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# JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

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**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE JRL AUTUMN 2023 ISSUE: AN INVITATION TO REIMAGINE RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP**  
COURTNY B. DAVIS OLDS

Religious leadership long has been associated with religious institutions: places of worship, denominational entities, and schools of theological higher education. Today, many of these institutions are on the decline financially, numerically, and influentially. In some parts of the world, religion itself is on the decline as more people identify as “none,” “done,” or otherwise unaffiliated. And yet, the need for purpose, belonging, meaning-making, and connection to something beyond oneself—all concerns that often fall within the purview of religion—has only increased in light of the political, societal, environmental, and public health turmoil of recent years.

Where do these competing realities leave the field of religious leadership? What does it mean to be a student, educator, practitioner, or scholar of religious leadership when religion and religious institutions are on the decline, and when at the same time an argument could be made that the need for religion has increased? Those are some of the questions that inspired the theme of the 2023 Academy of Religious Leadership Annual Conference—*Reimagining Religious Leadership*—and thus informed this edition of *Journal of Religious Leadership*.

The articles in this edition of the *JRL* propose a variety of possible ways to reimagine religious leadership. Likewise, the authors rely upon a variety of frameworks, perspectives, theories, theologies, and resources for their task of reimagining.

Using a case-study approach, Thomas Tumblin and Kristi Calhoun reimagine religious leadership as prophetic meaning making in time of turmoil and multiple, layered crises. Jack Barentsen employs social identity theory to reimagine religious

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leadership apart from institutional structures. Reflecting on his experience of walking the Camino de Santiago, Kyle Small uses pilgrimage as both a metaphor and a practice to reimagine religious leadership. Susan Maros, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, and Mark Branson use one another's books as a starting point for a conversation that considers the role of vocational discernment in the reimagination of religious leadership. Finally, Carson Reed and Shelby Coble draw on trinitarian theology, biblical texts, and relational leadership theory to propose a reimagined model of ministerial leadership in a secular age.

These articles, of course, do not represent the final word in the reimagination of religious leadership. Rather, this edition of *JRL* is an invitation for you, the reader, to reimagine religious leadership in your own context.

What might reimagining religious leadership mean for you personally and vocationally? How might you reimagine your own practice, teaching, study, or scholarship of religious leadership? What frameworks, perspectives, theories, theologies, and resources might you rely upon for the task? What might you contribute to the scholarly and practical enterprise of reimagining religious leadership?

The perk of being ARL president is that one can choose the theme, pose the questions, and see how others begin to answer them.



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## LAYERED CRISES: CRISIS LEADERSHIP AS PROPHETIC MEANING MAKING

THOMAS F. TUMBLIN  
KRISTI CALHOUN

### Abstract

*When a new United Methodist Church District Superintendent took his position in July 2021, four significant crises threatened the viability of his judicatory: a global pandemic, churches exiting the denomination, a child abuse case, and one of the worst tornadic events in US history. This story within a Christian context serves as a case study for orienting religious communities theologically in the conception and exercise of leadership. Drawing from crisis leadership, trauma-informed leadership, and sensemaking literatures, a model of prophetic leadership is proposed for Christian leaders during multiple crises. It is proposed that a Christian worldview and sacred texts should constitute a primary and critical schema for anchoring sensemaking, sense-receiving, and sense-giving, as well as the practices of leadership, in the context of a theologically reflective, Christian community.*

### Introduction

In the not-so-distant past, studies of organizational leadership understood crises in organizations as both singular and avoidable. Peter F. Drucker, for example, describes an “effective executive” as one who has systematized decision-making and the rare crisis is

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considered to be “the truly exceptional, the truly unique event.”<sup>1</sup> Much of the research in this field focused on avoiding a potential crisis before it happened and treated the occurrence of a crisis as a potential failure of leadership.

When an institutional crisis did occur, the organization was to conduct a type of operational autopsy that would help prevent the next crisis. This deterministic mindset created a circular reasoning that blinded leaders to the increasing complexity of stewarding the organization through frequent and overlapping critical events that were beyond anyone’s power to avoid. Given the chaos and turmoil of daily life — political turmoil, effects of climate change, and global health challenges, to name a few — it can no longer be assumed that good leadership serves as a prophylactic for crisis events.

Religious organizations and their leadership are subject as well to similar cultural and environmental upheavals. The questions we want to address in this essay are, given the social, cultural, and environmental turmoil of the present age: How might religious leaders steward their communities through multiple crises? When crises do arise, and they inevitably will, how can leaders steer their communities through crisis events in a meaningful and healthy manner? More specifically, how might Christian leaders engage in the process of meaning making<sup>2</sup> from a Christian worldview?

This article addresses these questions by examining a case study of a religious leader who shepherded his organization through layered crises and analyzing his leadership considering available leadership literature and models. The article utilizes

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<sup>1</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive*. NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967, pp 122ff.

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about meaning making from an organizational frame, see Jörgen Sandberg and Hardimos Tsoukas, “Making sense of the sensemaking perspective,” *The Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 36, No. S1, (February 2015), pp. S6-S32. Also see Paul Spee and Paula Jarzabkowski, “Agreeing on what? Creating joint accounts of strategic change,” *Organization Science*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January – February 2017), pp. 152-176. For religious perspectives on meaning making, see Sandra F. Selby, “Religious leaders as facilitators of meaning making,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 41-65. See also Adeeba Hakkim and Amrita Deb, “Religious meaning-making and pro-social action among disaster response volunteers,” *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, Vol. 25, No. 7, pp. 712-734.

models that inform the meaning making process for the leader and the members. It then pairs crisis leadership and trauma-informed leadership, anchored in the resources of a Christian worldview, as a model for navigating multiple, simultaneous crisis events.

