of making some income, could never able to amass enough the join the merchant class.

An important moment in the life of Francis took place in the Church of San Damiano, outside the walls of the city, when during a time of intense prayer, he heard the image of Jesus painted upon the Byzantine cross speak to him "Go, Francis, and rebuild my church." This iconic moment led Francis to do what God called him to do: he went out and began to physically rebuild the churches that were falling apart. As time went on, he began to realize that God was calling him to something else.

The rebuilding was about a change in spirituality, not about buildings. Other men in Assisi and the surrounding region heard about the life that Francis was living and wanted to join him. He was seeking a way of life that was profoundly different from the communal life of the monastics that preceded him. Francis struggled to fully understand his call, but intentionally chose to act as he understood God to be urging him. He began with physical labor and service to others but realized in time that the call was to a deeper spirituality. It was a call to relationship, reform, and change.

The life of St. Francis of Assisi becomes a model with which pilgrims can begin to learn a process of making sense of one's identity, belonging, and purpose. The themes of Catholic Social Teaching are a starting point for getting at this, especially the focus on human dignity. One of the first lessons experienced by the pilgrims involved a scripture study of Genesis 1 and 2. While most of the pilgrims are familiar with the accounts of creation, few have been given a space to ask deeper questions about the accounts.

We work with the young people in breaking open the Genesis creation accounts, particularly focusing on humanity as *imago Dei*, the image of God. This theological assertion, simple as it may seem, is a key turn for young people. It is applied not only to the other, but also to self. As *imago Dei* the young person is encouraged to claim their identity here and now as a vision of God's identity. As this vision is honed and brought to clearer focus, they are encouraged to notice the divine in the other as well.

The Program of Franciscan CORE

The aim of Franciscan CORE is to give young people the tools and capacity to begin to engage in their life of faith on a more

consistent basis, to become leaders who are formed and motivated by their tradition and scripture stories that ground it. We work with young people to see the value of listening and relationship building in their leadership and forming of community. In the gospel accounts, Jesus noticed and acknowledged the outsider and in so doing brought them into the community, into some sense of belonging. This same noticing is needed within our communities. When we notice the other, it is not with the intention of fixing or changing, but simply acknowledging their presence as valued. To notice is to see and to listen.

In evaluations of the institute, pilgrims often point to active service in the community as an important part of their experience. For many, this service is nothing new, but they have developed a new way of understanding the why of their experience. Each day of the institute, the pilgrims engage in service after which they are invited to reflect on that experience in light of their learning. One aspect of the service in which the pilgrims engage is their ability to build relationship with those with whom they are engaged in service.

The relationship needed for these experiences is grounded in the extension of hospitality. Feeling or sensing welcome encourages one to share oneself within a community. Belonging emerges when the identity one shares is "noticed, named, and known."[14] Acknowledgment by another brings along a valuing of the identity and encouragement to continue sharing within the community. This is more than an encouragement to use one's gift within the community. It is a valuing of the person for who they are, not solely what they do.

What I am discovering in working with these young people is applicable to all populations within the church and outside the church. Questions of faith appear in every stage, likely with different levels of responses. What is often absent, though, is an age-appropriate space in which to puzzle through these questions. In many church communities, the formation of faith has been

[14] Packard, *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation,* 35.

taken on primarily by volunteers, those passionate about their own faith, but often unprepared or with limited formation themselves.

In my own experience within the Catholic tradition, there are many individuals who can teach the catechism, but when faced with questions or an interest in understanding the "why" behind these beliefs, are unwilling to address difficult questions out of one's own discomfort with the topic. When one can address a difficult question, especially when the answer is, "I don't know…", a hospitable space opens up to the complexities of faith.

In Springtide Research's 2020 report, *Meaning Making: 8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generations*, the authors clarify the reality that, in general, people are imagining life in a way that moves beyond traditional institutions that have organized life in the past. People of all generations, and especially young people, more intentionally seek an integrated life and think about their engagement in community in ways that blur traditional lines. Springtide's work notes that eight specific values were thematically present in the interview conducted when young people were asked to discuss their engagement with organizations, including the church. Interviewees talked about the importance of organizations being *accountable, inclusive, authentic, welcoming, impactful, relational, growthful, and meaningful.*[15]

Reflection on the definitions of these values and their presence within the church draws into awareness that the value of being impactful, relational, and meaningful are present within the church in an almost natural form. These are values that are inherent in what the church is and how the church structures itself. However, as I read more about the importance of organizations being accountable, inclusive, authentic, growthful and welcoming, I recognize that these are contingent on the focus and motivation of the community itself. They require active engagement within the community to show these values enacted.

Regardless of age, these are areas most important for the church as it stakes its claim within the culture again but they are also the

[15] Josh Packard, et. al., *Meaning Making: 8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generation,* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research, 2020), 8.

most problematic and difficult to enact. Our challenge as a church is to be intentional about the values noted above when attempting to engage young people within the faith community.

Franciscan CORE, and programs like it, strives to enact church outside of the larger Catholic institution that seems to be caught up in its own self-preservation. In the Roman Catholic Church conversations about priest shortages tend to dominate conversations. At the same time, more and more use of the language of discipleship is popping throughout the Catholic landscape. Theologically, the grammar of discipleship is such that responsibility and leadership is located within the laity as forms of their direct and necessary participation.

Laity-focused discipleship, however, requires a shift away from a preoccupation with clergy and the dwindling number of ordinations within Roman Catholicism. Unfortunately, the language of laity-focused discipleship is unfamiliar at best and often quite frightening at all levels of church hierarchy. The effort to disseminate responsibility for following Christ throughout the laity is a major culture and structural change in ecclesiology. The culture of the church has been primarily that of producer/consumer. The church is where we go to get the product that we need to consume.

What's needed is a church that we enter knowing we have a role or a task that is not optional, but necessary for the church to continue to exist. This is what the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church attempted to promote but has not yet been fully engaged: "full, conscious, and active participation."[16] Ecclesiology was articulated by the council as the liturgical work of the entire community, and youth and young adults must be included in that church-constituting community.

When we assume that our church and our faith are no longer relevant to younger generations, we are in fact selling them short and depriving young people of the wisdom and spiritual meaning they so desperately need and deserve. Our churches are not being intentional enough about relating our traditions to the lives of our people. In 2019 my co-director asked about introducing Catholic

[16] *Sacrosanctum Concilium,* paragraph 14.

practices into the CORE institute, in particular the practice of Eucharistic adoration: spending time contemplatively before the consecrated host with the understanding that one is in the physical presence of Christ.

A number of different manners enable this to take place, but traditionally it involves a rite in which a consecrated host is placed within a receptacle followed by a period of silent prayer. My initial response to the suggestion was filled with skepticism. In the end, and to my surprise, not only were the pilgrims prayerful and intentional during the adoration, but we were also asked by almost every pilgrim if they would have an opportunity to do it again later in the week. Stillness is rare in modern society. I assumed youth would resist that stillness or not see it as valuable; however, they engaged in it wholeheartedly.

Years earlier, in the first institute gathering, we came to the last night after a day of hard work. The pilgrims had spent the morning at an organic garden pulling weeds and harvesting produce and sweating, a lot. This was followed by a couple of hours at a straw bale house in the afternoon and an evening Emmaus walk on the bluff overlooking La Crosse, Wisconsin.

When we returned to campus, we were tired, sweaty, smelly, exhausted. However, we had not yet held our evening prayer. When we were planning the institute, my co-director and I had decided to use the foot washing in the gospel of John as the focus of this evening prayer. We came to the chapel prepared with two large pitchers of warm water and two large plastic bowls. We opened prayer with the gospel account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples after which I spoke for a bit about how each of us is called to be a disciple. I do not remember any of the words I spoke that evening, only how the next moment became a surprising, Spirit-filled experience of church.

My co-director and I called up the pairs of college mentors and we each washed the feet of one who then called forward their small-group participants so that they could do likewise. As we came to the end of the last small group, my co-director and I looked at one another and nodded, fully intending to wash one another's feet. At that exact moment two of the pilgrims jumped up from their seats

and directed us to sit on the chairs and they proceeded to wash our feet. These two pilgrims listened and understood the way in which God was calling them to take up the mantle of service.

At the conclusion of Franciscan CORE each year, we survey our participants about the effect of their experience. Among those responses, we note recurring themes: sense of community and gratitude for its nonjudgmental, open, and welcoming safe space. We saw these themes even when we moved to a hybrid format last year. Young people, like all people, are seeking deeper meaning.

Research has found purpose and meaning are constantly forming and reforming as one matures. It can take many forms and experiences and as life changes, we often reconsider purpose as well. Much of vocational language has focused on a search for identity. Myers noted that this is shortchanging young people who have an identity and purpose now.[17] We often assume young people are disinterested in leadership in the church, but when given real opportunities they might be particularly engaged with possibilities for change and rethinking of processes.

Leadership in an age of isolation and disconnection requires intentional focus on forming relationships. The relationships that are being built must be rooted in values that translate well for multiple generations. Our ability to engage youth in service that is rooted in their passion is what will make the greatest difference for their continued presence in communities of faith. We must do more than entertain, keep busy, or distract our youth. It is vital that we give youth opportunities to lead in ways that are important and rooted in the community. We must offer them opportunities to take on real and relevant roles within the church.

In the process of developing the faith of young people, we also need to continue to assist them in finding ways to articulate their individual passions for service. Which issues, causes, or organizations are most compelling? This will make a difference in the engagement of youth. If we tap into their passion and concerns, we will find leaders ready to take on responsibility for

[17] Myers, *Liberating Youth from Adolescence,* 74.

the building of the world around them. Our work is to assist with the contemplative reflection on their work.

Through dialogue we must focus that reflection on "How can they make a difference?" Or, "How are these passions connected to faith?" Congregations able to instill this kind of engagement will be forever enhanced. When we place passionate youth who are idealistic, visionary and full of energy with adult mentors who have experience, wisdom, resources and connections, we will be surprised by the fruit those relationships bear.

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COURAGEOUS AND CONNECTED: HOSPITALITY LEADS THE WAY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

LAURA MURRAY

Abstract

As COVID-19 pushed people into greater isolation, Christian in-person gatherings decreased, and the church rushed to connect to its congregants in the digital space. The COVID pandemic forced people to increasingly inhabit digital space. The church needs to seize the opportunity to engage people digitally and provide them with meaningful forms of connection. Yet, in-person connections can be quite different from online gatherings. This article looks at how the practice of hospitality can engage persons in the digital space and create connection and belonging through examining a ministry known as the Digital Silent Retreats.

Introduction

March 2020 brought about many unknowns as COVID-19 made its way around the world and mandates were given to slow its spread, including shelter-in-place and lockdown mandates that prevented people from gathering in-person. Zoom became a household word and online worship became the way of gathering for Christians. As a result of these factors, I created Digital Silent Retreats in March 2020 as spaces for Christ-followers to be able to meet with Jesus and with others in solitude and silence. What began as a contemplative online experiment turned into a ministry of connection and belonging. So far, we have convened over fifty retreats with more than two hundred people participating, many of whom participated in multiple retreats.

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Three spiritual practices serve as the pillars for these retreats: hospitality, generosity, and spacious guidance. This essay will focus primarily on how the practice of hospitality creates spaces of belonging and connection online. In addition to the practice of hospitality, this paper looks at the lives and character of trained guides, and how their leadership can cultivate space for connection and belonging.

Definitions

The Digital Space

The digital space, the space of the internet and electronic transmissions such as text messages and email, has become a 'place' in which humanity commonly lives and connects. The digital space provides avenues and options for engagement, and most people inhabit it in some capacity, whether that be social media, shopping, and paying bills electronically; others choose to invest in cryptocurrency or create avatars in simulated communities. Relationships and communities of all kinds are formed and sustained in the digital space, for good and ill.

The digital space is shaping humanity; people are being formed, shaped, and discipled in positive and negative ways. Specific to the Christian context, David Kinnaman says, "Screens *disciple.* The power of digital tools and the content they deliver are incredible."[1] Filmmaker and cultural commentator Craig Detweiler adds, "External authorities do not carry the weight they once did. My seminary students did not look to conventional institutional authorities for answers. Instead, they looked to relationship and online sources and social networks."[2] All manner of interaction occurs online — whether it is alienating or uniting, conspiratorial, or truth-seeking, death-dealing or life-giving — it's all on the web. Church communities can no longer avoid or denigrate online space as somehow "outside" their missional imperative. We must

[1] David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019) 25.
[2] Diana Butler-Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012) 115.

learn better how to cultivate community and a sense of belonging within spaces where relationships do not depend upon seeing and touching in-person.

Hospitality

Henri Nouwen defines hospitality as the creation of free and friendly spaces, inviting strangers to become friends.[3] Theologian Amy Oden describes hospitality seen throughout Scripture as an orientation and posture toward others that attends to, listens and learns, values and honors; at the very least hospitality welcomes the stranger, receiving each person and extending resources as needed.[4] Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God speaks of hospitality as a remembering of one's strangeness and foreign status, and this recollection leads one to compassion, empathy, and care. Jesus himself enters the world and surrenders himself to the hospitality of a woman's womb, and to friends that will reject and even betray him. Hospitality, then, is a posture of surrender, compassion, and orientation toward the other, extending generously any resources one has. And hospitality is a gracious posture that is taken with a person wherever he or she goes, rather than a place someone must come to.

Amy Oden captures the heart of hospitality:

> Hospitality does not entail helping another so much as immersing oneself in a new reality, entering into a new relationship with one who before was unknown or unappreciated. The nothing of 'being with the other' values presence more than outcome. It may or may not be possible to alleviate another's suffering or improve another's situation. The success of hospitality, however, does not depend on end results. Rather, the success of hospitality is measured by the degree to which one

[3] Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* ReIssue Edition (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1986) 79.

[4] Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 13-14.

> offers one's genuine presence with another, to fully enter another's world and dwell with another.[5]

Digital Hospitality

If hospitality is viewed as a posture rather than specific to a place, then it becomes part of that person, being embedded within, and where it can go is limitless. A shift of hospitality from being practiced in a place to a posture of engagement everywhere is necessary to practice it in the digital space.

How then, can churches and Christian leaders take hospitality into digital spaces and practice it? And specifically for this article, how can Christian leaders create connection and belonging in this space and teach others how to go, listen and learn, value, and honor the stranger? To address these questions and others, a working definition of digital hospitality is the *creation of brave and protected spaces in the digital world where strangers can enter, be welcome, and be strengthened to take what they have received into their world*.

Biblical and Historical Foundations of Hospitality

Biblical and Theological Foundations

The biblical and theological foundations for hospitality include teaching from both the Old and New Testaments and practices of early church communities. Throughout the Scriptures, hospitality is a characteristic and practice of the Triune God. These foundations provide security, strength, and stability as the practice of hospitality continues. For those who believe and follow this God, the foundations that come from God keep one grounded in hospitality.

One of the foundational stories of God's hospitality is found in the story of Abraham in Genesis 18:1-15. In this story, Abraham welcomes, provides, and cares for traveling strangers. Abraham provides water and bread until they are refreshed and ready for the journey ahead. The instruction of hospitality toward strangers is reflected in Hebrews 13:1-2 (NIV), "Keep on loving one another

[5] Oden, 109.

as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

Throughout Scripture, the language of stranger and foreigner is used. In the Old Testament, God instructs the Israelites to care for and provide for these strangers. When God instructs the Israelites to do this, he often refers to their understanding of being strangers, having been strangers and foreigners in other lands. Remembering what it feels like to be a stranger helps the Israelites be hospitable toward the strangers and foreigners that come their way.[6] In her work *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition,* Christine Pohl writes, "Deep sensitivity to the suffering of those in need comes from our ability to put ourselves in their position, and from remembering our own experiences of vulnerability and dependence. This sense of shared human experience extends even to those most foreign to us."[7] Remembering one's stranger status provides empathy for those considered strangers in the world.

Hospitality is also exemplified by Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus welcomed those who came near and moved toward the stranger. This is seen in the stories of Jesus and the hemorrhaging woman, the voice of the leper crying for mercy, the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, and more.[8] Not only does Jesus make space and draw near those while he was living, but he also did this for all humanity when he chose to die and was resurrected.[9] In addition, Philippians 3:20 (NLT) reminds the Christian of his or her continued "stranger status" here on Earth: "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior."

With these biblical and theological foundations, God shows humanity where hospitality is rooted and how to be hospitable. These foundations also serve as a reminder that hospitality begins

[6] Exod. 22:21, Exod. 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34 (NIV).
[7] Christine Pohl. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 65.
[8] Luke 8:43-48; Luke 18:35-43; John 4:1-42; Luke 19:1-10.
[9] Col. 1:19-21.

with receiving from a God who has expressed the greatest forms of hospitality and calls Christians to do the same.

What Got Lost

Christine Pohl's *Making Room* extensively recounts the history of the practice of hospitality and what got lost. During the early centuries of the Church, hospitality changed from being embedded in the community to outsourced to institutions. The outsourcing of hospitality is seen today in the privatization of homes, institutions of care, and a lack of dedicated spaces in church buildings used specifically for hospitable care and compassion.

Yet, there is the opportunity to practice and recover hospitality in both the household and church community. Given the Church's history, the opportunity, and the need, the way forward will require generosity, creativity, and courage. It will require remembering where hospitality is rooted, offering it freely where possible, supporting ways to provide it, and continuing to open spaces for care, whether in a home, institution, or even the digital space.