### **The case study**

As 2020 came to an end, the Rev. Dr. Patrick Smith was serving as senior pastor of a local United Methodist congregation.<sup>3</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic had forced religious leaders and their organizations to quickly reconstitute their practices of worship and community. Smith had adapted creatively to the new normal; reports of attendance and finances attest that the congregation was thriving despite this crisis. But in January of 2021, Smith was notified that he would be appointed as District Superintendent of another district on July 1, 2021. The new district spanned eleven counties and contained ninety-five UMC churches that were largely in rural, small-town, and county-seat locations.

By April of 2021, crises of different kinds began to pile up. Even before he had taken the district superintendent position, Smith was informed that the district was involved in a child abuse lawsuit with both civil and criminal cases pending. At the same time, many local churches were wanting to disaffiliate from the denomination over long-term disagreements regarding theological and church governance issues. Disaffiliation entailed an overwhelming and complicated array of legal and ministry matters that needed to be delicately sorted. To make matters much worse, in December of 2021, Smith's district was ravaged by some of the deadliest tornadoes in US history.<sup>4</sup>

This case study is not intended to be an ideal scenario. Smith led well, but not perfectly. There may be no such thing as "perfect" trauma-informed crisis leadership. The thesis of this article is that navigating layered crises well as a religious leader requires additional layered leadership models with prophetic meaning

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<sup>3</sup>The identities of the leader and his context have been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.noaa.gov/news/december-2021-tornado-outbreak-explained>

making, described later, as the primary framework. The following paragraphs explain the layered crises in more detail.

### *Child abuse lawsuit*

Smith was made aware of a child abuse lawsuit facing his district in April 2021. The actual abuse occurred in one of the district churches a few years before Smith arrived, but he assumed leadership of what remained of the lawsuit and its aftermath. Due to the nature of the allegations, the case included civil and criminal components. The court decided to continue the civil case until the criminal case was resolved. It was completed March 2023. As this article was written, Smith continued to lead his district as the civil portion of the case moves forward and the criminal trial begins appeals.

### *Disaffiliations*

In 2019, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church created a legislative window, 2019-2023, during which churches could leave the UMC.<sup>5</sup> All district superintendents, including Smith, worked with the bishop on an orderly disaffiliation process. They were shocked that nearly half of conference churches were filing to exit, which would have devastating consequences for the district and the conference. It constituted a workplace crisis.

More than half of the local churches in his district went through a discernment process, and by June 2023, one-third of the district congregations chose to disaffiliate. This rupture within the conference generated enormous legal and organizational consequences as well as a massive workload because, as District Superintendent, Smith was responsible to supervise the discernment and exiting process for each congregation.

### *Tornadoes*

Just as the conference was putting together a strategy to implement the disaffiliation procedures on a much larger scale than expected, the final crisis of 2021 unfolded. On December 10, F3 and F4 tornadoes tore through an eight-state area that included the

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<sup>5</sup>Addendum to *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2016. (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2019).

West Plains District. It was the worst US natural disaster recorded in the month of December.<sup>6</sup> In 2023, much of the region is still rebuilding from this storm, and the West Plains District is an area significantly affected by the devastation. The response has required cooperation with social services in addition to faith-based pastoral care to meet the needs of the traumatized communities. Smith is still leading through the remainder of this event.

The following sections examine crisis leadership and trauma-informed leadership literatures to suggest how leaders experiencing layered crises, like those of the West Plains District, might assist in making sense of the overlapping crisis events.

### Defining crisis

Uriel Rosenthal and associates define crisis as “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which—under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances—necessitates making critical decisions.”<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Collins and his colleagues define a crisis as a “rare, abnormal, or infrequent event...” that poses “a significant threat to the organization’s long-term health and viability...” and holds the potential to result in “a profoundly negative impact on stakeholders,”<sup>8</sup> delimiting crisis as an uncommon anomaly rather than an often-recurring pattern. Both definitions highlight the threat(s) and risk(s) crises bring. Ignoring a crisis is not a prudent option. It might even prove extremely harmful to the organization. Dayton, et al., emphasize the organizational elements most likely

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.weather.gov/pah/December-10th-11th-2021-Tornado>

<sup>7</sup> Uriel Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles, and Paul ‘t Hart. (1989) “The World of Crises and Crisis Management.” In *Coping with Crises: The Management of Disasters, Riots, and Terrorism*, edited by Uriel Rosenthal, M. T. Charles, and Paul ‘t Hart. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas., as cited in Bruce W. Dayton, Arjen Boin, Ian Mitroff, Murat C. Alpaslan, Sandy E. Green, Alexander Kouzmin, and Alan M.G. Jarman. “Managing Crises in the Twenty-First Century.” *International Studies Review*, March 2004, Vol 6, No. 1, pp. 167

<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Collins, Marie T. Dasborough, Heath R. Gregg, Changmeng Xu, Catherine Midel Deen, Yaqing He, and Simon Lloyd D. Restubog. “Traversing the storm: An interdisciplinary review of crisis leadership.” *The Leadership Quarterly*, 34 (2023) 101661, p. 2.

to be impacted: structures or values and norms. They also point to the associated high uncertainty and urgency crises generate.

Collins et al., find that effective leaders create, in a crisis, an “influencing process that occurs between a leader and stakeholders (internal and external) in the context of organizational crises, as opposed to run-of-the-mill business challenges, over the various stages of the crisis life cycle.”<sup>9</sup> Crisis leaders lead and manage as they interact within and outside of the organization. They also monitor their personal responses to the crisis as they seek to practice sensemaking<sup>10</sup> and sensegiving.<sup>11</sup> They understand that crises are experienced subjectively both individually and corporately. While managing the crisis, they maintain a “political-symbolic perspective” as all stakeholders participate in making meaning of the event(s).<sup>12</sup>

While an individual crisis is “rare, abnormal, or infrequent,” the thesis of this article is that in these turbulent times, crises increasingly occur simultaneously. At the same time, crises appear to be aggregating more often, compounding the demands for appropriate management and leadership. For Smith in his position as superintendent, there were many normal, ongoing administrative responsibilities that existed before and after the series of crises that occurred in 2021. However, during 2021, he found compounding crises expanded his professional responsibilities into areas not previously covered by his ongoing job responsibilities.. But during

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<sup>9</sup>Collins, et al., p. 2

<sup>10</sup> Kraft, Sparr, and Peus (p. 309) define sensemaking as “a process that describes the effort to create order and produce meaning of what occurs in an environment.” They define sensegiving as “the ambition to influence others’ sensemaking in a certain direction.” To complete the logical cycle, they also use the term sense-receiving (p. 322) to describe the consideration of information conveyed by others during the sensemaking process. See Anna Kraft, Jennifer L. Sparr, and Claudia Peus, “The Critical Role of Moderators in Leader Sensegiving: A Literature Review.” *Journal of Change Management*, (2015), vol. 15, no. 4, p. 308-331.

<sup>11</sup> Curt A. Gilstrap, Cristina Gilstrap, Kendra Nigel Holderby, and Katrina Maria Valera. “Sensegiving, Leadership, and Nonprofit Crises: How Nonprofit Leaders Make and Give Sense to Organizational Crisis.” *Voluntas* (2016) 27:2787-2806.

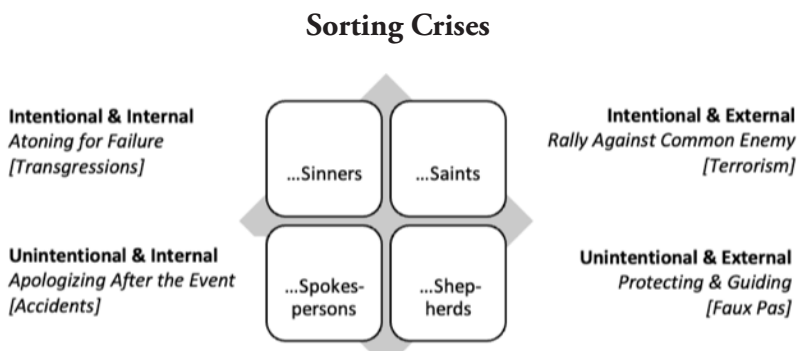
<sup>12</sup> Dayton, et al., p. 167.

2021, he experienced additional situations and duties that required urgent response as a result of these four compounding crises.

What follows will build a framework religious leaders can use to lead through times of layered crisis. We begin by examining the various types of crises.

### *Crisis typology*

Collins, et al., adapted the following matrix of crisis types upon one first proposed by Coombs and Holladay in 1996.<sup>13</sup>



Crisis are sorted by whether they are *intentional* or *unintentional* in origin and whether the crisis is *internal* to the organization or *external* to it. Intentional and external crises, for example, would include incidents like terrorism. Internal crises that are of unintentional origin would include accidents. Intentional and internal crises are described as transgressions while unintentional and external crises are categorized as faux pas. These terms bracketed in the graphic above are the labels used by Coombs and Holladay.

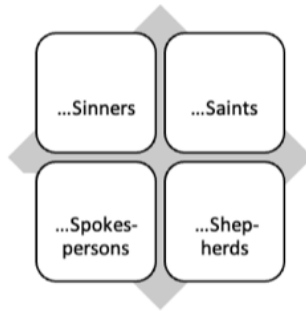
Collins and his associates employed their own phrases for each of the quadrants instead of labels. At the same time, they used faith-related terms to summarize the role of leaders in each zone, i.e., the role the crisis leader assumes to sensemake and sensegive. When the incident is intentional and external, the leader evokes a persona casting the outside perpetrator — actor(s) or action(s) — as the

<sup>13</sup> W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay. “Communication and Attributions in a Crisis: An Experimental Study in Crisis Communication.” *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8(4), pp. 279-295. As cited in Collins, et al.

unrighteous offender while the organization and its constituents are “in the right.”<sup>14</sup> In the event of an unintentional and internal crisis, the leader takes on the persona of the contrite organizational representative.<sup>15</sup>

When the crisis is intentional and internal, the leader becomes the repentant seeking to make restitution. Whether or not the failed leader recovers depends, in part, on the leader’s perceived (by constituents) level of status and power.<sup>16</sup> Unintentional and external events, represented in over half of the articles researched by Collins, et al., call for the leader to move from a chronological mindset to an immediate response approach as protective overseer during the season of crisis.<sup>17</sup>

### The Leader’s Role in Each Crisis Category



#### *Categorizing crises in the district*

The COVID pandemic clearly represents an unintentional and external event. Smith did indeed act as shepherd to those he served. While there was no fault with himself or other church leaders, Smith was still an involved actor in the process of shepherding the congregation through this global crisis. The members of his local congregation adapted the way that they gathered for worship, meetings, building maintenance, outreach, youth programs, and administrative duties.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, et al., pp. 7 & 14

<sup>15</sup> Collins, et al., pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, et al., p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, et al., pp. 5-7.



Virtually every area of local church leadership was affected by this crisis that was of no fault of the local church or its leadership. Because of the way this unintentional event created an internal crisis, the COVID pandemic could also fall into the lower left quadrant of unintentional and internal. Smith did not need to apologize for the events of COVID, but he often had to be the spokesperson for understanding the difficulties placed on the members of the local congregation to this unforeseen and unintentional event. He represented the bishop in explaining why the conference was responding to COVID as it did. Some congregations resisted imposed restrictions, moving Dr. Smith's role from shepherd to spokesperson for the conference.

When applied to the West Plains District case study, the disaffiliation movement within the United Methodist Church can be categorized both in the upper right and lower right quadrants. For some, churches choosing to leave the denomination constitute a common enemy against whom those who stay within the United Methodist Church must rally. Conversely, for many who disaffiliate, those who remain in the denomination are perceived as contributing to the decline of the UMC.<sup>18</sup>

For others who do not assign fault or blame, those exiting the United Methodist Church are merely utilizing the bipartisan exit clause negotiated at the 2019 General Conference. They are not enemies; rather, they are opting for the provision offered to them for a different future. This perspective would assign disaffiliation (and remaining in the UMC) to the lower right, unintentional and external, quadrant that would include crises like COVID and the spate of tornadoes experienced in the region.