Foundational Practices of Hospitality

In addition to biblical and theological foundations, foundational practices within hospitality need to be named and cultivated. These include generosity and gratitude, listening, guidance, framework, and boundaries.

Generosity and Gratitude

Generosity and gratitude are key to the foundation for hospitality for the Christian.[10] To grow in hospitality, one must also be a recipient of hospitality. The first place this begins is with God. In *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, Lonni Collins Pratt argues that "Gratitude is at the center of the hospitable heart. It keeps everything in perspective."[11] In gratitude, there is the remembrance of what has been given and from whom. Through ongoing gratitude, generosity forms and grows toward others.

[10] Eph. 2:17-19.

[11] Lonni Collins Pratt. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love,* 2nd Edition (Cape Cod: Paraclete Press, 2011) 202.

Pratt goes on to explain, "Gratitude opens up space inside of us for others. There is less of me in me when I am grateful. I can see that you, too, are a gift to me."[12] This gratitude leads to a generous and open posture toward others and toward oneself.

Another way generosity is practiced is through the generosity of expectation. A generosity of expectation allows hospitality to embed itself into a person and community and reflects the ways of Jesus. A strategy is a means to an end and when a strategy is unfulfilled it does not last. The following words from Pratt also serve as a reminder that a spiritual practice is not a strategy. Pratt adds, "The spiritual practice creates a possibility or opportunity, but the change itself is more gift than effort. The spiritual practice puts us into a receiving place where we are open to something more that we call God."[13] The practice of generosity in hospitality is an opening up to possibility, not a demand for return.

Often, the practice of hospitality does not arise out of an authentic compassion for others; especially when more members or funds are needed, congregations employ hospitality strategically. Inevitably, the actions of hospitality become instrumental to ulterior goals and its recipients become objects to manipulate. Strategic use of hospitality is not only unauthentic but it also is easily abandoned: "When viewed as a strategy, hospitality is usually short-lived. Unless it becomes part of our DNA, we often abandon the practice when we meet resistance or when it does not quickly bear fruit."[14]

Listening

A second key practice within hospitality is listening. Listening shows attentiveness, care, and focus. In listening, a stranger or guest is seen, heard, and responded to. In listening, generosity of time, attention, and agenda are extended to another.

Listening starts with humility, curiosity, and the posture of a learner. According to Henri Nouwen, listening includes offering

[12] Pratt, 205

[13] Pratt, 70-71.

[14] Christine Pohl. *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 168.

a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking to their center.[15] In hospitality, the space and environment is created for people to lay down their self-protective guard, not only to those in the space with them but even toward the critical voice within themselves. Hospitality provides a place for persons to be vulnerable with themselves, others, and with God so that grace and truth can be heard deeply and transformatively.

Guidance

Hospitable spaces are vulnerable spaces. To protect the sanctity and rhythm of welcoming practices, wise and gracious guidance is needed. The authority of a guide arises from their experience and knowledge of what it means to embody a space, hold it for others, and to lead others in the communal values of the space. They know through deep empathy what it is like to not belong; they know how to lead the way in creating spaces for connection and belonging.

The church continues to be a place where people feel judged and excluded. Many have walked away from the church — not necessarily away from faith, community, or Jesus — but from the institutionalized Church. Where do they go in their wandering? When they have become unmoored, who can guide them through this time? Spiritually attuned guides can show the way because they are familiar with traversing wilderness spaces. They know what it is like to emerge from a feeling of lostness onto a new path. Hospitable guides are men and women who are familiar with the terrain of fear, loss, and transition. They have engaged in cross-cultural work and living; they have done the hard work of grief, loss, and transition and walked the unknowns in life. These men and women can guide in conversation, meaningful work, and building community.

Naming and Holding Boundaries

One of the most important things that spiritual guides do and teach in hospitable communities is to name and hold boundaries. Boundary-making is done by providing a gracious framework and

[15] Nouwen, 76.

rules with expectations of time, space, and how to enter, and how to relate. Digital hospitality also requires such a framework that includes details such as time, space, guidelines, the social norms of the space, and what participants can expect from the space and their guides. Establishing a framework gives participants freedom to move throughout the space, a sense of security that decreases anxiety in a new space and with new people. This is especially important in the digital space which by nature has very few obvious bounds.

Naming and holding boundaries may sound like a contradiction in a space of welcome, yet the practice of boundaries is critical to creating brave and protected spaces. Pohl says, "sometimes welcome must be limited and distinctions made, however, if only for the sake of other guests or members already within the community. The amount of space available and the physical and emotional capacity of the hosts and guests impose certain limits."[16] The challenge for the church is to be hospitable with gracious boundaries. How welcome is defined in culture is likely different from how welcome is practiced by a church. This is why it is important to distinguish the boundaries of a welcoming church from the conventions of society, as an expression of divine love and acceptance. The church must grapple with its counter-cultural nature so that it can live it out more intentionally.

In addition to the practices above, additional strengthening practices include confession, readiness and flexibility, invitation and welcome, rest, and receiving. The practices listed are all a part of the ministry of the Digital Silent Retreats.

Digital Silent Retreats

Digital Silent Retreats were created during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to the shelter-in-place and lockdown mandates. They were created as spaces for Christ-followers to be able to meet with Jesus, and with others, in solitude and silence. In this experiment strangers and friends were welcomed on Zoom, were guided in the first spiritual practice, and then released to go

[16] Pohl, *Making Room,* 130.

off Zoom and connect with God in solitude and silence through a written retreat guide of spiritual practices. After their solitude and silence time, the participants came back on Zoom together and each shared what happened on their retreat, how God met them, and what this time meant for the worlds they would re-enter.

The foundations of hospitality in both theology and practice are found in the DSR. Hospitality, generosity, and spacious guidance provide the pillars of practice for leaders and the space. Boundaries and frameworks provide clarity for the participants.

Pillar #1: Hospitality

The first pillar of the DSR is the practice of hospitality. Through this practice, the host of the retreats offers welcome, connection, structure, boundaries, and purpose to the gathering. The host listens and responds with encouragement to those who come and what is shared. The host creates and holds a space for learning, interaction, and encouragement between the participants. The host is responsible to lead and guide the retreat with the following two practices: generosity and spacious guidance.

Pillar #2: Generosity

Generosity is the second pillar of the DSR and includes gratitude, expectation, and listening. Through this practice, the host offers thankfulness for coming to the retreat via email before the retreat, gratitude expressed during the retreat, and gratitude expressed at the end and with a follow-up email. The generosity of expectation is displayed as the host communicates what the aspects of the retreat are for and that participants can share whatever and to the extent they would like. By providing a space of listening to God during the silent retreat and then listening to one another, the host creates an environment that is free from advice and instead offers reflection and questions of curiosity. The host is the primary person who responds to each participant in the last hour and if there is time, participants are invited to reflect and express curiosity about one another's stories and sharing.

Pillar #3: Spacious Guidance

Spacious Guidance is the third pillar of the DSR and is provided through a host guide and a written guide. The host guides through the retreat time, beginning with an email sent with details before the retreat starts with guidelines and preparation for each participant. The host also welcomes and gives guidelines again during the beginning of the retreat. In the last hour of sharing, the host is responsible to manage time and ensure that each participant has an opportunity to share without feeling rushed.

The retreat written guide serves as an outline of the ninety minutes of solitude and silence. This guide includes spiritual practices that are based on Scripture and allow the participant to make space for meeting with God. The participants are not required to complete each practice and are specifically encouraged to go with the guide as the Holy Spirit leads. The written guide is given to each participant a few days before the retreat begins via email and the participants are asked to print out the document for the retreat. Each month offers a different written guide.

Framework

The DSRs began as once-a-month offerings and moved to two offerings each month, three hours total, with a participant limit of up to eight retreat participants. The first thirty minutes are the welcome, guidelines, and first spiritual practice. The next ninety minutes include the participants' time of solitude and silence on their own with the written guide. The last sixty minutes are with the group again when each participant has the opportunity to share how God met them. This can include things that were frustrating, resistance met, new things heard, or echoes of anything God has been speaking to him or her before the retreat. This structure and space reflect what Butler-Bass says about the Age of Belief: "if the Age of Faith was a time of 'faith *in* Jesus' and the Age of Belief a period of 'belief *about* Christ,' the Age of the Spirit is best understood as a Christianity based in an experience *of* Jesus."[17]

[17] Butler-Bass, 109.

Participants

Participants come to the DSRs from a variety of places. Many come from across the United States, and a few internationally. Participants are primarily Caucasian, include men and women equally, range from ages thirty to seventy-five, and come from various Christian denominations. The invitations to retreat are disseminated through an email list, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and personal invitations.

Upon a survey of returning participants, when asked the reasons participants attended a DSR again, their reasons were spiritual practices (76.9%), solitude and silence (69.2%), community (53.8%), and spiritual guidance (53.8%). When asked why the participants appreciate the DSRs their responses included community, content, sharing, being forced to stop and meditate, the openness and sharing, the material and silent time, encouraged slowness, connecting with like-minded people, allowing space to connect with God more intimately, the Scripture, facilitation, and question prompts, convenience and how it is wonderful to connect with God in their backyard, insight from God, organized time to sit before the Lord to sit and soak, and scheduled time with God and hearing from others about their experience.

The connection and community witnessed by the retreat guides included expressions such as the sharing and exchanging of gifts, the impact of the retreats on one's family, and the lingering effects of the spiritual practices and conversation into the days and weeks to come after the retreat. What is most notable and surprising to the guides was the last hour of each retreat and the beauty and sharing that came from that time. In this space, strangers became friends, encouraged one another, and then connected again via email or even in-person if they lived nearby. In this space, strangers became partners in the ministry of the DSRs as participants have invited friends, shared their financial gifts, and even had meals together in person.

A few of the retreat participants are currently being trained to host spaces in their contexts. One is going to lead retreats with her youth at camp, and with the leaders. Another is looking to adapt the content and space toward recovery ministries and dads in

his children's school. These stories continue to develop and unfold as more participants join; some have made it a monthly spiritual practice, and others invite friends to join the retreats.

The Digital Space and Belonging

Met with hospitality, the digital space provides a pause from the inundation of information, a purpose for the time spent in the digital space, and an opportunity for wisdom to arise from connection with others. The following are ways the digital space can respond to questions of belonging.

The Digital Space as a Space for Conversation and Learning

The digital space includes space for learning communities. Since the digital space is not limited to the geographic place of a person, it provides access to learning and conversation that may have been unavailable before. Kinnaman notes that having access to and participating in a robust conversation with others develops a richer inner life of a disciple saying, "resilient disciples take part in robust learning communities; that is, they learn how to think in the company of other Christians who are learning how to think."[18]

The digital space provides an array of opportunities for conversation and learning. Researcher and entrepreneur Nona Jones adds, "conversation is fundamental to discipleship because discipleship doesn't happen by tossing biblical content at people. Discipleship is the product of dialogue about how to apply that content to people's lives in a way that leads to continual transformation."[19] In the digital space, one can find a platform, engage with others, and invite them to these spaces of learning.

The digital space also lowers the barrier of entry so that people can come as they are ready with however much dialogue and engagement as they desire. The question may arise then, whether these persons are hiding behind the screen and whether they offer their true selves or simply a part of who they are. This argument is based on the notion that if someone shows up in person, he or she

[18] Kinnaman and Matlock, 76.
[19] Nona Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflection, 2020) 28.

is being authentic. Human beings hide, whether in the digital space or in-person. The hope is that these hospitable learning spaces can continue to be places where people show up more fully.

Another argument can be made that the digital space allows people to argue without being accountable. This is seen on social media sites and with people who troll just to begin an argument. This is where the practice of boundaries comes into play. Boundaries protect those who have gathered and it is the role of the host to protect the gathered people from those that would seek to divide and derail the purpose of the gathering.

The Digital Space as Communal Connection

The digital space is a space of storytelling and sharing stories. This is seen from a simple scroll and comment section on social media or a Zoom conversation. The digital space is more than news headlines and family pictures. It is a space for engagement. Butler-Bass says, "the early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus's followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on Christian theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world."[20] As the digital spaces are spaces for exchanging stories, there is learning, shared experience and emotions, and encouragement from others. Stories of living real life and stories of how God met them, and God meeting these persons in community online help to move the digital space from information exchange to communal connection.

Another way of communal connection in the digital space is the need for movement toward people, conversation, and listening. Jones reflects this in the life of Jesus as she writes in *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, "he didn't turn his followers into a 'street marketing team' that would hang scrolls around town telling about his next sermon series. Instead, he was out among the people, making connections and having conversations. All day, every day."[21] Connections, conversations, and engagement. This requires

[20] Butler-Bass, 207.
[21] Jones, 2-3.

being up close to others, taking time, and does not include the goal of going farther, faster.

A narrow view of hospitality sees it as one-directional, yet the way of Jesus and connection includes the movement toward others and listening to their stories. Hospitality moves toward the other for the sake of connection.

The Digital Space as Curious Expectation

The digital space invites others to be curious about what might happen. This is where guides are so important. Guides who have taken leaps of faith can provide an example and hope that there is more to formation than the limited experiences of what churches have provided so far. The digital space as a place for curious expectation gives opportunities for deeper discipleship by allowing others to express questions, doubts, and struggles and be met by those who can walk with them along the way. This happens by moving toward people, meeting people where they are, empathizing with their world, and listening to their questions, pains, and joys.

The movement from limited experience to curious expectation includes cultivating wonder around what will happen when the person meets with Jesus? What will happen as a result that will matter in the world? What will happen that will sustain a person's identity as they live in the world?

The Brave New World of the Digital Space

The digital space is the brave new world that can be simultaneously intimidating and intoxicating. Being in this space requires intention and courage. It also requires soft entries for people to connect, build trust, and join as they can. As people enter, the muscles of the Christian grow in preparation for any other brave new worlds he or she will enter as life continues. Quoting Kinnaman's research again, he says, "Churches *should* offer safe refuge and respite from the world. Yet God's mission is not safe. We can be a source of comfort, strength, and like-minded community for Jesus followers in digital Babylon *and* equip them for fruitful, missional living in exile."[22]

[22] Kinnaman and Matlock, 194.

If anything is relevant, it is that our world is not safe. Those who follow Jesus need to know how to live in the reality of the world and part of that is developing muscles in the brave new world of the digital space.

Moving into the Digital Space with Awareness and Intention

Lastly, the digital space must be moved into with awareness and intention. This awareness allows for cautions to be heeded and engagement to be made. Intention includes wisdom and curiosity. In Barna's research from 2022, Benjamin Widdle says, "we are shaped by the era in which we live. We are not immune to the digital era. If we fight it, we will lose. At the same time, if we act like a leaf tossed into a stream and simply abandon biblical convictions, we will drift from our central purpose."[23]

Proceeding with wisdom means proceeding with awareness of how the digital age shapes people. Along with awareness is intentional movement and how to interact with the digital space and persons in the space. This intentional movement requires the church to know its convictions and the values it holds. The digital space pushes the church to be intentional and thoughtful in its engagement, yet the church often does not want to be pushed.

A helpful shift to proceed with intentional and thoughtful movement is the practice of curiosity. One way is through good and purposeful questions that engage and move toward unity with Christ and others. These questions are especially valuable as the church asks "How do we gather?", "What needs to be embodied and to happen in person?", "What are the biblical convictions that guide us?", and "Are these biblical convictions actually biblical, or are they simply the way it has been done?"

Courage is needed to engage and try new things, courage with the hopefulness that God is engaged in the world and with people, and courage with a curiosity about what the digital space might hold. As Craig Detweiler says in *iGods*, "technology can be used to exploit and devalue the earth or it can be a boon and blessing to all.

[23] Benjamin Widdle, "Digital Church in a Lonely World: The Ingredients of Church Community," *Barna Ideas* (January 2022): 45.

How we define technology may determine what we do with it."[24] Defining technology and discerning what places can and should it be used in the life of faith is one of the critical works of the church in this age.

Cautions

To move forward with intention, curiosity, and courage, one must also move forward with caution. Two areas of caution have to do with the digital space itself and with discipleship.

Caution for the Digital Space

Scott Laurence brings the digital age down to its human impact in his book, *The Four-Dimensional Human*, as he describes how the digital age has created a fourth dimension to live in as human beings. He describes how to live in the digital space, providing cautions along the way. One observation he shares is what can happen to the inner person, "going online can feel like a step on a homeward journey, where it is the abstract promise of home, rather than any real sense of the home itself, that matters. We all know the pocket-sized shipwreck that occurs when an inbox shows us, with treacherous indifference, the pale, empty horizon of read emails."[25]

Throughout time humans have felt loneliness, a sense of not being home, and alienation. This is not new. What is new is that the digital space adds more ways a human can feel alienated and that the human can feel this in isolation without anyone else knowing. This is why it is so important to be connected in community — in-person and online — and why hospitality cannot be limited to geographical places but must move into digital worlds. The church must relearn hospitality to move toward others online, in virtual spaces.

In addition to lonely isolation, the digital space can evoke anxiousness. Kinnaman has noted, "Digital Babylon is *accelerated* (life moves faster) and *complex* (life is uncertain and difficult to

[24] Craig Detweiler, *iGods: How Technology Shapes our Spiritual and Social Lives* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013) 33.
[25] Laurence Scott, *The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015), xx.

predict). The reaction of many people to these facts of exile is a low-level anxiety that never really goes away and that occasionally ratchets up to high-level anxiety."[26] One way to meet anxiousness is to remind a person of the present moment and to make a connection with him or her right here and now. Focusing on the present and slowing down helps center and calm. These practices help people engage the digital space more intentionally for greater connection.