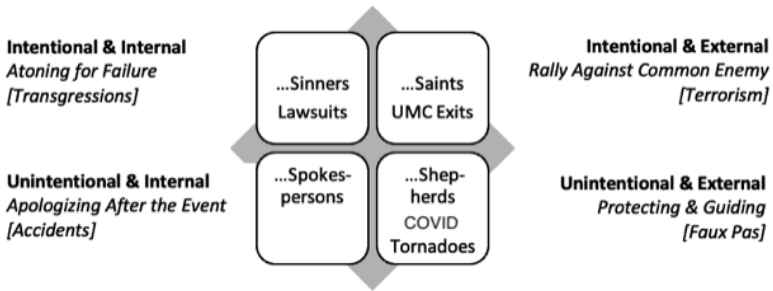
The child abuse lawsuit faced by the West Plains District does not fit neatly into any quadrant. Since what happened occurred in one of the churches within the district boundaries, the leader's role is to atone for the failure of adequate oversight of the childcare workers who committed the abuse, hence placing that crisis in the upper left quadrant.

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<sup>18</sup> The levels of animosity on either side vary. For some examples, see <https://www.umconnected.com/> and <https://wesleyancovenant.org/>.

It is instructive to take notice of the way in which neither the COVID pandemic nor the lawsuit fit completely into one quadrant. While this model gives us a framework to begin to form a strategy for responding to crisis, it is important for the religious leader to keep in mind that in the era of layered crises, many crises will require layered responses and a compounded understanding of how to lead the organization forward.

### Sorting the West Plains District Layered Crises



As we see, crises faced by the West Plains District in 2021 can all be categorized within the typologies laid out by Collins and his associates. Their model provides a framework for the leader to better understand what the organization is experiencing. The question then becomes what does the leader do with the information? Specifically, how does the religious leader move the organization through what remains after a crisis and guide it toward God's preferred future? In short, the leader helps the members of the organization to make sense of what has occurred.

### Sensemaking and sensegiving as responses to crisis

Layered crises like those experienced by the West Plains District disrupt and disorient. Many of what were familiar patterns no longer serve the new, unexpected realities. The mental maps for understanding events are stretched and, possibly, need to be replaced. These mental maps, or schemas, serve as points of reference for understanding what is being encountered. They are

knowledge bases containing data for defining what is real and what is not.<sup>19</sup>

The schemas for interpreting experience prove inadequate in the face of chaos and trauma.<sup>20</sup> Initially one is unsure how to act, what to do next. The “flood and famine” dynamics of “interlocking crises” and “collective traumas”<sup>21</sup> require a cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving to process all that has happened. New or updated schemas will be required to make and give sense of the new actualities.

Anna Kraft, et al., offer a model for this process. Using the lens of information processing theory, the authors reviewed the sensegiving literature and analyzed it at three levels of analysis: the individual, the organization, and the sensemaking process itself.<sup>22</sup> They present this understanding of schema within the employer/employee relationship. We will look at this model and then discuss how it applies to our case study.

Both leaders and employees engage in making sense of the change(s) while giving and receiving sense to others in the organization. All who go through a crisis, for example, sort out what they are experiencing individually and collectively. All bring with them their own categories, their own schema, for understanding what they are experiencing. From that schema, they act and make decisions.

Schema consistency and legitimate power are moderators in the first phase of the process; schema consistency and emotions are moderators during the second phase of the process. Individual leaders carry legitimate power as they provide sensegiving interpretations of what is happening. Individual employees interact with the leader’s interpretations and their own experience, including the affective dimensions, to make sense of the change(s).

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<sup>19</sup> Kraft, et al., p. 311.

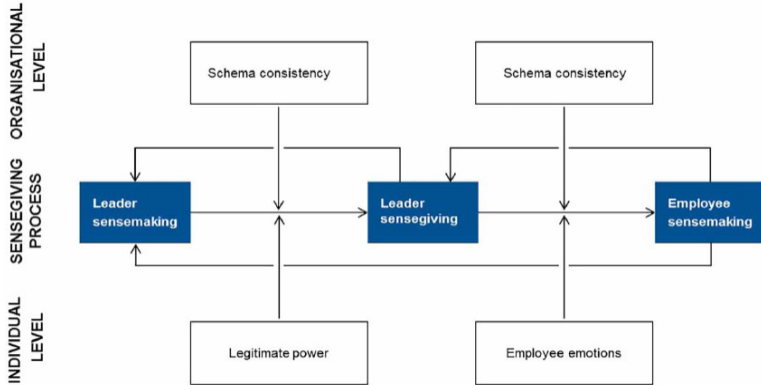
<sup>20</sup> See Karl Weick’s definition of schema and the effect on enactment in *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd ed. (NY: McGraw Hill, 1979), pp. 154ff.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this descriptive language, see *Crisis and Care: Meditations on Faith and Philanthropy*, edited by Dustin D. Benac and Erin Weber-Johnson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Anna Kraft, et al., pp.309ff. The graphic is found on p. 310.

Leaders and employees are simultaneously feeding back to one another how they are experiencing and interpreting the change(s).

### Sensemaking at the Organizational and Individual Levels



Kraft, et al., observe that the more the events(s) does not fit existing schemas, the more intense the sensemaking and sensegiving. If the employee is experiencing positive emotions during the sense-receiving process, the employee will likely revise existing schemas by adding the new learning to the relevant existing schemas. For example, an employee might believe the employer meets industry standards for employee compensation. If, during a crisis, the employer exceeds the industry standards for support, the employee would need to update the existing schema regarding employee compensation. If the employee is experiencing negative emotions during the sense-receiving process, the employee is more likely to seek new schemas during sensemaking.

If the leader's perceived legitimate power is high, the leader will use more top-down sensegiving strategies. The leader is "more likely to use abstract, positive, and normative language" in communicating what makes sense. If the leader's perceived legitimate power is low, then the leader becomes more collaborative in the sensegiving strategies. The leader is "more likely to use concrete, negative and rational language" in communicating what makes sense.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Anna Kraft et al., pp. 316ff.

Particularly of interest for this article, the authors recommend further research on the role of uncertainty in sensemaking and sensegiving. They assume higher uncertainty would evoke more intense sorting of the experiences while lower uncertainty would lower the intensity of processing all that has happened.<sup>24</sup> The level of affective intensity for the leader and the members likely rises in high-uncertainty events.

For example, regarding the disaffiliation process, initially there was a low level of uncertainty among conference leaders because they assumed that only a few congregations would exit. However, as the number of exiting local churches rose, uncertainty increased and leaders in the organization needed to engage more in sense-giving activities. We will address some of the sense-giving activities of the conference later in this article.

### **The relationship of crisis and trauma**

The second compounding issue that correlates with an increased level of uncertainty at both an individual and an organizational level is the high likelihood that the crisis will produce trauma.

#### *Interlocking crises and collective trauma*

A parallel to the difference between crisis and trauma would be the relationship between change and transition. While there are hundreds of resources on leading change, the technical and adaptive aspects of executing change are not the same as caring for the emotional dynamics that accompany it. As William Bridges and others remind us, unless the emotional and psychological follow-on to change is attended to, any progress during the change event will be undermined.<sup>25</sup> Shelly Rambo, among others, refers to the ongoing effects of crisis as the “remainder,” and the aftereffects

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<sup>24</sup> Anna Kraft et al., pp. 324-325.

<sup>25</sup> William and Susan Bridges. *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. (NY: Hatchett Book Group, 2019). For other examples, see Bruce Feller. *Life is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*. (NY: Penguin Random House, 2020) and John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen. *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002)

of crisis and trauma as “residue.”<sup>26</sup> The language used by Rambo to describe the aftermath of trauma reminds us that the effects of crisis do not simply disappear when the moment of crisis passes.

It is not only individual members of the organization that experiences crisis or trauma. “Christian leaders encounter forms of collective trauma ordinarily in several ways, including when families or ministry groups experience crises, when the whole congregation or ministry organization experiences crises, or when the greater community experiences a natural, structural, or human-caused disaster.”<sup>27</sup> The leader cannot adequately lead the organization if the leader has not engaged in the act of sensemaking as well. The leader who is processing a crisis and living through the traumatic remainder of that crisis must walk through a recovery process while leading the organization through the same recovery.

Following a trauma-inducing crisis, leadership can limit and even heal the effects of trauma on the individual within the organization. To participate in this type of redemptive work, the religious leader must understand the process that the organization must engage in to make sense of the event(s) and move toward restored wholeness. Smith experienced this as he and the Cabinet of the Conference collaborated in strategies for creating a framework through which local churches and the entire conference could make redemptive sense of the events of disaffiliation. These efforts included, but were not limited to, creating a communication center in which all members of the conference could get information on the issues and how they might affect their local congregation.

At the same time, the conference exerted significant energy to communicate affirming messages to the continuing members of the conference to continue being the church in their local context.

The slowly evolving details of disaffiliation at the denominational level allowed Smith and the cabinet time to implement a strategic approach that could limit or even mitigate trauma before it occurred. Conversely, the uncertainty created by the tornado was much more

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<sup>26</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2010), p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Kate Weibe. “Toward a faith-based approach to healing after collective trauma.” *Tragedies and Christian Congregations*. Pg. 72.

abrupt and required an immediate response. The trauma induced by a sudden disaster is much less likely to be mitigated, but the leader can still engage in the redemptive work of healing by acting as the protecting and guiding shepherd.

### **Post-crisis trauma recovery**

There can be no organizational level sense-receiving process without a leader who is actively sense-giving. As the organization experiences the remainder of each event, the leader must process this personally while also offering sense-giving. These two roles assumed by the leader add to the complexity of the personal experience for the leader. A predictable pattern emerges that all who experience trauma mirror, including the leader.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a US agency, the human brain requires several weeks to several months to process a single traumatic event.<sup>28</sup> Any human, including a church leader, needs chronological time to pass for the leader's physical brain to process, heal and make sense of traumatic events. In the case of a leader, these processes must take place while simultaneously moving the organization through its collective process of recovery. If this process is neglected for the individuals in the care of the leader, additional trauma is likely to occur. It is necessary for the leader to bring the organization through the remainder of the event to successfully give sense to the event and facilitate healing for the individuals that make up the organization.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/factsheets/public/coping.pdf>

### Phases of Collective Trauma Response



This figure illustrates the typical pattern of an organization that moves through the remainder of a trauma to viable healing. It is fortunate that a great deal of study has already been done in this field. Moving toward healing follows a typical pattern of recovery through the remainder of the event. The challenge for a leader is to provide sensemaking leadership at each stage of the recovery process. Walking through the remainder toward healing is a complex and often challenging time for both the organization and the leader. For instance, in the honeymoon phase, members of the organization are likely to view their leader as a hero and express gratitude for the leader's outstanding leadership.

As the organization moves through this stage, the members are likely to engage in sensemaking at the pace of the leader. During this phase when the leader is seen as the organizational hero, the leader is completely trusted with the task of sensemaking and sensegiving. The members of the organization trust the leader to lead.

However, as the organization moves through the disillusionment phase, members of the organization are likely to become more resistant to sense-receiving. The hero phase is long over and the members of the organization are more likely to question the sensegiving of the leader. This is also a natural and healthy period of recovery, but it can be a dangerous time for the organization.