Technology and the digital space are increasingly idolatrous in society. Issuing a word of caution, Craig Detweiler says, "it is good to be connected to family and friends, but when we cannot resist the urge to check updates or upload a photo, we are veering toward idolatry. Idols serve our needs according to our schedule. But over time, the relationship reverses. We end up attending to their needs, centering our lives on their priorities and agendas."[27] We notice this as people respond to the notifications on their watches and need to respond to a text or message immediately rather than pausing and waiting. Intention and discipline are needed. Ignoring the digital space is one way of handling this issue, but it is not a hospitable way of meeting people where they are and inviting them into a deeper relationship with God.

As the fourth dimension (online) continues to open, over-networked people, ever-present anxiety, and idolatrous technology caution us to keep faithful focus using awareness, intention, curiosity, and courage.

Caution for Discipleship

In *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship,* Pete Scazzero cautions against an easy and banal understanding of discipleship: "I've become convinced that implementing robust and in-depth discipleship for our people requires that we address at least four fundamental failures: We tolerate emotional immaturity, we emphasize *doing for* God over *being with* God, we ignore the treasure

[26] Kinnaman and Matlock, 72.
[27] Detweiler, 3-4.

of Church history, and we define success wrongly.[28] Kinnaman and Matlock's research echoes Scazzero as they note three areas of God-given opportunity for disciple-making to include relationships, vocation, and wisdom.[29] These are reflected earlier in this article in the sections on conversation, community, meaningful work, courage, and caution.

As the pace of the digital fourth dimension accelerates information, activity, and the opportunities to respond, there is a caution for the life of the Christian. Scazzero says that we are already "addicted — not to drugs or alcohol, but to the adrenaline rush of *doing*."[30] Combining meaningful work, courage in the world, and the digital age's accelerating pace, there is a high risk of becoming continual doers and forgetting how to be with Jesus and having the strength that comes from that identity. If doing drives the Christian's actions in the world, then hospitality is at risk. As mentioned earlier, hospitality begins with God and being and receiving from God. To create spaces of connection and belonging, our work cannot come from doing for God, but from being with God.

Ministry Implications

Ministry implications and opportunities below are for churches, ministries, and leaders to use to engage and move forward in digital hospitality.

First, the digital space must be engaged. The digital space is forming and discipling, therefore engaging it with curiosity, wisdom, attentiveness, caution, and courage strengthens faith, meets people in their isolation, provides an expanded understanding of being with others, and goes to where people are.

Second, hospitality needs to be re-defined, re-learned and experienced. This especially includes the need for movement toward people. This will require re-learning, re-framing, and experiencing hospitality as a posture in addition to a place.

[28] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021) 5.
[29] Kinnaman and Matlock, 28-30.
[30] Scazzero, 11.

Third, the church needs to learn how to enter and be in the digital space, with no strings attached to returning to a building. Digital hospitality cannot be a space where the church seeks to calm its anxiety of dwindling and dying. Those who have walked away from the church still long for community and connection, and the manipulation to return to a building and calm the anxious system cannot be part of the church's hospitality. Hospitality must be generous, especially when it comes to expectations.

Fourth, space, energy, and resources need to be made for experiments to be tried and learned from, experiments like the DSRs and other spaces where people are invited to connection and conversation, meaningful engagement and curiosity, and the courage to show up. This means that innovation is part of the DNA of a church rather than an add-on that comes when all that is urgent has been addressed and the life of the church is steady.

Fifth, a framework for hospitality is needed. Offerings of in-person hospitality have frameworks and guidance. The digital ministry offerings also need to have frameworks and guidance both to give freedom and decrease anxiousness.

Lastly, leaders need to be trained. These leaders are the hosts and holders of the space provided. These leaders bring care, protection, guidance, and freedom to connect, create, and belong. These are men and women who can hold spaces with listening, generosity, curiosity, courage, wisdom, and care. They are leaders who are aware of what it is to be on the outside, to walk on the fringes, and to feel loneliness. They are aware and they have navigated the terrain, know what might come up, and can hold and lead these spaces with a nonanxious presence, welcome, and care. The church cannot engage the digital space with hospitality without these leaders. They are key.

A new reality is here. The digital space is one to engage and enter. It is a space where hospitality, welcome, connection, and belonging can be offered. It is a way to be present with the other in a new way. May the church engage the digital space with hospitality, and be genuinely present in it with intention, curiosity, and love.

OPPORTUNITIES IN LIMINAL SPACE FOR CO-CREATING CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY IN A VUCA WORLD

LISA R. WITHROW

Abstract

Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity often breed alienation and isolation, discord and polarization. In the face of VUCA, we are invited to co-create new meanings, new identities, and new approaches to positive spiritual "Presencing" in many sectors of society. This essay will summarize the overarching issues at play regarding social, environmental, and governance approaches for contributing to local and global well-being in current liminal space. Emergent strategies and practicalities for action at local levels within religious organizations will be identified, such as spiritual partnering with the business world for building networked connection and beloved community.

Introduction

The concept of Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) circumstances in the world was used in the late 1980s by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus as they developed their leadership theory. At the same time in 1987, the United States Army War College used VUCA to describe the conditions resulting from the Cold War. Now, the acronym is used for crisis management and recovery planning in various sectors throughout the world.

In sum, Volatility marks the speed and turbulence of change, Uncertainty emphasizes the unpredictability of the future, Complexity influences focus of attention on interconnection of myriad issues and factors, and Ambiguity determines our level of

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interpretative clarity.[1] When volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity are combined, they characterize the nature of difficult conditions in the marketplace, religious organizations, nonprofits, the environment, and the daily mental health in the lives of human beings.

Certainty and predictability, especially named in simple binaries (x vs. y), no longer exist as we once knew them, much as we attempt to preserve polarities because we desire certainty in terms of predictable outcomes. The list of VUCA-contributing metalevel factors is long: a majority of populations transitioning from rural to urban living, climate change accelerated by human impact, global demographic age shifts, ongoing geopolitical aggressions, and technological advances that connect us increasingly faster.[2] Add local changes based on the economy, living conditions, political views and polarized social stances, and access to technology, and VUCA-based life takes on additional layered systems, complexities, and conflicts.

Human beings innately look for cause-and-effect in systems, stories, and experiments. Our brains wish to simplify interconnections that are complex and messy. The propensity to simplify often leads to over-simplification and the "danger of the single story,"[3] where complexity is distilled to a linear cause-effect process, or an oversimplified statement about personhood or situation, often leading to stereotyping and incomplete or false conclusions. In the religious world, this phenomenon is often called "fundamentalism." Whether conservative or progressive, the single story leads to a singular sense of control and "rightness," marginalizing all other perspectives.

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[1] See Withrow, Lisa, "From Surviving to Thriving: Coaching as Disruption in Disruptive Times," *Choice*, Vol. 19, No. 3, summer 2021.

[2] McNulty, Eric J. "Leading in an Increasingly VUCA World," Strategy + Business in "Leadership," *Harvard Business Review,* October 27, 2015. https://www.strategy-business.com/blog/Leading-in-an-Increasingly-VUCA-World (accessed 4 April 2022).

[3] See Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, "The Danger of the Single Story" TED Talk, October 7, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHm7aBWoheY (accessed 4 April 2022).

Herein lies the danger of not taking VUCA-life into account: Leaders might capitalize on the human desire for simple explanations based on simple stories by exerting and exhorting simplistic hermeneutical lenses in key repetitive phrases as authoritative, definitive answers to human questions. By doing so, these leaders create "in" and "out" groups, or the "other," isolating people into closed groups controlled by belief systems. To keep control, often designated as "belonging," this isolation necessitates alienation from those who do not have the same belief or value systems. Hence, polarization and sometimes-violent defensiveness rise in society, often with a religious veneer as justification for "rightness." Those who do not subscribe to an unequivocal belief system, whether religious or economics-based, are considered uninformed, spineless, or threatening.

Yet, it is those who wish to immerse in the messiness of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity who can be most adaptive to these characteristics of the world. They do not eschew liminal spaces, whether thrust upon them or required by them for deliberate change. Liminal space, the space between former identity and emerging identity, is the very space in which VUCA conditions can be shaped into creative, meaning-making potentials for positive relationships.

Liminal Space

To appreciate the importance of liminality in the VUCA world, it is helpful to know its meaning as well as differentiation from simple transition. "Liminal" originates from the Latin "limen," or threshold, and was coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in the nineteenth century as he studied tribal rites of passage in Australian and African tribes. These rites of passage were designed to shift the identity of boys to men through a transitional, testing phase in the wilderness.[4]

[4] See Van Gennep, Arnold, *The Rites of Passage*, English translation. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960. 11. (Original work published in French in 1909.)

The transition or threshold is where the transformative work is done. Further, liminal space is neither in one space or another; for example, when one stands in an interior doorway, one is partially in the room behind and partially in the room ahead, but not fully in either. This space is transitional, but also is temporal. Being caught between two spaces forever does not allow for an emerging future to occur. If the boys in van Gennep's studies found themselves permanently in physical wilderness, they would never emerge as adults upon their return to the village. No new equilibrium (in van Gennep's studies, no new identity), would be realized. They would remain in a static, stuck place, paradoxically trapped in a threshold.

As van Gennep observed, the three phases of this rites-of-passage journey include moving into a threshold over a boundary or border (separation that moves one into threshold); living in the wilderness or liminal space (transition within threshold where awareness-raising and testing occurs); and then returning, albeit with new identity and a new sense of home (incorporation that moves one back into community).[5]

> The middle phase, transition, is the liminal space. In it, events happen and decisions are made that are based on our beliefs, ethics, instincts, and learned behaviors, but at the same time, we are in unknown territory and the flow of life may not make much sense; the behaviors that have worked for us thus far are no longer entirely helpful in our current context. Unusual occurrences are likely to manifest themselves in this liminal space: new thoughts, dramatic insights, changing values, loss, life lived with discomfort and perhaps physical and emotional threat, ability to take more risks, new meaning for life or work, and a focus on what comes next even if that next phase is not yet clear.[6]

[5] Van Gennep, vii.

[6] Withrow, Lisa R. *Leadership in Unknown Waters: Liminality as Threshold to the Future*. Cambridge, England: Lutterworth Press, 2020, 6.

What is distinct about liminality for van Gennep is that it does indeed incorporate a shift in belief systems and identity—in other words, transformative growth. Transition alone might not accomplish this same kind of shift. Further, liminal space, by its nature, holds layers of tensions: for example, risk *and* opportunity, known *and* unknown, child *and* adult (adolescence), letting go *and* letting come, ending *and* beginning. While these layers sound like polarities, they mingle together with the "and" rather than an "or" in the flow of transformative change.

Living in a VUCA world with the realization that humanity as a whole and organizations in particular will never again experience change at (what the future will call) the "slow" pace they know today, tempts us to claim that we are living in permanent liminality. Perhaps a better way of understanding our metacontext is to observe the layers of liminality that affect each other, while also acknowledging that there are moments of clarity and clear purpose that help us cross thresholds. These moments of clarity and clear purpose, while they might not be long-lasting, give us opportunity for landing on grounded space to make meaning of our work, to clarify our purpose, and to connect more deeply in relationships.

Each time we move through liminal space, our belief systems and identities shift in some way; our intentionality and openness about such a shift determines its quality and character. Essentially, we are in space that invites a deepening and complexifying of our own natures and how they connect with others'. Liminality allows emergence of fear-based reactions (fight, flight, or freeze), or curiosity and connection, depending on where we choose to focus our energy, spirits, and intention; the hope here is that our intention will mirror God's desire for us to live well and in beloved community.

Adaptation in a Liminal VUCA World

The question before humanity at this moment in history is, "How do we live in a VUCA world with intention based on well-being and beloved community while dwelling in liminality for a time?" COVID-19 has subjected nations, regions, and many families to deep suffering and loss. For several weeks in March

2020 the world came to a standstill—all was quiet, and we looked around in wonder, listened in fascination, breathed clean air, sensed a life-force that was not our own. A deadly virus had descended upon us and in a moment, we saw awe, opportunity, and new life, even amid fear or skepticism. After two weeks, we became restless, fearful again—what of our jobs, our livelihoods, our production, our community? We moved back into the human noise and frenzy slowly but surely. In 2021, we fought hard to "get back to normal" or find the "new normal" quickly so that we could move out of uncomfortable liminal space.

The Great Resignation came along (people quit their jobs at high rates, accompanied by no logical, linear cause-effect immediately found by analysts) and the business world was up-ended in terms of worker shortages, supply chain interruptions, and working spaces redefined (working from home or a hybrid model). The VUCA acronym took on a whole new meaning. Add ongoing and new violence, including wars, as attempts to get back to a single, "purified" story, and we deepen the current political and social volatility, complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity of paths into the future.

In late 2021 and throughout 2022, perhaps beyond, many businesses, health-care systems, and corporations are rethinking how they operate in the world. Higher education and religious organizations are attempting to do the same. Leadership theories are being revisited and new ones are emerging for such times as these. Liminality, first used as a term in a public way at the onslaught of a pandemic, has developed many layers in all sectors of our lives. Leaders are in identity-shifting transitions in this long-term liminal space, requiring adaptability like we have not seen before.

Noticeably, leadership articles, while still using the word "adaptive," do not subscribe to one school of thought about what adaptive leadership looks like any longer. *Everything* must be adaptive. Formulaic ways of being a good or great leader have given way to the practices leaders need to adopt to ride this VUCA wave in their own contexts. This formational, co-created approach to leadership does not rely on outcomes to determine the kind of leader one is. For example, Jennifer Garvey Berger in *Unlocking*

Leadership Mindtraps, describes complexity as the water in which leaders swim and the thought-traps that complexity can call forth as leaders seek to eliminate the discomfort of liminality. These traps often lead to alienation and isolation of the leader and within groups. She says:

> The more interconnected we are, and the faster things are changing, the more complex our world is. This shifts formerly straightforward professions into confusing, complex ones. Accountants today wonder whether their entire profession is going away, whether they will be 90 percent replaced by computers (and when?) [and what business they should bet on next to keep their firms alive]. They have no idea what five years from now looks like. Their old leadership tools—to help them control, predict, plan—fail them. And worse, their ways of thinking and feeling about the issues at hand fail them too.
>
> Frustratingly, the fact that our reflexes lead us astray in complex and uncertain times doesn't seem to make us less likely to use them. The cognitive and emotional shortcuts honed over the course of tens of thousands of years of evolution are so automatic that we use them without even noticing whether they're helpful or not. Part cognitive bias, part neurological quirk, part adaptive response to a simple world that doesn't exist anymore, they are 'mindtraps.'[7]

Garvey Berger goes on to list five mindtraps and the ladder of practices to avoid them, or if necessary, to crawl out of them. She advocates for two main practices to avoid mindtraps: first, raising self-awareness at every level of beliefs held, decision-making, and myths about having control, and second, developing self-

[7] Berger, Jennifer Garvey. *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 8-9.

compassion and compassion for others.[8] There is no formula here; she simply provides a frame. In a VUCA world, providing frames, practices, and structures or containers is an essential function for leaders who focus on co-creating meaningful life and work while living in liminal space.

To raise self-awareness requires leaders to let go of or at least modify the very things that used to work. For example, servant leadership, named in the 1970s as an alternative leadership style, still assumed control of outcomes, but shifted to serving workers on the front line as worker-investment to create a positive environment and more worker buy-in.[9] Such an approach was effective in particular instances, primarily for dominant-culture leaders. Further, adaptive leadership, still popular from the turn of this century, names how to survive the pitfalls of leading and has relevance to our VUCA world by focusing on relationships and the nature of heart-centered presence amid conflict and challenge.[10]

To push the adaptive leadership mindset further as the VUCA world speeds up, we need more complex understandings of leadership, so we add and subtract leadership practices by experimentation in context. Adapting itself becomes reframed as experimental or prototyping and coach-like, not from the proverbial balcony of the "big picture" which might no longer exist as it once did, but amid the fray or the dance, where no big picture is yet evident. The difference here is not attempting to manage systems of behavior and function already in play, albeit with flexibility, but to co-create emerging work and even new systems altogether. In other words, we are pressured to be fast-paced adaptive leaders on steroids.

VUCA is beginning to demonstrate that there are at least two practices in liminality that need to be brought to the forefront to slow the frenzy, but these practices seem counterintuitive—leaders

[8] Berger, 115, 130.

[9] See Greenleaf, Robert K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1976).

[10] Heifetz, Ronald A. and Marty Linsky. *Leadership in the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

relinquish control to become co-creators, learners, and holders of a creative, experimental container rather than directors for strategic, predetermined outcomes.

Direction itself might no longer be clear, so working in the container to ascertain purpose now that we live in a VUCA-COVID context, is clearly the work. Such a claim is difficult when strategic planning, even with adaptive components, has been effective for decades, for for-profit business and nonprofit and religious organizations.

The Practice of Co-creating

Living and working in liminal space, by its very nature, shifts roles and responsibilities along with beliefs and identities. That is not to say that leaders all throw in the towel, but it is an opportunity for leaders to slow down despite the chaos and high speed of change around them. While rapid and unexpected change tends to create the desire in human beings to control the environment more tightly, the opposite response is more helpful. Instead of controlling more tightly, unless there is an acute emergency that requires compulsion to act a certain way for the sake of physical or mental safety, the leader finds her own calm space and then creates a safe-enough container in which people can express their fears, griefs, angers, concerns as needed. Some call this container "brave" space. In this container, once people have grounded themselves enough to sustain some level of composure, a leader has opportunity to ask, "What next?" or "What do we believe will be purposeful and meaningful for us in the here and now?"