Some members of the organization might decide that the reason they cannot make sense of the event is due to the quality of the sensemaking of the leader. It is at this point in the recovery process that members of the organization are most likely to seek to escape this emotionally challenging time by turning away from the leader or leaving the organization altogether. Effectively, members of the organization strip the leader of authority to sensegive. If the organizational leader is not prepared for this necessary phase of the recovery process or is distracted by the recovery cycle of another crisis, a secondary crisis could be triggered within the organization brought on by the exit of a significant portion of the members or the replacement of the leader.

In the case of Smith specifically, we see a religious leader who looked at the typology of each crisis, considered the level of uncertainty to measure the intensity of sensegiving needed and the level of potential for trauma remaining after the event while simultaneously moving the organization through the event. As illustrated above, each event that Smith led needed to be framed individually. Each group had differing potentials for trauma. Each group and each crisis had to be handled separately, but simultaneously. Smith continued to lead the members of the West Plains District through post-COVID recovery, disaffiliation conversations, and a pending lawsuit while also tending to the needs of those affected by the sudden onset of a tornadic natural disaster.

#### *Trauma recovery in the West Plains District*

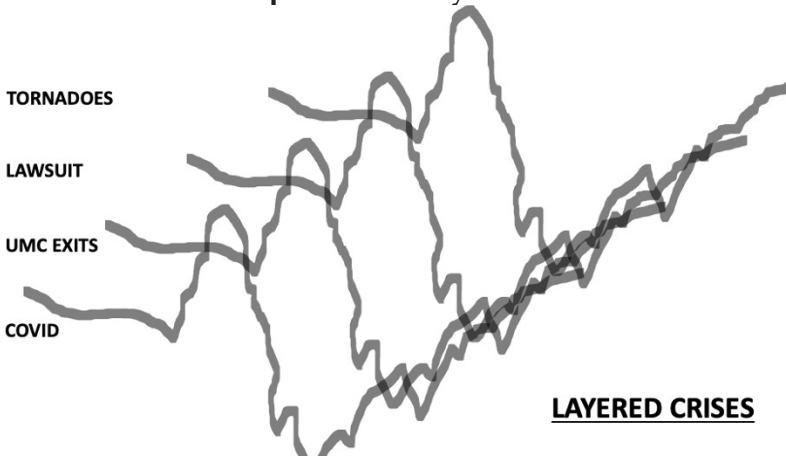
Smith had to help the West Plains District navigate layered crises by sensegiving in multiple groups. Smith was required to continually adapt his sensegiving style to each group within the organization based on where each group was in its recovery phase. Sensegiving gets further complicated since each recovery process happens organically and may take more or less time for each group depending on the scope of the crisis and the personality of the group affected. Within each group, individuals also recover at varying rates.

Each group Smith was leading needed to walk through this process to make sense of what was happening and to move toward healing from the trauma of the event. As the members of each group moved through this process, they experienced times in which they were more or less likely to engage in sensereceiving. Each of these phases is likely to present its own challenge to the religious leader.

During phases in which the organization is openly receptive to sensegiving it is incumbent on the religious leader to lead ethically and to actively engage in personal sensemaking to build trust with the members of the organization before they enter periods in which sensereceiving is more difficult. The leader is likely to need to be able to recognize each phase of recovery on the part of the organization to engage in personal sensemaking as well.<sup>29</sup>

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, at least three of the crises Smith faced in 2021 had a sudden onset, then a drawn-out path toward resolution. One or more cycles can stretch out to represent a longer timeline and/or shorten to represent a shorter time frame. Smith has needed to remain responsive and proactive to each group and their sensemaking pace and needs.

### The Complexities of Layered Crises



<sup>29</sup> This why Bridges and others recommend establishing a transition monitoring team to help scout out how well the organization is navigating the transition. See Bridges, *Transitions*, pp. 136ff.

As these iterative cycles play out in the practice of religious leadership, any leader can be ministering to multiple groups who have experienced crises at the same time but are moving through the recovery at different speeds. The needs within the organization require a wise and energetic leader to proactively lead meaningful sensemaking activities. These activities are vital to facilitate the recovery process. The leader must remain steadfastly attentive and reflective to adapt to the changing needs of each group. It now becomes evident how layered crises require layered leadership strategies.

### **Organizational sensemaking**

Acknowledging the complexities of leading an organization through post-crisis trauma does not eliminate the need to engage in the redemptive work of assisting the members of the organization to heal from post-crisis trauma. To engage in this redemptive work, the leader must assist the members of the organization as they make sense of the event(s) they experienced.

#### *Sense-making models*

While social psychologist Karl Weick pioneered sense-making research, David Snowden and his team at IBM proposed a model in the late 1990s for locating the organization's experience.<sup>30</sup> (They intentionally add the hyphen in the sense-making label to distinguish their theory from the other schools of thought.) Their Cynefin model, which was adapted by the European Union during the COVID crisis, provides a framework for sorting out crises and their effects on the organization.<sup>31</sup> In the model, Snowden and his team create a five-element decision support graphic with ordered (more predictable) systems on the right side and unordered (less predictable) systems on the left side. In the lower right segment are