It is in the people's best interest to have a leader not invested in providing an answer for them; rather, a leader serves well when committed to co-creating a way forward with them after deliberative discernment of purpose. This discernment is called "presencing" by Otto Scharmer, founder of the Presencing Institute at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.[11] Presencing is a process

[11] See Scharmer, Otto C. https://presencing.org and *Theory U: Leading form the Future as It Emerges (The Social Technology of Presencing)* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

of listening deeply to self and stakeholders and sitting still enough to pay attention to what is emerging around us. It takes time. It also requires practices that invite stillness (see the last section in this article), much like religious centering prayer practices or the use of clearness committees in the Quaker tradition. Such practices move in the opposite direction of our profound global anxiety.

The way forward then becomes an iterative experiment rather than a strategic plan. Strategic plans in liminal space embedded in the VUCA context would have to be revamped so frequently that they would lose their value; hence, experimentation and prototyping ideas will lead to a more sustainable path forward, whether with product development, services, or emerging religious and spiritual practices. In other words, what we know as adaptive leadership, which depends on flexibility of pacing and learning rather than outcomes-based planning[12] requires a significant infusion of "wandering in the wilderness" for a time without benefit of traditional authority and influence.

To be a co-creator, one first must be a learner—asking open-ended questions of self and others to keep learning rather than leading to make a point. Second, a co-creator must be open to imaginative possibilities that might seem completely unrelated to the work at hand but continue to rise as "nudges" about the path forward. By no means does this approach negate strategic thinking or strategy itself; instead, it develops purpose and process as the future unfolds rather than naming an unmovable outcome to which all actions are directed without question. Thus, ironically, adapting itself has a VUCA quality to it when the context is liminal.

Co-creating and learning go together, much like the action-reflection process. In such a container in which these activities and mindsets evolve, assessments of goals and corresponding results are more free flowing. They morph to become idea-development, experimentation, reflection on what was successful and what learning occurred from failure, then to experimenting again until there is a crystallized commitment to the path forward relying on

[12] See Heifetz, Ronald A. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994). Part III.

experimental evidence. In fact, with the practice of co-creation, evidence based on long-term experience might no longer be relevant; rather, iterative learning yields the unfolding path.

Co-creation fosters connection and community because it assumes that everyone in the room has some level of wisdom to contribute to the conversation. It also assumes that everyone is not an expert in all areas, including the leader. When there is a group of specialists in particular areas, all contributing from their knowledge, insights, and experience, the experiment is going to be well-thought-out; courses of action will consider factors that peers formerly might not have attended to, while having full investment of the parties involved. Community might be a team working on a temporary project, or it might be a long-term group defining a shifted identity with a long-term purpose and ideas for a flexible, VUCA-mindful process to fulfill it.

The Practice of Repurposing Our Work

A VUCA world requires the church to attend to the broader community as co-creators of purpose in intentional ways. The church is used to thinking of itself as *in* but not *of* community, yet Christianity often is used as a purported value system for voting, law-making, protest of civil concerns, civic duty, and charitable work in local areas of need. Therefore, there is precedent for conversation and experimentation with non-church partners to crytallize a church's emerging purpose in the world; a new pathway becomes part of the church's life that co-creates social and environmental well-being alongside deeply meaningful work of co-creating connection and community. What might partnerships look like?

Social, environmental, and local well-being have been the foci of Benefit corporations, known as "B corporations," that are for-profit and serve the public good since B Lab was started as an experimental movement in 2006,[13] with more and more companies moving in this direction worldwide. Benefitcorp.net claims that

[13] https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/faqs/how-did-b-corp-movement-start/ (accessed 4 April 2022).

millennials will grow to 75 percent of the workforce by 2025, and "77% say their 'company's purpose was part of the reason they chose to work there.'"[14] In addition to millennial interest, conscious consumers are increasingly attracted to these corporations because they have purpose beyond mere profit. Further, a B corporation seeks to be profitable while also avoid producing negative social and environmental impacts. The more advanced the company's work, the more likely that it will create positive impact rather than merely avoiding the negative.

Business governance practices matter for this shift from profit-as-purpose to purposeful wider well-being. The International Organization for Standardization established in 1947 and headquartered in Switzerland, with branches in major international regions, establishes standards for corporations, and recently has focused on environmental and social well-being as an additional important purpose of business and manufacturing.

What does governance have to do with religious organizations and its leaders? For millennia, religious leaders have claimed the purpose behind their existence as a call from the Divine to bring the faith message into the world. Governance is the set of standards by which they do that: in other words, Christian denominations (my own tradition), and independent churches have statements of faith, mission statements, and organizing principles. Governance usually occurs through an overarching board overseeing the work of the church or a wider denominational system with clear hierarchies.

The question is, do these boards have at their core a clearly stated, specific purpose that promotes social and environmental well-being within and beyond the church as a tenet of their faith? Do they make meaning by following this kind of purposeful response to their call in whatever forms it manifests itself? Of course, social and environmental well-being carries many layers of entry into purposeful work. Religious organizations choose what their faith practices will be, based on their capacities and callings. It will be important to make sure their governance aligns with these

[14] https://benefitcorp.net/businesses/why-become-benefit-corp (accessed 4 April 2022).

practices and callings by framing budgets, policies, and personnel in ways that serve their purpose.

Repurposing the work of the church requires first, acknowledgment of the VUCA world and the liminal space in which we find ourselves, and second, the possibility of opportunity held within this space.

Third, and here is where the leader creates a container for difficult conversation, the church must understand that opportunity includes letting go of what a church no longer needs (rather than wants), to make room for an emerging future. The declarations "We've never done it this way," and "We tried that before and it didn't work," are not relevant today.

Clergy and lay leaders have been forced into liminal space, where they had to rethink immediately what gathering looks like, how worship can be shared effectively online, and what really matters for their community. Many clergy have said to me personally that they are so burned out they cannot imagine continuing as they are because they have been asked to add so many new functions while retaining traditional ones as well. In these cases, the "letting go" part of the work hasn't been addressed or perhaps has been addressed but not heard by the congregation, many of whom are working hard to "return to normal" in 2022.

Fourth**,** co-creating a community-based future with a group of leaders in the church will require commitment of time and energy, with attention to adopting a learning posture, with external voices fully present. This learning posture is both theological-missional (the purpose of the church), and spiritual (the church's call); much time needs to be spent discerning and discussing these aspects of religious life.

Theological and spiritual purposes underpin the answers to the next level of key identity and purpose questions that lead to action. "What does God want next?" "How do we see the Holy Spirit active in our midst?" and "What do we believe will be purposeful and meaningful work theologically, spiritually, and practically in the here and now?" will make space for the conversation about letting go of what no longer creates meaning or value for the church and indeed, for the world around it.

Concentrating on desired identity and accompanying purpose for the church's existence and for its presence in the world takes time, and it will lead to in-depth self-reflection and reflection on VUCA difficulties the local community faces socially and environmentally. Such conversation would be greatly enhanced by inviting "outsiders" into it; people who do not attend church or who want a different kind of community bring valuable insight into the purpose-development being discerned and designed. In fact, the wider community's input might indeed shift the church into something different from what it ever imagined, if leaders retain their learning postures.

Should these four steps lead to a significant change (transformation?) for the church, then leaders and outsiders alike have opportunity to set up experiments based on the emerging purpose. "What would happen if we…?" The church doesn't have to make big leaps; small experiments on the edges will do. Take, as a hypothetical example, a purpose based on the church intending to co-create connection and community by reaching out to the nearby neighborhood that exists in a food desert. This community could use some social and environmental uplifting. The first experiment is to re-evaluate the long-standing annual pie-baking fundraising event at harvest time. Try an experiment by requesting donations for needed materials and ingredients, then invite the neighborhood children to come to learn how to can fruit or make pie crusts with designs of their choice. Have the children take their baked or canned goods home. See what happens.

Is the neighborhood cookie bake next? Or planting a tiny orchard for the neighborhood? Or food photography classes for young adults and their ultimate creation of local flyers for community baking events? Then a garden planted by church leaders and neighborhood participants for any who can't afford or access fresh produce? A traveling fruit/vegetable stall around the neighborhood where the church meets people they might have never seen before? A worshipful blessing and gratitude time for community around each experiment that isn't held in the sanctuary? Let go of the failures, keep the successes, experiment again. Eventually, a series of experiments crystallizes how the church's purpose begins to work

in partnership with others—a networked community focused on well-being for everyone.

Emerging Futures at Local Levels with Religious Organizations

Above was an example of repurposing the work that already had seeds in place from the church's tradition. Liminal space opened when the church realized that it wasn't reaching new people and in fact was in decline. Rather than try to curry favor with people who didn't attend church, leaders were invited to come into conversation to see what was no longer working and what might be a better purpose for the church based on its current context. They discerned identity and purpose over time and thought through the meaningful work in front of them—not just to stop decline, but to genuinely promote well-being in their neighborhood. Then they looked at what they already had in place that they did want to retain (annual pie-baking event) and managed to develop experiments.

Throughout the time of experimentation, people were offered a co-creative, safe-enough space to dream, try, fail, and try again, all without judgment. As experimentation continued, they began to move toward their emerging future, crystallizing what was meaningful work amid expanding sense of community. In time, the church looked and acted very different; its identity had changed as it stepped into its new present on the other side of liminal space. The church became an organic, open-minded organization (organism) with the health, welfare, and connection with neighbors and their environment at its heart.

This example describes a process for moving from isolation (the church is not welcoming and keeps to itself) and polarization (the church versus the neighborhood) to connection and community. Particular components in the liminal process will keep the container strong for the work of identity shift and repurposing the work. An essential component is for the leader and eventually the whole group to ask the right questions essential for building trust and creating ideas. These questions most often begin with "what," "how," and eventually "when."

What is meaningful to you about that thought? What brought that to mind? How might that thought change into experiment?

When might we put something like that into action? Garvey Berger, in *Mindtraps*, supplies key questions to supplement these: "What do I believe and how could I be wrong?" "Could this conflict serve to deepen a relationship?" "What can I help enable and what can enable me?" "Who do I want to be next?"[15]

Of course, these questions can be posed at a collective level for groups in Presencing space. Margaret Wheatley, a consultant and speaker on leadership and organizations, titles her latest book with a vital question: "Who do we choose to be?" in this complex world where we need "islands of sanity" amid the environmental destruction and social polarization.[16] Powerful questions that surface deepest-held values are essential for co-creating a new purpose in a meaningful way.

An essential piece for the process of connecting and co-creating community is another component of the learning posture: participants, especially the leader or leaders, will need to let go of predetermined answers and outcomes for the church. VUCA world moves so fast that outcomes can become outdated quickly. Further, there isn't time for experimentation if all the focus is on reaching an outcome within a certain timeline.

Presencing until what is useful from the past and what is emerging on the horizon can be considered "soft" and unscientific, but it is a natural way of being for those who know how to pray and to listen. Presencing makes room for surprises and adventurous considerations; it also makes experiments far less threatening as the group moves on a quest for purposeful focus and meaningful work. Once experiments crystallize, then the outcomes emerge to meet the needs of the clients, customers, or community.

A final essential aspect for connection and community is to keep real faith and cultivate curiosity. Many people in the church claim faith and yet act like functional atheists; everything depends on them and what they do. To grasp for certainty and rely totally on one's own volition keeps people in their individualized comfort

[15] Garvey Berger, 115.
[16] Wheatley, Margaret. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2017).

zones. This lack of trust and reliance on individualism will all but guarantee disconnection and isolation other than being together for shallow conversation on Sunday mornings or in study groups. If there is no room for the movement of God, then Presencing is not actually happening. If there is no trust that the Spirit wants to meet us in our intention to be relational beings with our communities and our planet, then we act alone—and the cycle of spiritual isolation and polarization continues.

The antidote for trusting only self is to adopt not only the learning posture but to be curious about what is next or what might happen without judgment or excuse. The cause-effect linear thinking can be released to be replaced by a sense of adventure and gratitude for God's rather impish way of providing opportunity and silver linings even in hardship. This stance of learning, adventure, and gratitude calms the soul, mind, and body (according to neuroscience), and creates an "island of sanity" in the midst of VUCA. It is a stance that brings forth the potentials to be found when traversing liminal space together.

Emergent processes tend to work best at the local level but can be expanded for wider purpose and effect. The church might want to pay attention to what is happening in the wider world, with an eye toward partnering, learning and likewise creating emerging futures that might have been unheard of until now. Here are two experimental opportunities:

> First, the business world is spending more money and time than ever before on mindfulness practices and inner leadership/teamwork. Programs for CEOs and other C-suite leaders based on adopting learning postures and co-creating team purposes and processes are exploding in the coaching world and through the mindfulness practice education industry. Workers are being asked to take deep breaths and stay fully present, find beauty for a few minutes during a stressful day, explore yoga poses in their chairs, and if they are inclined, pray.

> Mid-morning and mid-afternoon workers who snack on the clock (for people who still go to the office) are encouraged to eat in the kitchenette and converse with their peers, much like former water-cooler conversations but with greater intention. Thousands of people sign up every year for six- to nine-month online courses like the SoundsTrue "InnerMBA,"[17] not because the course will advance their career, but because it will advance their well-being and sense of meaning, and thereby help them invest more deeply in their work (which in turn advances the company).

For many in the business world, the church has long been irrelevant, though there are some businesspeople who still find meaning there. For the rest, this plethora of spiritual and mindfulness practices is being adopted like wildfire—globally. What might the church offer the business world that has a clear intention of offering well-being right where people are rather than attempting to convert them to the church's way of thinking? What might the business world offer the church in terms of dealing with stress in helpful ways, especially as Benefit corporations seek to do good in the world? How might this dialogue be co-created in a container that leads to connection and communal efforts for social and environmental well-being? There are experiments here to be had.

Second, the scientific world is making breakthroughs in the realm of neuroscience with attention to what stress and trauma do to the body and the brain.[18] The field is wide-reaching, but the importance of its work for spiritual leaders is how the brain and body work in concert to create space for change in thinking, responses, and openness to learning. In fact, the brain can make

[17] https://innermba.soundstrue.com (accessed 4 April 2022).
[18] See Blake, Amanda, *Your Body is Your Brain: Leverage Your Somatic Intelligence to Find Purpose, Build Resilience, Deepen Relationships and Lead More Powerfully* (Trokay Press, Embright, LLC), 2018, and Ann Betz, expert in neuroscience of human consciousness and coaching, https://www.beaboveleadership.com (accessed 4 April 2022).

space for far deeper spiritual experience as well. Neuroscience is connecting with the business world and spiritual practitioners throughout the globe, using trained coaches to work in highly conflicted situations, with teams who cannot come together with common purpose and with religious organizations that are stuck.

This realm of knowledge has possibility to transform the way churches make meaning from their belief systems and their work in the world. It also can tackle the griefs, conflicts, polarizations, and traumas experienced by so many churches. What might neuroscience offer the church in terms of its purpose-thinking, its behaviors, and its meaning-making? What might the church offer neuroscience studies in terms of ancient spiritual prayers and practices that long-intuited much of what neuroscience is discovering? Again, there are experiments here to be had.

Each of these examples invites the church to engage in liminal space in the face of VUCA, to co-create new meanings, new identities, and new approaches to positive spiritual Presencing in society. Without the church's presence alongside other movements, and perhaps co-creating the shape of these trajectories, there is danger of making workplaces and neuroscience the new "feel good" religion unto themselves. Mindfulness practices can lead individuals and groups to feel better about themselves and the state of the world but feeling better can justify not acting on behalf of those in crisis, or worse, increase selfish tendencies.[19]

Likewise, shifting one's nervous system from anxiety to calm is indisputably helpful in most circumstances, but it might tend to derail attention to the seriousness of huge socioeconomic, political, and environmental pressures faced by all of humanity today. Thus, experiments with an eye toward partnering with the purpose of serving human beings and other creatures as well as challenging damaging social and environmental systems will require the church to grapple with its current identities, influences, and authority in a VUCA world.

[19] https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220302-how-mindfulness-can-make-you-a-darker-person (accessed 5 July 2022).

The church's voice has much to offer in terms of spiritual practices and love-based intention for the well-being of all. To claim this voice and take action mandates fostering leaders who can connect potential partners, live in liminal space, create brave and safe-enough containers for the work of Presencing, all while discerning and co-creating the emerging future in wider communities for planetary healing, one space at a time.

Final Thoughts

Co-creating connection and community in a VUCA world is no easy task. Suffering, alienation, polarization, violence against others, climate change damage, inequitable treatment of people, meanness, white supremacy as privatized privilege, greed, war, and a host of other ills are undermining the integrity of humankind and the planet.[20] Moreover, fast pace and complexity, paired with uncertainty and ambiguity, all in the context of a pandemic and racial-ethnic challenges that last for years, make our lives difficult to navigate. Exhaustion, being overwhelmed, and hopelessness creep into our bones at times—some people never recover.

The church can invite co-created connection that becomes community as antidote to this severe malaise, *if* it decides to repurpose its spiritual calling and subsequent response with focus on social and environmental well-being and appropriate governance structures to sustain this purpose. To do so requires significant effort and time, with leaders who are willing to hold a container for the discernment and experimental work. These leaders exist. They can be found adopting learning postures in churches, businesses, nonprofits, and on governing boards; their numbers are growing as our global crises begin to become priorities at every level of our existence. They are superior networkers.