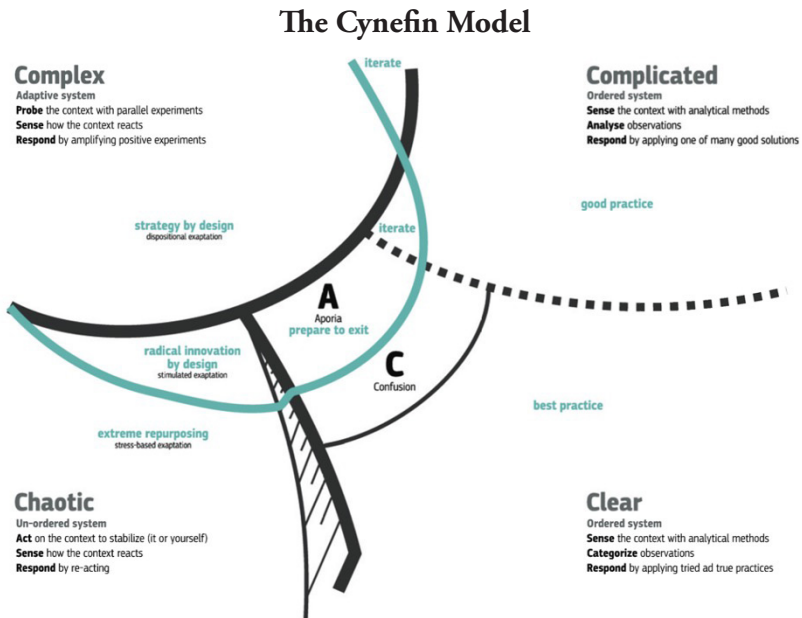
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<sup>30</sup> For an overview of the sensemaking/sense-making models, see [https://cynefin.io/wiki/Schools\\_of\\_sense-making#The\\_Five\\_Schools\\_of\\_Organisational\\_Sense-making](https://cynefin.io/wiki/Schools_of_sense-making#The_Five_Schools_of_Organisational_Sense-making)

<sup>31</sup> David Snowden and Alessandro Rancati. *Managing complexity (and chaos) in times of crises: A field guide for decision makers inspired by the Cynefin framework*. (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021)

clear, ordered systems that can depend upon best practices to fulfill their mission. The organizational context is best understood using analytical tools and by observing the impact of these tools. One can apply tried and true practices to lead the organization forward. The existing individual and shared schemas are consistent with the realities of the organization.

In the upper right segment are organizations and systems that are a bit more complicated. They are still ordered systems and the context is still observed using analytical tools. At the same time, there may not be one best practice to guide the organization forward. Instead, the leader seeks multiple good practices, one or more of which might be applied to help the organization fulfill its mission. The existing schemas continue to be relatively consistent with the realities of the organization, though they need to be more pliable.



On the left side of the graphic are the more unordered systems and organizations. The work for the upper left segment is to lead

adaptively rather than technically in a season of high complexity.<sup>32</sup> The leader probes the context with parallel experiments to sense how the context might respond. By amplifying those experiments that yield positive results, the leader can lead strategically by design. There is a feeling of “dispositional exaptation,” which they define as the radical repurposing of practices and systems to match the complex realities. As the complex organization edges toward the lower left segment on the graphic, the levels of desperation and anxiety in the system rise. There are attempts at radical innovation by design as the organization moves into the chaotic phase; the unordered system now demands extreme repurposing. New schemas will be required in the face of high uncertainty. This is a stress-based exaptation.<sup>33</sup>

The chaos caused by such events as COVID and tornadoes required Smith to relentlessly focus on regaining stability, for the organization and for its leaders. While observing how the context reacts to these multiple experiments and waiting to see which one brings more order to the system, rapid feedback loops and directive leadership are helpful.

When things appear to be out of control, the organization seeks some confidence in what can be ordered while waiting to find the pathways out of the chaos. Although adaptive leadership is an effective approach in the complex system, the unpredictability in the chaotic segment might call for directive leadership. In the language of Kraft, et al., leaders and others cling to what fits existing schemas while working (not just passively waiting) for new schemas to emerge.

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<sup>32</sup> Cp. the adaptive leadership literature like this summary from *Harvard Business Review* that came out in September 2020, a few months after the COVID crisis officially began in the United States: <https://hbr.org/2020/09/5-principles-to-guide-adaptive-leadership>

<sup>33</sup> “In organizational terms, exaptation indicates a process of radical repurposing of roles, processes, paradigms, values. It is a state of action that emerges after critically observing the present while (sometimes frantically) creating the structures and the conditions for the organization to adapt.” (Snowden and Rancati, p. 43)

There is a liminal state<sup>34</sup> between the four segments that constitutes the fifth element of the model, a state of irresolvable contradiction. In this state of aporia (uncertainty – marked “A” on the diagram), a leader keeps attentive to where to go next. Ideally, an organization will move from a less ordered state to the next ordered state — from chaotic to complex or from complex to complicated.

Liminality always includes a degree of confusion. Through careful discernment disciplines, confusion lessens to a degree and allows the organization to set a trajectory toward the next segment, e.g., from confusion to aporia to potentially any other quadrant. Regardless, crisis leadership is not the same thing as leading in a trauma-informed way. The whole-person effects of trauma require another level of expertise to walk an organization toward recovery and avoid retraumatizing anyone along the way.

### *Trauma-informed leadership*

The Collins, et al., article on typing crises recommends a better understanding of the affective side of crisis leadership. The literature addressing trauma-informed leadership offers a resource for addressing the affective dimensions of crisis.

“According to leading traumatologists such as Erikson, Felitti and Anda, Levine and van der Kolk, trauma is a collection of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual manifestations within the body of an individual or a group following an experience, or series of experiences, of stressful loss.”<sup>35</sup>

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) points to the “lasting adverse [whole-person] effects” of trauma. Unresolved traumatic experiences negatively impact the

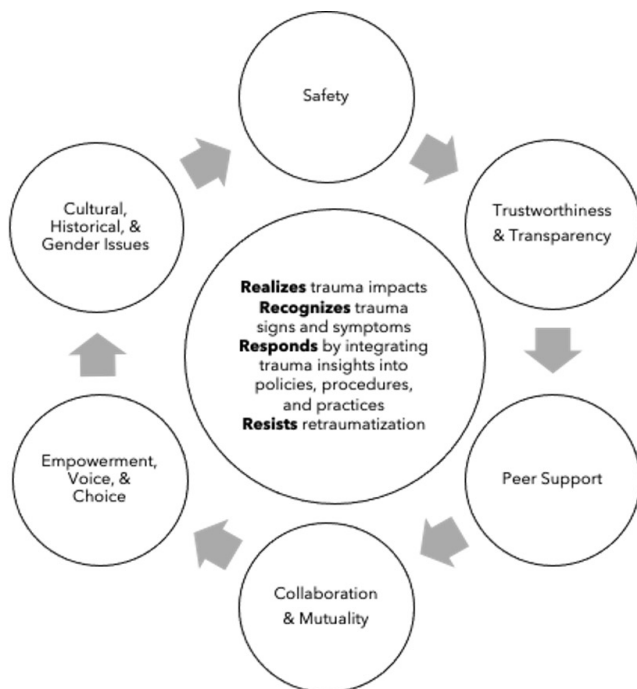
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<sup>34</sup> We know that we are in a state of voluntary suspension, while the elements for an informed decision are brewing and a sense of somehow optimistic urgency is building up.” (Snowden and Rancati, p. 35.)