The numbers of leaders participating in online groups, Zooming with new support gatherings, sharing resources and ideas without hesitation, and taking courses that focus on inner work

[20] See Withrow, Lisa R. ed., *Alienation and Connection: Suffering in a Global Age* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011) for a series of nine authors offering essays describing different points of alienation around the globe that have remained unresolved for decades and remain so to this day.

for leadership are rising every year by the thousands.[21] Leaders who do not yet know how to do this work can be trained to do so by courses, coaches, consultants, self-education, combined with faithful trust when VUCA seems to overrule all reason.

Ultimately, connection and community for the well-being of society and planet is our only hope for humanity's future. There are strong forces working against such a hope, but in the end, all things are possible with God. The church's call is to bring God into the world in innovative and loving ways, especially in times of pain and alienation. It is time for the church to do its work well for the sake of future generations and flourishing for all beings.

[21] I have participated in four online nonacademic courses where global enrollment ranges from 1300-12,000 in 2020, 2021, and 2022. These courses are repeated from year to year, and the sponsors have noted exponential growth in enrollment since the pandemic surfaced in late 2019.

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ENGAGING WHITE LEADERS IN RACIAL JUSTICE WORK IN AN ERA OF ALIENATION AND ISOLATION

Susan L. Maros
Jessica Vaughan Lower
Christopher Brooks

Abstract

In a conversation before the 2022 meeting of the Academy for Religious Leadership, a panel consisting of an educator, a pastor, and a marketplace leader discussed the challenges of fostering the capacity of White leaders to work for racial justice. This essay is based on the panel discussion with further reflections by the participants. The conversation centers on evaluating the role of White religious leaders to develop capacities in themselves and their communities to listen to the experiences of people from diverse racial-ethnic-cultural backgrounds in the United States and engage in appropriate collaborative action toward addressing race-based injustice.

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Introduction

National stories of racialized violence and discrimination regularly highlight the different responses of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities and White communities to racialized experiences in the United States. While many in BIPOC communities organize through movements such as Black Lives Matter, #StopAAPIHate, and other groups, many in White communities resist acknowledging that there is more than one experience of race. Considering this dynamic, many questions arise: What is the responsibility of White religious leaders who freely operate in White spaces to speak to diverse racialized experiences in the United States? In an era of increased polarization in which families and congregations have been fractured by competing political ideologies, what frameworks and skills do White leaders in pastoral and educational spaces need to foster a community of practice within their own families, and within congregations, communities, and educational institutions? What role do White religious leaders have in helping their communities work toward developing a healthy sense of racial-ethnic-cultural identity? How do these needs inform how educators of pastors engage with pastors and pastoral candidates in the seminary classroom? Given the range of responses White Christians have to information and experiences around race, what are strategies that leaders can draw on to be a life-giving presence in their communities?

Having honest conversations about race is difficult for a variety of reasons. One key reason is White isolation. Members of White communities find it difficult to participate in these conversations with communities of color and White people find it difficult to have this conversation with one another. White isolation and White silence contribute to racialized pain.

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities often are called upon to be the sources of information and equipping for White communities. This panel will focus on the particular work White people can do with their White colleagues, family members, and congregants so that the burden of facilitating White conversations about race does not fall on already burdened BIPOC

shoulders while, simultaneously, welcoming diverse voices to inform the White community's process.

This essay reflects a panel discussion between a White educator (Susan), a White pastor (Jessica), and a multiracial Black-identifying entrepreneur (Chris). Each engages in conversations about and in actions toward racial justice. They note that alienation and isolation have grown in the last few years in the United States. Far from the postracial world that many acclaimed upon the election of a Black president in 2008, we see increased alienation and isolation, exacerbated by the various experiences our communities have had during the COVID-19 pandemic. How do we engage in racial justice when our communities are siloed and isolated from one another? This essay represents a conversation among colleagues to respond to this pressing question.

How did you become involved in racial justice work?

Susan: My work as an educator is focused on the development of Christian leaders. I am particularly interested in how leaders are formed across a lifetime of experience. In that context, I've come to see the leaders' social locations as important contexts for the formation of identity and a sense of vocation. My research has brought me to consider how social location forms the lenses through which we look at and interpret our experience.

Particularly as I listened to the stories of religious leaders from diverse racial-ethnic-cultural backgrounds, I came to realize that my experience differed from their experience in some significant ways. Despite having been a missionary kid then attending elementary through high school in the United States in schools that were majority Black, and having been part of a church for two decades that could be considered multiracial,[1] I was still grounded in assumptions shaped by my experiences as a White person.

[1] In the multiracial church literature, a multiracial church is defined as one in which at least 20 percent of the congregation is some racial-ethnic-cultural group different from the majority. See Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

I was able to be in a majority Black high school, for example, and still study US history that prioritized the stories of people who looked like me rather than the stories of people who looked like the students sitting next to me in class. This allowed me to think of racism as something "out there" somewhere rather than "in here" in my own heart and mind, in my church, and in my community. The more I learned, the more I was able to listen. The more I listened, the more I realized that the church is a racialized community set in the context of a racialized society.[2] The more I explored, the more I felt the "fire in my bones" (Jeremiah 20:9) of the Spirit at work challenging me to engage justice as a matter of the gospel.

Jessica: I came to be involved in racial justice work as a pastor. I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA in 2006. My experience is similar to most mainline pastors with many mainline churches being primarily White congregations, often existing in neighborhoods largely populated by people of color. One of the churches I worked in was a White church that was located in a federal reception area for people from West Africa. The second church that I served in El Paso, Texas, was multiethnic, but did not reflect the surrounding community that was 89 percent Hispanic. The current church I serve is primarily White, but the city around us is 70 percent Asian. If communities of faith do not reflect a similar racial make-up to the surrounding community, then something has gone awry. In order to fulfill my calling and in order to be someone who is faithful to the gospel I have found myself having to engage in racial justice work because the dynamics of race always exist, and yet are very rarely discussed.

Chris: I was born into racial injustice. My mother is an immigrant who came to the Twin Cities metro area from rural Jamaica in 1965. Because it was very conservative Christian missionaries who recruited her to come to the Twin Cities, she

[2] A racialized society defined as "a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships." Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

attended a conservative Bible college that was housed on the campus of the University of Minnesota during the 1960s and 1970s. My father is the oldest of six siblings born and raised in rural Iowa. Education was his way out of foster care and he ended up attending the University of Minnesota. My mom met my dad at the Bible college on the University campus and they married in 1967, the year of the Loving Act.

When they married, it was not yet legal across the United States to marry interracially, although it was legal in the state of Minnesota. My parents had been attending their very conservative church on the campus of the University of Minnesota for two to three years. When they went to the pastor to say they were going to marry, the pastor said, "I will not marry you. You're gonna have spotted children. That's an abomination unto the Lord." They had to leave their church, go down the street, and get married at a different church. Shockingly, my parents returned and raised their children in this conservative church. I literally grew up in a church that hated me. I learned about Jesus from people that refused to marry my parents.

As an adult, I went to the same little Bible college that my parents attended. I call the theological education I received as an undergraduate the beginning of my leaving the plantation of evangelical Christianity. I asked questions that simply no one could answer. No one wanted to talk about race. My opinions were not welcome. My theological critiques were not welcome. I was not welcome. I was born into racial justice and it's been a lifelong journey since then trying to figure out why does my own (Body of Christ) family hate me?

What is the context in which you engage the work of racial justice at this moment in your life and in your vocation?

Susan: As a teacher, much of my engagement around racial justice takes place in my classroom. We cannot expect to train pastors who are able to facilitate conversations in their churches and

communities if we are unwilling to have those same conversations in the classroom. This is the work I must do for the sake of the leaders I am part of forming. Another arena is engagement with my colleagues. Some of this is relational as I participate in, rather than avoid, discussions of race. Some of this is structural or systemic as I seek to participate in challenging White normativity in my institution.

Finally, in my personal life, being a part of a faith community with leadership of color has been very important for my spiritual formation. Following my pastors as they lead in areas of justice and as we collectively engage with our local community has been very significant. I need my attention not to be governed by the news cycle or by social media but to pay attention to the concerns raised by my neighbors and by my brothers and sisters in the church. I need to engage in concrete concerns of the community.

Jessica: As a pastor I engage primarily in two very different conversations: one with White people and one with people of color. Many White people struggle with and shy away from conversations about race, feeling embarrassed or acting as if it's impolite to discuss race. That attitude flies in the face of the experience of those in our community who are suffering from racialized pain and who want to discuss it within the larger community. For instance, the 2021 murders of eight women in Atlanta, six of whom were Asian, that started the Stop AAPI Hate movement really impacted our community, but there was no cohesive conversation about it.[3]

Rather, there was a conversation within the Chinese and the Asian American community in our town that happened (and is happening) separate and apart from the ears of White people in our town. As someone who at various points has tried to create a communal table to have this conversation, I have seen how resistant many White people in the community are to talking across racial lines about racial struggle and pain.

[3] Shannon Stapleton. "8 Dead in Atlanta Spa Shootings, With Fears of Anti-Asian Bias." *New York Times*, March 17, 2021. Accessed July 27, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/17/us/shooting-atlanta-acworth

Chris: I am a founding member of Sanctuary Covenant Church which is a Black-led, multiethnic church in Minneapolis. As a lay leader in the church, I find myself doing a lot of premarital counseling and weddings with interracial couples. I engage race in that context with people who are trying to figure out what their life together looks like for the next sixty years. Vocationally, though, I co-founded and co-lead one of the fastest-growing venture capital firms in the United States called Brown Venture Group. We founded our firm based on some data that suggested that 92-96 percent of capital from the venture capital industry—some $70 trillion dollars—was going only to White men.[4]

Women, who are half the population of the United States, were getting less than 1 percent and Black and Latinx businesspeople were getting less than 1 percent. We founded our venture capital firm not only to disrupt racist, unjust, gated communities of business but also, from a business perspective, to access the good deals that have never been considered or funded. I imagine we will continue to be a fast-growing firm for some time as we will never run out of good business deals that have been overlooked by White-centered venture capital firms.

I live my life day to day, every single day, at the intersection of race and gender, trying to figure out how to create opportunities and create access for people that have been locked out of power and access for almost the entirety of United States history.

How does the intersection of race and theology impact or guide your worldview?

Susan: I think about God's clear joy in creating the world and creating humanity in a diversity of peoples and cultures. Cornelis

[4] Suraj Gupta. "Diversity: The Holy Grail of Venture Capital." *Forbes*, May 26, 2022. Accessed July 30, 2022. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/05/26/diversity-the-holy-grail-of-venture-capital/?sh=4b076fdf4178. Dan Primack. "Venture Capital Recons with Its Racial Disparities." *Axios*, June 3, 2020. Accessed July 30, 2022. https://www.axios.com/2020/06/03/venture-capital-racial-disparities

Plantinga defined sin as the culpable vandalism of shalom.[5] When we act out of our fear of the other, we vandalize the shalom of our community. When we foster prejudice and act in discriminatory ways, we vandalize the shalom of our community. Further, we are vandalizing the *imago Dei* when we treat people as "other" or "less than." A theological foundation for thinking about race and engaging in racial justice is the search for shalom, honoring the *imago Dei* in individuals and in peoples.

Jessica: The two places that I go to are the tower and the table. Ted Hiebert's interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel is that the enacted sin is found in humanity's insistence that we all be uniform. We all huddle together and hunker down rather than following God's command to scatter, to be fruitful and diverse.[6] I think that reflects the human instinct many have to 'not see color,' to erase diversity, to become uniform. Communities of faith can fail to honor diversity and to recognize the holy value of diverse fruit in our communities.

The second place I go is the table of Jesus Christ. In the parable of the banquet in Luke 14, the master keeps going out, and going out, and going out. Even poor moral character does not exclude anyone from being invited to this table. What this says to me is that God is more concerned with the banquet table being full than God is concerned about judging who is worthy of attending. This commitment means that everything about us—our color, race, gender, ability, and so forth—is welcome at the table.

Furthermore, it appears that none of us may sit down at the table until everyone sits down at the table. Consider the story of Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9. After becoming king and settling into his role, King David asks if there is anyone in Jonathan's house that he could honor. He locates the one remaining member of

[5] Cornelius Plantinga. *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996).

[6] First Presbyterian Church of Deerfield. "Ted Hiebert: The Tower of Babel." February 12, 2019. https://www.firstpresdf.org/content.cfm?id=213&download_id=544

Jonathan's family, a man who is disabled named Mephibosheth, and brings him to the king's table. I believe he did this because David's promise to Jonathan could not have been fulfilled until he made sure that *that* seat was occupied by Mephibosheth.

These stories provide me with my foundations for work in conversations and relationships across race. Sometimes, especially as White people, we claim ownership over the table and say to others, "you have a seat at the table." We don't acknowledge that this seat was created for and belongs to each unique person, created and loved by God without stipulation of merit or conformity. The truth is that, until every seat is occupied by the person it was created for, we are not complete as a body of faith.

Chris: When I think about "worldview" I think about the literal meaning: You have a view that encompasses the world. When I research what I would call "Western missiology" I see a worldview that says, "We have the answers, you have the questions; we have the resources, you have the need; your job is to receive, ours is to give." The relationship is never a value exchange, it is "power over." When I think about race and worldview, the song *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* comes to mind. If God has the world in his hand metaphorically, and God is looking down at the world, God can see a family in the East and the West simultaneously and has, in my mind, the same loving thoughts about both families.

One of the great challenges in the United States is that our nation was founded on calling indigenous folks "merciless Indian savages" and dehumanizing them and telling imported, enslaved African people they were three-fifths human. We've never had a collective moment of repentance before a holy God for the sins and the atrocities that we've committed at a national level. As a result, our worldview is a distorted theology and missiology. When I think about the intersection of race and theology, I think about the *imago Dei* and how the only path to shalom in the United States is repentance.

What do you see as the role of White leaders in engaging conversations about racialized experience?

Chris: I'm going to let the two White panelists respond to this question.

Jessica: The area that I live in now used to be the headquarters of the John Birch Society.[7] If we consult historical records and real estate records, we learn that my town, along with neighboring towns, were created to preserve segregation in an era that was working toward integration. Thus, in the context that I'm in, there is a very vibrant history of White supremacy that, at one time, was a source of pride. Now, the majority of White people in my community find it a source of shame. But shame over anything is hard to acknowledge and it's very difficult to talk about. Thus they don't talk about it.

Therefore, for me, the role of White people in engaging conversations about race is, first, continuing in this conversation even when it is not central to the national conversation and to have the conversation regularly. We need to incorporate conversations around our racialized experiences into what it means to be Christian, what it means to be someone who values unity without demanding uniformity. We need to be able to acknowledge that there are elements of White culture that make this conversation difficult.

As White people in the United States, we tend to turn our backs quickly when we're uncomfortable with what someone is saying. We have a hard time resisting our desire to perform and to be the "good" White person in the room. I believe that remaining active in the conversation and integrating consideration of racialized experience into how White people think and talk about life is an important role we have in becoming fluent in conversations about race.

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[7] "Serene Enclave: San Marino, U. S.; Birch Headquarters on Coast Shuns Metropolitanism." *New York Times*, August 16, 1964. Accessed July 27, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/1964/08/16/archives/serene-enclave-san-marino-u-s-birch-headquarterson-coast-shuns.html. Randle J. Hart. "There Comes a Time: Biography and the Founding of a Movement Organization." *Qualitative Sociology* 33, no. 1 (03, 2010): 55-77.

Susan: I have a friend and colleague who, as a person of color, has expressed how exhausted she feels trying to pastor a church through COVID-19 and multiple events of racially oriented violence. She said to me on several occasions, "I cannot handle another White person asking a question. I cannot." She challenged me, "Go get your people. Go get your people!" At one level, my answer to the question is that this is my responsibility: to "go get my people." What that looks like at any given moment is part of my ongoing discipleship. Part of "getting my people" is being willing to have uncomfortable conversations. It means being willing to take responsibility for my own learning and growth as well as taking responsibility for my people to bring them into the conversation.

What's at stake if we ignore or minimize these conversations?

Jessica: All of it. All of it is at stake. As Christians, if we are not actively loving people as they were created to be, if we are not actively engaging every nation and every person, then it is all at stake in terms of our faithful expression of the gospel. The gospel that we preach was never intended to be valid only sometimes or for some lives. The whole point of the good news is that it's good news for everybody. And the good news needs to sound like good news for everybody. If we preach a gospel that only sounds like good news for some people, then it is no gospel at all.

How can we as Christians look in the face of someone who's saying, "I am in pain; this racialized experience hurt me," and not take it to heart? Out of our love and connection for one another, our brothers and our sisters, our siblings are the people whose stories and experiences need to move us. The Spirit uses our siblings in Christ to move us and to make the good news even more vibrant in our lives today, making our experience on earth more as it is in heaven. If we ignore this conversation, then we are ignoring the gospel.

Susan: I would add that this is an issue of discipleship. If we are vandalizing *shalom* and we're vandalizing the *imago Dei* in our

human sisters and brothers, then there's a gap in our discipleship.[8] How can we call ourselves followers of Jesus but pick and choose the context of our discipleship? How can we see ourselves as surrendered to the lordship of Jesus while we hold onto the "right" to maintain prejudice and continue to behave in discriminatory way toward people that Jesus loves?

Chris: I'm in a wide variety of conversations with theologians all over the world and there's this really interesting provocative statement that I've heard pop up in various places, in various communities. The statement goes something like this: "Eurocentric Christianity is a false religion and White Jesus is a false God." I'm not claiming this statement as true or false. The reason I raise the provocative statement is because of the implications to a society that has based its entire gospel only on heaven, not on life to the fullest here on Earth. If your entire theology is wrapped around "get to heaven" and a Eurocentric Christianity is potentially a false religion with a White Jesus who is a false god, what are the implications for the generations and generations of believers who have been practicing that false religion and worshipping that false god? It is a provocative question. But perhaps part of the reason conversations about race are so difficult is because one of the most unpalatable conclusions any Christian could come to is that grandma is not in heaven.

What if grandma owned slaves and grandpa raped enslaved people, and neither ever repented but, instead, went to church every Sunday where there were people of color hanging from trees at the picnic. We have a hard time with these conversations because we have to go through some pretty deep waters to get to the other side. The conversation is difficult because the stakes are very, very high.

How have you experienced isolation as you've attempted to facilitate conversations about race or engage people in racial justice actions? What is that isolated experience for you at a personal level?

[8] See David W. Swanson. *Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

Susan: Of course, I receive student reactions of "you hate all White people" or "you're bringing your liberal politics into a seminary where they don't belong." I experience the unhappy student who takes out their frustration in anonymous evaluations. Dominant culture students also know how to enact their power and work the system to make as much difficulty as possible for educators who are challenging their worldviews. We are living in an era where higher education is in crisis and increasingly under attack by people who want to shut down conversations about racialized experiences.

As uncomfortable as that might be, I'm still able to continue teaching. I'm mindful, though, of many colleagues I know who are marginalized in their institutions. They become "that person" whose agenda is race. They are marginalized and isolated by their peers and by administration. They become the scapegoat and the target for the discomfort and disorientation of White people in their contexts.

What is more painful personally has been relationships that have broken down. I have White friends who have been really important to me but our relationship is now strained. I find it hard to reconcile the life-giving person they have been to me in the past and the discovery of the views they hold about race that I now see are harmful to them and to our shared community. I feel the bite of comments from family members or from members of my faith community suggesting I've lost my faith. I feel the pain of having my character or my spirituality judged because I no longer uphold what used to be our common view of whiteness.

Jessica: Often, as a pastor, when I walk into the room, people are on their best behavior. There are moments when I see people at their worst but, in general, when it comes to social issues, people don't volunteer to talk if I'm in the room. Sometimes I think I'm invited as a pastor into those places because people assume that if I'm there for a tough conversation, then people will speak in a way that is respectful of the pastor or respectful of God.

Yet sometimes the conversations are challenging to navigate. As an example, about a year ago, there was a video made about anti-Asian sentiments in our small town with multiple people being

publicly named. There were three Asian people who defended the video and three White people labeled as racists within the video. Because I personally knew five of the six people, I invited them to come around a common table with a trained facilitator. The hope was we could use this moment to have a constructive conversation. It looked, initially, like we were going to succeed in having this discussion. But, for a variety of reasons outside of my control, we never made it there. Of the five people I knew as friends going into these conversations, only one has remained a friend–the others took steps back. This work is hard and isolating because all of it is personal work.

Chris: I want to speak as a Black man to the White folks in the room. We see you when you lean in, we see you. There will be periods of loneliness when you lean in, because this is some hard work. When we look back at the pictures a hundred years from now, when your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren look back into the archives, they'll see you. So will my great-grandchildren. That matters. It matters that you lean in right now, even though you're probably going to be punished for leaning in right now, but history is moving on, the world is changing fast. We see you and we appreciate you for leaning in.

What knowledge, attitudes, and skills do you see as most essential to your work related to racial justice? What are the tools that you need to do this work?

Jessica: First of all, relationships are the key for me. I don't think that this work can happen outside of relationships. I have a young team at my church. After George Floyd's murder, they were rightfully very angry (as were we all). In one of the conversations that followed, I asked them, "What do you do when Jesus asks you to love a racist? Jesus does ask us to love our enemies and I understand that racists are the enemy right now." We certainly needed to prioritize the care and nurture of our BIPOC siblings in the aftermath of such horrible cruelty and death. Meanwhile, the racist acts people engage in and racist attitudes they demonstrate do not excuse us from Jesus's command to love them. As White people, we are in a remarkably unique position to love White

racists as Jesus would love them. I don't really know how to do that, but I know that we cannot do this work by fully excluding them. Change cannot happen outside of relationship.

Second, I see the importance of humility and listening. Martin Luther King Jr. talked about the impulse to be the drum major.[9] We need to step back and realize that, as White people, our role is not necessarily out in front leading. Stepping back is really difficult when we are trained and taught that stepping forward is the essence of leadership.

Susan: I would echo part of what you're saying about relationships although I'm thinking about relationships in another sense. I need friends and colleagues who are also engaging in this work. I appreciate my colleagues who are also working on decentering whiteness in the academy, for example, because there's a place for us to draw from one another's wisdom in the work. I find it so helpful to have colleagues with whom I can process events that happen or brainstorm strategies for my work. We need to sojourn together.

I would also echo what has been said about listening and add to it. Listening is a spiritual discipline. I particularly think about how an impulse to say, "Yea, but…" can raise up in me when I listen to stories of people whose experience or social location is different from my own. I notice my impulse to explain away their interpretation or to challenge what they are saying. When I feel, "Yea, but…" rise in me, that is my signal to be silent and to listen.

I also find the spiritual practice of lament to be crucial. This practice is the only way I know how to get through the grief and the shame of moments when I'm emotionally flooded by a realization about the racialized experience of people in the world. Left to myself, I will shut down and isolate. Lament is a healthier response to the pain than analysis or denial or intellectualizing.

Chris: I've learned a lot about this question while leading a business. We're engaging markets that we, the partners of

[9] Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Drum Major Instinct." in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr*. Edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran. (New York: Intellectual Properties Management, 1998), 165-186.

the business, did not grow up in. Therefore, when we see their solutions, sometimes we don't even know how to assess whether a business is investment ready. What we have learned to do is trust the leadership of the community out of which those businesses come. We seek out subject matter experts and people who are embedded in that community to vet the business because we don't actually know how to vet the business from our own contexts. This is a question of posture.

How do we engage women-led businesses as a four-man team or engage Latinx businesses when none of us is Hispanic, or indigenous businesses when none of us is indigenous? We cannot come in and say, "We know business better than you," because they could say in a heartbeat, "not in my neighborhood, you don't." Our best investment opportunities come from exploring the ignored racial and cultural ecosystems that have never been considered. I will never be a woman in a boardroom so sometimes I have to be quiet and listen to the women who are in that boardroom. It is a matter of posture.

Conclusion

The authors reflected personally and collectively on the experience of this panel following the event. Much like the larger conversation of race in the United States, we found participation on this panel to be uncomfortable at points. Each of us experienced different insecurities about what we said or didn't say, and we questioned whether this conversation was valuable for documentation. In a society where White experience is privileged and centered, did it feel appropriate to center yet another discussion about racialized experience around the needs, feelings, and experiences of White people?

Our conclusion to this question is nuanced. We acknowledge that there are White communities (including Christian communities) to which BIPOC people are not given access. Therefore, we believe it is imperative that White religious leaders initiate discussions about diverse racialized experiences within our communities as a way to challenge White isolation and White

silence. We recognize that equipping White communities to engage in these conversations is important in reducing racialized pain in BIPOC lives and communities. As a part of this commitment, we believe it is important for White leaders to authentically share their fears, hopes, and strategies in leading these conversations.

We further affirm that conversation alone is insufficient. For those of us who are White leaders, we must bear in mind that whenever anyone in our community hurts, we all hurt. To paraphrase a quote attributed to Mauri activist, Lilia Watson, and echoing the words of Martin Luther King Jr., the liberation of our White community is inextricably bound up in the liberation of our brothers and sisters of color. The call to engage our communities toward racial justice is even more so than ever before part and parcel of our role as Christian leaders in this era of isolation and alienation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Where have you, as a *Person of Color*, experienced a White person stumbling into a space in a way that creates distress?
- Where have you, as a *White Person*, felt unequipped or lacked confidence to engage racial pain in the context of your church or organization?
- Where have you felt isolated, unequipped, or lacked confidence to engage racial justice concerns?
- How have these dynamics affected your ability to engage your community and equip others to communicate the Gospel as good news for everyone?

Call for papers. Do you have an idea for an article that could be published in the JRL? Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay to rmartin@wesleyseminary.edu.

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How Can We Learn Across Difference? A Conversation about Ethical Research and Writing vis-à-vis Identity and Positionality

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Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi
Susan J. Dunlap
Dale L. Lemke
Jason A. Miller

Abstract

As practitioners and scholars who engage in research on leadership, attention to why and how we conduct these activities is paramount. As such, this article is a summary of a panel conversation that took place at the 2022 annual meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership among several researchers to discuss the ways in which those of us who study and learn from religious leaders and communities might be attentive to a) our motivations and applications in researching and writing about leadership, and b) how our research might contribute to connection and community, especially across sociocultural differences of identity and location.

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Susan J. Dunlap is consulting faculty and director of the Master of Divinity/Master of Social Work Degree Program at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.
*Dr. Jason A. Miller is associate director of TEND (*tendwell.org*), a nonprofit in Tustin, California, and has served as an adjunct professor of Christian ministry and leadership at Talbot School of Theology and Biola University.*
Dr. Dale L. Lemke is associate professor of Christian ministries and assistant dean of academic innovation at University of Northwestern-St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Background

In fall 2021, Robert—editor of the *Journal of Religious Leadership*—received a manuscript from Dale and Jason, two white scholars and practitioners in the field. The essay focused on experiences of African American pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder as these pastors led their congregations through those particularly tumultuous moments. Robert thought it was interesting but somewhat problematic for two white authors to be researching and reporting on the experiences of black pastors.

Wanting some input on the matter, he sent the draft to two other scholars in the ARL guild: Jeffery Tribble, an African American professor of ministry and associate dean for advanced professional studies at Columbia Theological Seminary, and Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, a Latina professor of leadership and formation and director of contextual education at Iliff School of Theology. Jeffery read the article and found it had information useful in his courses. Kristina raised insightful questions that might be directed to the two white authors:

- How did you come to be interested in this topic?
- What are your own motivations for doing this kind of research?
- Who is your audience? What are you trying to communicate, and to whom are you trying to communicate?

As a board member of the *Journal of Religious Leadership*, and as someone who teaches social science research methods, Kristina works with students to help them understand the importance of naming identities and positionalities as part of the task of research. From her perspective, one rooted in social justice, it was crucial that the researchers answer these questions explicitly for the audience to understand their motivations and anticipated applications.

After these exchanges, when Robert received a second manuscript from a white transgender man about experiences of pastors of color, the question in Robert's mind about research across difference expanded beyond racial differences. Research is often complicated by sexual identity, class, age, nationality, and other factors. If this complexity is acknowledged, then white research

investigating experiences of people of color is not unlike all kinds of research that occurs across differences of power, status, gender, and many other categories of sociocultural identity.

As a long-standing member of ARL, Robert could not think of another time when the ARL, mostly consisting of white Protestants, collectively examined our ethics, methods, motivations, and applications in the practice of researching others, especially those who may be marginalized or oppressed. In the planning process for the 2022 ARL Conference, the opportunity arose for Kristina and Robert to host a panel discussion on precisely this topic as a first stage of reflexive conversation in the ARL about our practices of research and how we might orient ourselves more empathetically to honor experiences that are different from ours and how our research and writing might contribute better to the struggle for shalom.

As people of faith, we believe that theological research is a sacred enterprise because it plumbs the religious/spiritual depths of human experience: We hold others' sacred stories, and we are tasked with communicating those stories on someone else's behalf. The importance of how we pass on those stories—so that truth and accuracy are upheld and the dignity of persons is honored—cannot be overstated.

However, all of us are inescapably subjective creatures: We have assumptions, perspectives, and biases, most of which might be unconscious. This means that in the telling of others' stories, the positionality of the teller—the researcher—matters. The researcher's race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, ability status, and so on always informs what one hears and interprets. *Who we are* always comes through in what we say.

The inescapable question here is: How do we currently research across these types of vast differences? And how might we do it with more integrity? With greater authenticity? With increasing understanding and reflexivity of our own identities and positionalities? As researchers, teachers of leadership practitioners, and religious leaders committed to faithful praxis, these questions should be raised in our own research and writing as well as in our teaching and leading: How might we research more responsibly and ethically, and how do we better learn and grow *with* one another?

This essay distills a panel discussion at the 2022 annual meeting of the ARL entitled "How Can We Learn across Difference? A Conversation about Ethical Research and Writing vis-à-vis Identity and Positionality." Kristina and Robert, as the conveners of this discussion and primary authors of this essay, are not simply replicating the discussion for a written audience. Rather, we are trying to faithfully represent the content and intent, albeit with slight revisions and a different order to the conversation to make it a better fit for written form.

Our panelists include Dr. Jason Miller, professor at Talbot School of Theology and Biola University in La Mirada, California, and Dr. Dale Lemke, professor at the University of Northwestern in St. Paul, Minnesota. They wrote the article mentioned above that is included in the April 2022 issue of the *JRL* entitled "Hardships, Growth, and Hope: The Experience of Black Pastoral Leaders During a Season of Social Unrest and COVID-19 Quarantine." [1]

Our conversation also included Dr. Susan J. Dunlap, a Presbyterian Church USA minister and chaplain at Urban Ministries of Durham, North Carolina. She teaches pastoral care at Duke Divinity School and administers its Master of Divinity/ Master of Social Work Degree Program as well. We focused on her recent book *Shelter Theology: The Religious Lives of People without Homes* in which she recounts her experience of, and reflections on, working with unhoused people in a shelter.[2]

These three authors are white academicians who are researching people of different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic statuses. The following sections explore their motivations for writing and researching and the outcomes they hope for in their publications. Our primary aim in this exercise is to foster conversation among academicians and religious practitioners about how we engage the work of research and writing across significant sociocultural

[1] Jason A. Miller and Dale L. Lemke, "Hardships, Growth, and Hope: The Experience of Black Pastoral Leaders During a Season of Social Unrest and COVID-19 Quarantine," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 21(1) (Spring 2022): 51-82.

[2] Susan J. Dunlap, *Shelter Theology: The Religious Lives of People without Homes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021).

differences, taking into account our cultural privilege and ethical responsibility to honor the dignity of all persons and groups.

Jason Miller and Dale Lemke, "Experience of Black Pastoral Leaders"

We turn first to Jason and Dale and their article published in the Spring 2022 *JRL*. After Robert reviewed their initial manuscript, he reached out to them as editor to ask them to be more explicit in the manuscript about how they were thinking about their positionality, subjectivity, and motivations for researching and writing, and what they hoped to accomplish in their article.

In the panel conversation, Robert asked Jason and Dale to reflect again, for the audience, on the same questions. Responding, Jason said that he had been in pastoral work for fifteen years, and then entered a doctoral program with a burning question: "Why is it that Christian leadership so rarely takes into account the way Jesus engaged others as he exercised leadership?" After graduation, Jason started a research project to answer this question; he focused on the pastoral and professional experiences of thirty-four pastors who were primarily white. In the middle of his research, someone asked if he had investigated the difficult circumstances of African American pastors whose parishioners were devastated by COVID-19 and who had to respond to the recent murder of George Floyd by the police.

Jason realized that he didn't know what was going on in African American religious communities because he was involved primarily with white communities of faith. He realized that he and his white evangelical community needed to know what was happening with their black and African American siblings, not only to be present and empathetic to their circumstances but also to dispel some of the misconceptions and disinformation among white evangelicals about black evangelicals.

Jason reached out to a seminary friend, Dale Lemke, to partner with him in this research. For his part, Dale wanted to accept the challenge even though his predominantly white, conservative colleagues and community at Northwestern were rather uninformed

about black experiences and resistant to the notion of systemic racial inequities. Having listened to black students on Northwestern's campus talk about their experiences after the George Floyd murder right there in Minneapolis and the all-consuming social conflict that ensued, Dale could only imagine the pain and frustration that his black friends and students experienced.

Dale felt that Jason's invitation to research black pastors' experiences was a specific and compelling opportunity to understand the trauma and travail within the black community and represent them to his white colleagues and community. He wanted to share their stories as a means of shifting white misperceptions so that they might better understand racial inequities, troubles, and frustrations within black faith communities and among black pastoral leaders. In other words, Dale had a vision of sharing stories of transformation within black communities to foster transformation in his own community.

For about six months during 2020 and 2021, Jason and Dale worked to interview nineteen black pastors with the purpose of detailing the loss and hardship for black communities as well as the leadership resilience and growth that guides these communities to overcome political division, engage social justice, and cultivate healing and reconciliation. Initially, they tried to partner with colleagues of color to conduct the research; but because of the emerging pandemic and intensifying racial struggles, their black colleagues were otherwise engaged in their communities and, understandably, did not have the bandwidth to join in their research project.

Early on, Jason and Dale wondered if they should even undertake this project. They asked themselves: Because there is so much potential for something to go wrong, should we do this? How will it be received? Can we do this research appropriately, in an empathetic, authentic, and honest way? They reached out to several black pastors and colleagues who encouraged them to receive and then share these important experiences with a wider audience. They believed that white communities needed to hear what was really going on in black communities from black folks.

They believed in the power of these stories to transform hearts and minds within white communities and urged Jason and Dale to continue with this critical research.

At first in the research process, Dale and Jason met a hesitant skepticism from black pastors, many of whom asked why these white men wanted to engage the stories of African American communities. Then Dale reached out to a former student, now pastor, to interview. Because of the trust level already established by their prior relationship, the interview went well. Subsequently, the pastor introduced Dale to other black pastors who were willing to be interviewed. With that type of intracommunity credibility, their research "snowballed."[3]

The stories they heard revealed a complex world of struggle and heartbreak against seemingly insurmountable forces of injustice. But the interviews also revealed hope-filled resilience within the black community and effective leadership to guide people through the tribulations of the pandemic and overcome obstacles of racist oppression. These are the stories recounted in their *JRL* article.

Susan Dunlap, *Shelter Theology*

We turn now to Susan Dunlap and the book *Shelter Theology: The Religious Lives of People without Homes* about her experiences with persons who are unhoused. The book is mostly situated within a shelter in Durham, North Carolina, at the same time Susan was teaching pastoral theology and care at Duke Divinity School. About fifteen years ago, Susan realized that although she was teaching pastoral care, she wasn't engaged in the practice of pastoral care within a community. Soon thereafter, she offered to be a chaplain at one of two emergency shelters in Durham for three mornings a week.

[3] Snowball sampling is a specific research technique in which "the researcher first identifies a group of people, and after gathering data, he/she asks them to recommend similar cases for the study…this method is most effective when members of the population are not easily accessible." Mahin Naderifar, Hamideh Goli, and Fereshteh Ghaljaie, "Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research," *Strides in Development of Medical Education* 14(3) (September 2017): 2. DOI: 10.5812/sdme.67670.

Susan said that it quickly became all too obvious that her academic, Presbyterian, progressive theological language and perspective was not theirs and that she did not agree with a lot of the statements and the underlying worldviews that seemed to be very sustaining for the residents. She said:

> For example, I recognized that my form of offering carefully constructed prose in prayers or encouragement was very different from the sayings that each of them offered to each other. Phrases such as "God can make a way out of no way," "Don't let the devil steal your joy," "God is in control," and so forth. That difference was something I wanted to take seriously both as pastoral caregiver in that setting and as a teacher of future pastoral caregivers. We have to take the form and content of their language seriously. It's important to them that "God will provide" and that they should "give thanks in all circumstances" and that "God has a purpose for your suffering, that your suffering is not wasted." I wanted to teach students how theological statements that are true in one context aren't necessarily empowering and sustaining in another context. So, I started paying attention to the performance and content of the theological utterances that emerged in the context of the prayer service and in my conversations with the residents.

In her book, Susan drew upon the words of her teacher Mark Lewis Taylor who cautioned that representing people who are victimized or marginalized in research is fraught with tensions, especially if individuals inhabit a social location that one's own group has victimized. Susan continued,

> Our research can all too easily infantilize or reproduce harmful stereotypes about the poor or people of a different race. We run the risk of subtly blaming them for their poverty or victimization or setting oneself up as the valiant hero or as the brilliant one who has

the solutions. But Dr. Taylor argued that representing vulnerable groups in research and writing can be justified if one is actively involved in changing the circumstances that victimize them. We can offset the risks of our research by acknowledging those risks from the very beginning: that we may reproduce stereotypes, get it wrong, or misunderstand. So, the first step *is to acknowledge the complicated nature of the situation and our limited ability to represent others faithfully*. For example, in my interviews with very poor women whose children were taken away from them, I wondered if they might think that I was judging them, if that was a factor in the interview. In another interview with an African American man, I identified myself as a "white woman," and he interrupted me: "You're not a white woman!" I asked what he meant, and he said, "White women are scared of black men, and you're not scared." I learned something that day, that black men in conversation with me may have been thinking that I was afraid of them, and that they were at risk if I felt threatened by their presence and called the authorities to do something. That was an important learning about the specifics of my being white talking to a black man. In this respect, I try to anticipate and be aware of how gender, race, power, education, or able-bodiedness can function in a conversation.

The second way we can mitigate the risks of further victimizing vulnerable groups is *to engage in acts of resistance to the powers that are in fact victimizing the people we interview.* In my case, not only was I working with unhoused people, but I was also involved with a community organizing group advocating for affordable housing for precisely the people in the shelter. A third suggestion from Mark Lewis Taylor is that *we should not only address exploitative structures in society, but also*

> *that we should pay attention to the structures in which we are involved: our church, university, or neighborhood.* We need to be aware of the exploitative forces at play where we live and work.

Motivation and Application in Research

Motivation starts the research ball rolling. Perhaps we are especially curious about something. Perhaps we sense something is "wrong" or some person or group is being harmed. We might start a research project simply because it is an academic necessity for promotion and tenure. Whatever the reasons for starting, our subjectivities frame the research project. The more aware we are of our desires and biases, the more cognizant we will be of how our research and writing are affected by our identity and social location.

It is almost inconceivable that research is not undertaken with the hope of changing something—or at least illuminating something—whether socioculturally, personally, or professionally. To start a project, we need some idea, even if exceedingly vague, of who and what we want to influence. If the subjective aims of the researcher (as well as locations, commitments, and preunderstandings) are left unexamined, the research can easily transform subjects into objects.

It all too often renders our content and conclusions as tools to influence audiences to the specific changes that *we* think are necessary and good without adequate consideration of the needs, desires, and hopes of our research subjects as living religious peoples and communities.

Motivation also has a teleological orientation in terms of *application*: How might I, as researcher, inform others? What needs to be done? How might my research change things for the better? In particular, who are the communities to which I am responding, that I am addressing, and what do I hope those communities will do as a result of my inherently interventionist research?

By application, we mean a whole host of factors related to whatever happens, whatever changes, whatever results from the research intervention, and how that relates retroactively to our

initial motivations and sets up the next set of problems and future research agendas. In this respect, motivation implies application, anticipates it, and orients content and methods to it.

Together, motivation and application yield a heuristic future orientation constituted not only by one's awareness but also one's unconscious proclivities. The degree to which we are aware of our motivations and anticipated applications, the more ethical and intentional we can be in the process of research from beginning to end.

With these categories in mind, we asked our panelists to reflect on motivations, purposes, and hoped-for outcomes for researching and writing about communities across differences. Dale and Jason reiterated that their main objective in the research and writing was to bring stories of African American Christians to their communities, mainly composed of white conservative evangelicals, as a way of breaking through misinformation and prejudice toward greater awareness, empathy, and active solidarity with the struggles of black pastors and faith communities. But in the initial draft of their *JRL* article, that defining motivation was not explicit; they did not identify it as such, even though it was explicit to them.

When asked why they didn't make their overarching motivation clear in the article, they had two responses. First, they wanted the experiences of black pastors in the foreground and did not want the article to be about their personal stories. So, the article was structured more as a journalistic reporting of their interviews and findings with very little said about who the reporters were and what they wanted to accomplish in publishing the article. Their second response was that they knew that their communities of white evangelicals might not be positively disposed to the substance of the article, and so they were reluctant to make their motivations and objectives explicit because of the likelihood that they would be judged for doing so.

However, through the editorial conversation between Robert, Dale, and Jason, it became clear that for the authors—as white males researching black experiences—to establish trust with their readers, it would be helpful to reveal the backstory of their journey and to be more open about their purpose and objectives.

Yet, what would be an appropriate balance between reflecting on themselves and telling the stories of black pastors? It is a difficult balance to determine; they did not want the article to become an exercise in autoethnography, as Dale put it.[4] How can we name our identities and positionalities without our stories becoming predominant and overshadowing the actual subject?

This is where creativity and technique in imagining new rhetorical forms for writing about the research helped Dale and Jason find the right balance between self-disclosure that generates trust with one's audience and storytelling that illumines the rich, complex reality of others. Jason and Dale reorganized the article simply and effectively into three main sections. The first was an introduction into their identities, positionalities, methodologies, and purposes. This section clearly stated who they are, why they are doing this work, and their hopes for its contribution to their white evangelical communities.

The bulk of the article is clearly divided into a) a report of their interviews with black pastoral leaders and, b) after each "report," a shorter section entitled "reflections on interview findings" in which Jason and Dale reflect on the meanings of the stories to them personally and to their location and context. The article concludes with a section on "practical implications for leadership" that poses a clear challenge to white leaders of majority white Christian communities "to overcome political division. … Through humble listening that seeks to understand and respond to the experiences and explanations of those around us, Christian leaders can honor one another as image bearers and demonstrate the Kingdom of God to a watching world."

The conversation with Susan about her motivations and anticipated outcomes was illuminating as well. Recall that research and writing was part of her activist engagement with homelessness and populations most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of rapacious

[4] Autoethnography is a particular research methodology that "allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture." Mariza Méndez, "Autoethnography as a Research Method: Advantages, Limitations and Criticisms," *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 15(2) (2013): 280.

capitalism. Although her primary aim is to change the circumstances of persons who are unhoused, she also did not want to romanticize the population or uncritically portray them. She said,

> Some people might want to say that if I'm going to talk about a vulnerable population, then I do want to eliminate from my discourse any kind of negativity or negative perspective; I don't want them to come off badly. But we can't romanticize the population because that doesn't do justice to them. It is untruthful to represent these people as sweet, innocent, and childlike and who have pure, uncomplicated faith. To disregard anything that falls outside that template is just lazy research. It's dehumanizing to think that there is a group of people who are not vulnerable to temptation; and it's unfaithful to the full, complex reality of our common humanity.
>
> I've thought a lot about the differences between my life and my reality and their life and their reality. Sometimes I think, 'We're all alike,' and I am tempted to overlook the real differences. One time, I was sitting with a woman; and we were chatting about this or that. I thought, 'Wow, we're just two human beings here, and we're just alike. And then she began talking about how her child had been taken away because she had mistreated her child. This woman had not only endured horrible circumstances, but also had inflicted horrible suffering on others. In that brief moment, I experienced a major gestalt change from thinking that we were so similar to being blown away by our differences. Now, I can recognize our similarities; in many ways we are alike. But in many ways, we have very different life experiences of poverty, hardship, and the effect of violent police officers or over-eager social agencies, for example. So, I like to think about my relationships with people I work with as people with

> whom I can connect, but who have had very different experiences. It is crucial that we strive to faithfully reflect that complex reality."

Susan's emphasis on recognizing and representing the full complexity of people's lives asks for an additional type of accountability in research and writing: an accountability to not only the interpersonal differences among persons, but also the larger, institutional, and cultural forces at play in our lives. So often we like to think of race, gender, and socioeconomic status mainly in interpersonal terms, but there are larger systems at work—real estate redlining, educational assumptions in schools, barriers to adequate legal representation, inequitable pay, and so many others—of which we are participants.

How do we hold ourselves accountable to represent these larger structural dynamics in people's lives? *Shelter Theology* is an excellent example of holding the interpersonal and the systemic together in complex reinforcement.

Given Susan's overarching motivation of being faithful to the complexities and ambiguities of reality, she brought to the conversation three guidelines for engaging research and writing truthfully:

> The first is that all attempts to represent people should be guided by *empathy*, a generous attempt to see the world as they see it cognitively and experience it emotionally. As clergy, that's what we do; most of us clergy are pretty good at empathy. So, use that skill as a researcher. Secondly, when pastoring in a setting that is different from the one that you are used to, and you are trying to speak a word of hope, a word that is sustaining, or a word that affirms the full dignity of persons, you have to be guided by *love*. Sometimes when I'm responding to someone, I calculate exactly what to say when actually I should have been operating out of love. Finally, when offering pastoral support or interviewing someone, you need to be in a *prayerful posture*. What's

> happening in those moments is a disclosure of the divine between us and the other person. We should be open to how the Spirit is leading, how God beholds the person in front of us, and how the interaction is not only up to us but that there are other 'powers' that are a part of our relationships.

What is clear in the wisdom offered by Dale, Jason, and Susan is that motivation and application must be attended to not only within the research questions, overarching methodologies, analyses of data, and writing of results, but also within the minute, seemingly insignificant interactions between the researcher and the ones whose lives and stories the researcher hopes to learn about and share. It is a delicate, sacred thing to represent another; in this regard, cultivation of trust is essential and reinforces accountabilities to both our own communities of belonging and the communities with which we engage.

Even though we have touched upon the necessity of vulnerability, love, empathy, and the guidance of the Spirit in the task of research, it is important to emphasize that each of these reflects the foundational work of cultivating trust, which is a mutual endeavor between researchers and lived communities that takes time and requires a shared authority, an orientation to a learning *with* rather than a learning *from* that can easily become extractive, exploitive, or appropriative.

Such learning *with* assumes co-relationality, a sojourning together as people of faith through offering care and ministry to one another, which is a unique aspect of religiously informed research. Jason and Dale shared a bit of how this care took place in the context of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with black pastors:

> The story of our research had an authenticity that allowed people—as they gravitated into it—to spend their relational collateral with us. By the time we got done with the interview, the hope was that this would be a safe space for self-reflection. There was a question about whether and to what extent the creation of

> safe space could occur between white researchers and African American pastors; but because of the impacts and vulnerabilities that COVID created for all of us, it allowed a unique space for reflexivity and catharsis for pastors to just actually breathe and process a little bit, to try to make sense of their work. We both needed that hour and a half [interview] together. We needed to hear from them and to become part of their world, and they needed some space to process.

In contrast, Susan's research took place only after years of being a chaplain volunteer at the shelter in Durham and becoming a part of the community. She said,

> I was there for fifteen years, and I just got to know people. They were friends. We did stuff together. We went places together. And the way I led the prayer service was that they did it. I opened and closed; but all of the leadership, all of the power, and all of the authority was turned over to them. I think that that contributed to my trustworthiness, that I trusted them to do the prayer service. It was longevity and shared authority. We talk about the importance of building trust, and it often takes years.

Along with this, Susan offered invaluable advice regarding the researcher's own disposition when learning *with* others, which flies in the face of unrealistic models that emphasize the researcher as dispassionate observer:

> Another recommendation is that we researchers should not approach a vulnerable community as invulnerable or detached, as if we have no aches or pains or vulnerabilities. We should not only be aware of our socio-cultural insecurities, but we should also acknowledge them explicitly. In our prayer services, I would ask residents to pray for my family or things in my life that were sources of difficulty. In this way we

> are not invincible researchers peering in at the suffering of others. We go into the research relationship with the willingness to be changed by it, to have our world turned upside down. To enter into research with vulnerable populations means that we risk our assumptions and make ourselves available for discomfort.

Beyond the nurturing of trust within lived religious communities, the panel discussed the importance of creating trust with those who read our research, otherwise known as the audience. How can individuals trust what they are reading? In a time of great skepticism about information and what constitutes fact, the cultivation of credibility and trust that assists in validating what is being shared about people's experiences—especially experiences of people who are marginalized or oppressed—deserves consideration. How do we generate trust with readers we might never meet?

Through the editing process that Jason and Dale undertook for their article, they came to the realization that it would be more poignant for readers—particularly those from their similar social identities and locations as white evangelical scholars and practitioners—to engage with the authors' reflections on the stories they heard, so that their work might be conveyed with a higher level of honesty and transparency for their audience. This was not always the case, though, as they shared:

> The methodological portion of our article was much longer initially, because we were looking at this conversation from the perspectives of other white researchers who run in our circles and who may be somewhat discomforted by these findings. We didn't want them to be able to write off the findings because the methodology was not sound from the beginning. We didn't want to grant them the opportunity to say, 'I don't know that you used current scientific practice the way that you should have.' We wanted to cut out every argument that had the potential to dismiss the findings

> that came out of the voices of black leaders, because these voices matter, these findings are what they are, and we have to deal with them.

While attending to trust and credibility with readers, Dale and Jason kept returning to this critical practical question: Who is the primary beneficiary of this research? They answered,

> If the primary beneficiary is the researcher, we should start asking questions about whether or not this is right or ethical. It was one of the questions that we kept bouncing around. We wanted to know: how does this serve this community? What is the gain? Ultimately, this article goes on our CVs and moves knowledge forward in white communities. But do black leaders and communities somehow gain in in a way that that moves the conversation forward for them? Any research endeavor has multiple beneficiaries, and do the primary ones need to be this group of people? Those are the questions with which we wrestled, and it all gets down to the issue of motivation.

In the field of research, trust, accuracy, and honesty as ethical values are determined by practices and processes that create internal and external validity for the research itself. Internal validity asks: "Do the findings of the study make sense? Are they credible to the people we study and to our readers? Do we have an authentic portrait of what we were looking at?"[5]

External validity asks: "Do the conclusions of a study have any larger import? Are they transferable to other contexts? Do they 'fit'? How far can they be 'generalized'?"[6] Two of the most salient threats to validity, especially in learning *with* living religious leaders and

[5] Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1994) 278.

[6] Miles and Huberman, 279.

communities, are researcher bias and reactivity.[7] Susan, Dale, and Jason—as scholars, practitioners, and religious leaders themselves—have recounted the varying ways they gave particular and sustained attentiveness to both of these threats, being careful to check their own biases and assumptions and to name explicitly their identities and locations. They were attentive to their own reactivities to certain theological phrases and practiced self-reflexivity when moments of discomfort or resistance arose. Moreover, with integrity and balance, they were intentional in discussing such validity threats in writing about their research.

Specific practices toward cultivating validity are common among researchers. For example, when conducting interviews across social identities and locations, some researchers share their written results and interpretations (what they intend to publish) with the individuals they interview to ensure the accuracy in representation of their stories and experiences. This is a practice known as member checking, which helps create internal validity.[8]

Jason and Dale engaged in a type of member checking with black pastors they interviewed by summarizing some of the themes they heard from individuals at the end of each interview, as a practice of on-the-spot confirmation. They also later sent more polished summaries of themes to these pastors to gain feedback from them on the accuracy of their representations of their stories and shared experiences.

In garnering external validity, Jason and Dale sought reviews of their draft article from colleagues of color prior to submitting it to the *JRL*. In practices for both internal and external validity, people who can come alongside researchers so that co-relationality and learning *with* takes place at every phase are invaluable to the cultivation of trust toward accountability. Ultimately, research is never a solitary journey and must always be done in community.

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[7] Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach,* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013) 124.

[8] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009) 191.

Conclusion

Kristina and Robert initiated this reflective conversation about our research practices to engage several levels within this work. The panel discussion began with white scholars who studied black experiences. Our concern primarily had to do with misunderstandings and misappropriation of black experiences by white scholars. In this respect, it is the white scholars we focused on as they learned *with* others of very different identities, locations, and subjectivities. And as the ARL is a majority white organization, we want our guild to do its own reflexive work to examine our practices carefully and reorient them in ways that are more ethically responsive and responsible.

However, unreflective research and unethical misappropriations are not limited to white folks. They happen across all kinds of sociocultural identities and locations, as was shared by the research conducted with unhoused people. Additionally, we should not assume that appropriation only happens unilaterally (e.g., whites appropriating black experience and cultures) or that a dominant/majority group in one context is also dominant/majority in all contexts.

For this reason, we are keen to broaden the scope of the discussion to include everyone, in all social locations, as we endeavor to learn from one another across religious, ideological, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other differences. Even as we began this conversation in the context of white academic researchers studying experiences of black pastors, as well as people across various racial groups who are unhoused, the question, "How can we learn *with* one another?" applies to all of us who lead, teach, and conduct research within and beyond our respective communities.

Call for papers. Do you have an idea for an article that could be published in the JRL? Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay to rmartin@wesleyseminary.edu.

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BOOK REVIEW

LEADING WITH THE SERMON: PREACHING AS LEADERSHIP

By: William H. Willimon
Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020
150 pp. e-book
ISBN 978-1-5064-5638-6

William Willimon is convinced that providing leadership is an essential part of the pastoral role because every congregation is called to participate in God's mission. He believes that leading and preaching are inextricably tied. In the preface he says, "My aim is to show how preaching aids and shapes our leadership and how our leadership proves the context, purposes, and test of our preaching" (8).

I wish I had been given this book when I began pastoral ministry thirty years ago. As I pastored, I gradually realized that three essential parts of the pastoral role are preaching, leading, and managing. In *Leading with the Sermon,* Willimon shows there is a natural coherence to these three activities. Helping congregations participate in God's mission requires leadership. Preaching is one of the best ways of helping a congregation grasp what God is calling them to be and do. Ensuring mission actually happens requires management. If any of these three are lacking, a congregation will struggle to play its part in God's mission.

Communication is a fundamental part of leadership. Many who lead outside the church look with envy on pastoral leaders who are required and expected to speak every week to the community they lead. For pastors the sermon is not just a pragmatic opportunity it is a theological necessity. "The vocative, missional intent of preaching (derived from the nature of the gospel itself) is why, from the first days of Jesus' earthly ministry, *preaching and leadership are inseparable.* In preaching, God's people are moved, that is *led*—little by little, or sometimes violently jolted—in the power of the Holy

Spirit, Sunday by Sunday, toward new and otherwise unavailable descriptions of reality" (16).

Willimon draws on more than forty years as a pastor, a seminary professor and a bishop. He makes a strong and persuasive case using well-chosen illustrations from the many congregations and pastors with which he has worked. Fundamentally this book is a plea to pastors to step up and lead and, since communication is such a core element of leadership, it is an encouragement for pastors to grasp the opportunity preaching presents to exercise leadership. "I know of no church that goes forth from the cozy confines of their contented congregation toward a world dying for want of the gospel without someone who is willing not only to preach but also to lead" (21).

Leading with the Sermon prompted me to reflect on how I exercise my calling. In naming the tendency of pastors and congregation to collude in what is comfortable it strengthened my resolve to speak and lead bravely. "Faithful sermons require risk-taking preachers because a sermon is not merely a statement about where the congregation is, but an inspired witness to where God is calling the congregation to be" (52).

There are, however, two assumptions Willimon makes which, I think, should be challenged. First, the model of the pastor, as one who is expected to lead, preach and manage, aligns with the omnicompetent pastor. Rather than the body of Christ, in which gifts are distributed by the Holy Spirit with every person participating a ministry, the pastor is seen as the one who ministers on behalf of others. Willimon's case would have been stronger if he had explored how his understanding of the pastoral role fits with the body of Christ. Second, the model of preaching Willimon implicitly advocates is the traditional Sunday monologue. In the last twenty years the digital revolution has transformed communication. A pastor, seeking to share a vision of what God is calling the congregation to be and do, is faced with many styles and media for doing this. Willimon's case would have been strengthened if he had engaged with this diversity, suggesting either how this variety might serve pastors as they seek to communicate, or by making a case for the benefits of the traditional sermon.

Those preparing to be pastors, particularly in mainline denominations, are likely to find *Leading with the Sermon* very helpful. Faced with the competing expectations of what it means to be a pastor Willimon offers a fresh frame. Whereas most see the different roles of leader, preacher and manager as a regrettable reality of pastoral ministry, he identifies a natural synergy in them and suggests how this can be used effectively both for pastor and congregation. For that very reason, pastors (like me) who struggle to make sense of their calling amid the conflicting demands they encounter every week, will also find *Leading with the Sermon* stimulating, encouraging and challenging.

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BOOK REVIEW

FAITHFUL LEADERS AND THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

By: Rico Tice
Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2021
111 pp. paperback
ISBN 978-1-78498-580-6

In the book *Faithful Leaders and the Things That Matter Most,* author Rico Tice delivers a short yet powerful pastoral perspective of faithful leadership that can be applied in any context and role. He suggests key principles for becoming a faithful leader: "define success, fight your sin, lead yourself, and serve your church" (18). The primary audience for this book is those serving in or seeking to serve in pastoral roles that include preaching and teaching the Word of God.

In Matthew 25:23, Jesus says, "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."[1] In this parable, Jesus discusses the responsibility of the servant to faithfully produce results with the portion of money given to him. The ultimate test of the servant's success was his ability to use what he was given and deliver results according to his ability.

In *Faithful Leaders*, Tice defines failure as "being successful at the things that don't matter" and success as "hearing '*Well done*' from the only lips that matter" (19). Tice suggests that one way to achieve this is that the preacher must be intentional in handling the Word of God with care in a manner that keeps the message of God at the center of the message.

Tice intentionally places emphasis on the responsibility of the leader's spiritual self-care. In Chapter Two, he discusses the challenge of fighting your sin. He emphasizes the urgency of repentance in the life of the leader to make progress. He states, "The problem is

[1] Matthew 25:23 English Standard Version (ESV)

sin, and sin needs to be dealt with, and all the prayers in the world will make no difference until it is" (43).

Tice references the biblical account of the life of Achan (Joshua, Chapter Seven) and the effect his refusal to confess his sins had on his family. In comparing Achan's lack of repentance until he was under fire, Tice writes, "The pastor and theologian Jack Miller famously put it like this: If the pastor is not the chief repenter, the gospel becomes a theoretical solution for the theoretical problem of sin, for the theoretical sinners—should there be any present" (56). Tice stresses the need for the leader to be honest with God by dealing with their sin, which is the only way to receive forgiveness.

Leaders must first lead themselves. Tice states, "You cannot lead others well if you cannot lead yourself well" (61). He goes on to discuss two feelings that every leader must address if they will effectively lead others: resentment and thanksgiving. He states, "resentment is the child of envy, and envy is how idolatry feels, and thanksgiving is the cure for resentment" (65). He challenges the reader to consider their three greatest struggles (sins). This challenge presents the leader with an uncomfortable position to examine ways to apply what they are teaching about God's forgiveness and grace. Tice provides a diagram that encourages the leader to manage their "thinking, feeling, physical health, and behavior and choices" (62).

Leadership can be lonely if one allows it to be. Tice suggests a necessary element for every faithful pastor to have a pastor that can provide "CIA—confidentiality, intimacy, and accountability" (81). In Galatians 6:1-2 the Apostle Paul encourages believers to hold one another accountable with a spirit of gentleness. This is what Tice refers to as CIA, a safe space where the leader can be transparent enough to experience the forgiveness and restoration that only God can give.

When the leader can lead themselves in a manner that honors God, they will be empowered to lead others. Tice concludes Chapter Four by discussing the choice to serve the church. This essentially challenges the leader to examine their motives for serving. He suggests asking if my motivation is "self-serving or self-sacrifice, power or service, security or suffering" (89-94). The book concludes with a charge for the leader, "Instead, whoever wants

to become great must be a servant—a servant who knows that success is being faithful in the things that really matter, and so who defines success biblically, fights their sin ruthlessly, leads themselves carefully, and serves their church wholeheartedly" (104).

This book provides a four-point powerful set of tools for anyone serving as a pastor. The challenges the leader faces require a response reflecting God's power at work in their life. *Faithful Leaders and the Things That Matter Most* is a must-have book for any pastor that serves with the goal of hearing the Master say, "well done, good and faithful servant."

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BOOK REVIEW

MANAGING THE UNEXPECTED: SUSTAINED PERFORMANCE IN A COMPLEX WORLD, 3RD ED.

By: Karl E. Weick And Kathleen M. Sutcliffe
Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley And Sons, Inc., 2015
209 pp. hardback
ISBN: 978-1-1188-6241-4

The religious institution as a high-reliability organization might sound like an oxymoron in the Western world, given the fifty-year trends of decreasing confidence in church or organized religion reported by Gallop.[2] Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe have been researching the concept of high-reliability organizing for at least half of those fifty years, focusing on organizations that are required to minimize failure, e.g., aircraft carriers, hospitals, and electrical power plants.

In the three editions of their *Managing the Unexpected* text, they identify five principles of what they call "mindful organizing" (21ff). HROs attend to early signs of potential concerns before they become more serious. They engage in ongoing sense-making, retrospectively seeking meaning in an ever-evolving context while realizing that their very activities contribute to the ongoing evolution of their experience (32). Not unlike some models of practical theology, mindful organizing poses framing questions to better comprehend the situation. What are we facing? What do we think we should do? Why? What indicators should we be monitoring? What feedback do you have that helps to clarify our understanding, identify capacity issues, raise issues we have not yet mentioned? The text includes a Mindfulness Organizing Scale assessment tool (43).

The first principle of high-reliability organizing (45ff), "preoccupation with failure," entails a wariness of glitches, of any early indications that systems are not working as intended. These

[2] https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx

early cues start to develop into a picture or story that something might be amiss. Hiccups might be clouds gathering before the storm of a failure. They are not meant to be normal. An organizational alertness to leading indicators of potential failure suggests negative feedback is at least as valuable as positive feedback, maybe more so. As one specialist in a highly respected children's hospital observed, "My job is being prepared for the worst while working for the best."

"A reluctance to simplify," the second principle (62ff), might be analogous to the liturgical idea of mystagogy. While members are systematically catechized into the faith community, knowledge of God cannot be distilled into simple truths. All will be fully known eventually. For now, holy mysteries invite an unrushed, lifetime journey of apprehending, of seeking to know and be known by the Creator and in the midst of community. A reluctance to simplify avoids over-generalizing while seeking a variety of perspectives. Diverse opinions broaden understanding, opening the organization to greater awareness. Rather than placing new evidence in familiar buckets with well-known labels in a nod to efficiency or parsimony, mindful organizing allows the fresh data to update interpretations of what is happening.

For one to manage the unexpected, a shared awareness of operating in a changing environment is required, a "sensitivity to operations" (77ff). Participants in HROs "make an effort to assemble complex inputs into a map, a frame of reference, and a definition of the situation, in other words, a plausible story" (83). They understand their role as a contributor to the organization and have a sense of how the various contributors together help form the whole. They respect the need to add value by "heedfully interrelating" as part of a larger system. Their attention is sharply focused with a humility that recognizes no situation is ever exactly like another. Therefore, open communication and availability to one another are fostered by regularly mining the unique insight each participant has to offer.

The fourth principle (94ff) of a "commitment to resilience" sounds familiar in a pandemic-laden world. HROs define resilience as "a combination of keeping errors small, of improvising work-arounds that keep the system functioning, and of absorbing

change while persisting" (97). HRO participants improvise. They understand the need to deepen improvisational skills and knowledge. Especially in complex and chaotic situations, they demand prompt and valid feedback to adjust their behaviors accordingly. They understand that past experience must yield to new learning as situations change.

In the face of the unexpected, HROs practice a "deference to expertise" (112ff). The hero expert does not exist—only expertise. Therefore, decisions are pushed to coalitions of perceived expertise wherever they form and regardless of rank or status. HRO cultures minimize hubris and foster pliability. They flex to match the situation at hand and habitually run simulations to more quickly identify expertise that can be tapped when the unexpected arises. They work against the "fallacy of centrality" that says ones in central positions will know something is amiss and will alert the rest of the organization. They are the authorities. If they do not see concerns, then nothing amiss must be happening. No need to defer to expertise.

High-reliability organizing in a religious institution might look like attending to the early cues of life in a fallen world with responsive compassion and justice. It might involve stewarding mystery in a diverse community yearning to know and be known. It might resemble a people gathered around a Grand Narrative, each one contributing to making the Story recognizable for others. It might betray a stubborn persistence regardless of the challenges. It might display a readiness to become like a child so God might raise up the lowly.

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BOOK REVIEW

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

By: Ian Parkinson
London: SCM Press, 2020
304 pp. paperback
ISBN 978-0-3340-5874-8

A masterful piece of work that combines a breadth of academic knowledge with a genuine spirituality, this book is seasoned with the lessons of practical experience. The book falls into two main sections: one is more theoretical and the other more practical. Each section has five chapters.

Chapter One makes the case for leadership by discussing what happens when it is missing. It also sets out what the author describes as "the goods of leadership." These he defines as sense-making, animation, alignment, problem-solving, and hope. There is also a brief—but important—excursus on leadership and ministry, terms the author believes need to be distinguished.

Chapter Two acknowledges the complexity of leadership, a complexity driven by differences in context and perspective, along with a temptation toward oversimplification. The author then proceeds to survey a range of theories, breaking them into three broad classifications: leader-centered theories, relationship-centered theories, and an approach that sees leadership as a social process.

Chapters Three and four move to a biblical discussion of the theme, first exploring how leadership is presented in the Old Testament and then how it is presented in the New. The chapters are not always watertight as some of the themes discussed under the rubric of the Old Testament (such as shepherd, or servant) are not exclusive to the OT, as they are also in the NT, including the ministry of Jesus.

The NT chapter includes a series of studies on leadership words. These are grouped under three functions: exercising oversight,

representing Christ, and animating the body. By the end of Chapter Four, the author is ready to present the following definition of Christian Leadership: *A relational process of social influence through which people are inspired, enabled and mobilized to act in positive, new ways, towards the achievement of God's purposes.*

In part two, the author turns to focus on more practical matters. Five tasks are grouped under the heading "the work of leadership." The first of these discusses leadership and organizational culture. The author points us to the Schein's three levels of culture. Leaders have the possibility of shaping their organization's culture through modeling, explaining, exposing dysfunction, inviting participation, and reinforcing.

The next aspect of the leader's work is the task of "animating the body." The idea of leaders as catalysts is developed, with both theological and practical considerations presented. Three priorities are suggested: leaders need to establish a "development culture," cultivate a vision for "whole-life discipleship," and devise a strategy for leader development.

Chapter Eight deals with the task of "fostering collaboration" and includes detailed discussion of the concept of teams. It also addresses conflict, noting the differences between affective, procedural, and substantive conflict. Another task is that of discerning direction in light of the organization's identity, purpose, and vision.

The final chapter is a short discussion of "the spirituality of Christian leadership": What is it that makes leadership Christian? While much of the application in the book relates primarily to leaders in a church context, the book recognizes that Christian leadership is not limited to such. The author suggests that "perhaps what most distinguishes Christian leadership from any other form of leadership is the understanding that it is received from God as a gift."

One of the great strengths of the book is its thoroughness. The author demonstrates a considerable grasp of a range of relevant leadership. He has thought deeply about the range of questions arising from leadership. The book is a not a simple regurgitation of secular theory seasoned with an isolated text from Scripture here and there to justify the title! There is frequent engagement with

Scripture, ranging from theological reflection to the use of biblical narratives to illustrate a point.

Additionally, the author makes careful use of his own experience in a way that demonstrates that leadership has been far from a merely theoretical subject for him. He includes case studies ranging from a vicar revitalizing an inner-city church in Liverpool to a consultant psychiatrist developing the work of a Mental Health Trust.

A minor limitation is that much of the application is made in an Anglican context. This is understandable, given the author's primary sphere of work. I wonder if the book's appeal might be extended in a future edition that draws on some more non-Anglican examples. My free-church friends need not be put off—they might even enjoy the discussion of elders and bishops!

In conclusion, this excellent book merits a prime place on any curriculum devoted to the subject of Christian leadership.

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