<sup>35</sup> Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla A. Grosch-Miller, and Hilary Ison, eds. *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma* (NY: Routledge, 2020), p. 68.

wellbeing of individuals, relationships, and organizations. They hinder sensemaking and relationship-building. Additionally, traumatized individuals risk retraumatization, deepening the harm of the initial experience and often compounding behavioral health issues.

### The SAMHSA Trauma-Informed Leadership Model



Consequently, SAMHSA calls for trauma-informed leadership. Trauma-informed leadership seeks to create physically and psychologically safe spaces and interactions. Decisions are made in a highly transparent manner to build trust in the organization. Leaders organize peer support options for trauma survivors. There is a strong commitment to collaboration and power-sharing across all roles in the organization. All members of the organization are empowered to share in decision-making, goal-setting, and facilitating their own recovery. Gender and culture barriers are lowered to move beyond stereotypes and to enhance sensitivity to historical trauma. Trauma-informed leaders advocate the four Rs: realizing the effect trauma has on individuals, groups, and

organizations; recognizing (and helping others to recognize) the signs and symptoms of trauma; responding to this wisdom by integrating trauma-informed insights into policies, practices, and procedures; and exercising all diligence to avoid retraumatization of members within the organization.<sup>36</sup>

### *Smith's trauma-informed crisis leadership*

The assumption in this article is that most crises generate some degree of trauma in those who directly experience them. In the case of the West Plains District, first-hand experience of a tornado certainly generates trauma, as does an experience of a pandemic. Close proximity to the machinations of leaving a beloved denomination might well be trauma-producing. The same could be said of witnessing the tragic effects of child abuse.

In our case study, Smith created layered holding narratives drawn from Scripture and theology to make and give sense to what the district was experiencing. For each crisis he sought to anchor the sensemaking process in traditional resources of the Christian faith.<sup>37</sup>

- As Smith accepted his appointment as District Superintendent and departed his church during the pandemic, he focused on the Joshua 1 story of the leadership transition between Moses and Joshua. He encouraged parishioners to be bold and courageous as they seek to follow Christ into the uncertain future. He continued this narrative as he cared for the churches in his district.
- When he learned of the pending lawsuit in that same spring, he reminded himself and his leaders that they cannot control the outcome but can be stewards of what was unfolding in the confidence that God would walk with them and provide wisdom as they sought to resolve it.

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<sup>36</sup> SAMHSA's *Concept of Trauma and Guidance...*, p. 11ff

<sup>37</sup> For a more in-depth discussion in the role of institutions during crisis, see Dustin Benac's 2021 presentation "Neither Cross nor Catalyst: Institutions as a Container for Crisis." International Academy of Practical Theology Conference Series (<https://www.ia-practicaltheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/230612-FLYER-Coping-with-crisis.pdf>)



- As he began addressing the possible disaffiliations within his district, he reminded the people that throughout church history God is faithful. He referred his district to Acts 5, the story of Gamaliel advising the Sanhedrin to allow God to show what was of God and what was not.
- When the tornadoes hit in December of 2021, Smith encouraged his people to enact Habakkuk 1 and 2 where the prophet was encouraged to yell at God in anger while listening for God's voice. Acknowledging the pain of disasters like tornadoes while encouraging honest communication with God and one another in the midst of shared suffering undergirded this holding narrative.<sup>38</sup>

Applying the holding narratives to the crisis typology, intentional and external crises were linked to Acts 5. Unintentional and external crises were linked to the theodicy of Habakkuk 1 and 2 and the reminder to trust God with the unknown in Joshua 1. Intentional and internal crises were linked to a reminder that God is still in control and will show a way forward.

Smith referenced the shared Christian worldview schema as an act of sensegiving. He was pastoral in communicating with the clergy and church leaders in his district. He could not protect them from the layered crises, but he did seek to care for the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs at each stage, to represent them and their needs to the larger judicatory, and to relay the communication and resources from that judicatory to the district. To the degree that there were emergency preparedness plans to guide Smith and the leaders, they practiced trauma-informed crisis leadership. For example, the United Methodist Church provides emergency response training to churches and judicatories.<sup>39</sup> It also provides funds for disaster recovery.

Absent from Smith's leadership, and that of the churches and people in his care, were sensemaking models like those

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<sup>38</sup> This holding narrative assumes most laity do not have a sophisticated understanding of theodicy, e.g., finitism or despotism. One helpful resource might be Grace Ko, *Theodicy in Habakkuk* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> <https://umcmission.org/united-states-disaster-response/>

above. Layered crises require naming and sorting, including how to steward each, e.g., as shepherd or spokesperson, and how to navigate organizational liminality. Sensemaking moderators like schema consistency were not part of the leadership strategy. Religious meaning making was clearly happening. Application of the SAMHSA recommendations for trauma-informed leadership was less recognizable in the district.

*Revisiting Kraft, et al.: prophetic meaning making as schema*

The crisis typology and its roles for the leader pointed to the biblical references of saint, shepherd, sinner, and spokesperson. These archetypes relate well with the need for discerning holding narratives in a time of crisis. But what is the relationship between spiritual discernment, using resources such as biblical archetypes, and meaning making? How do religious schemas interact with the other schemas utilized to make/give/receive sense, especially during a crisis?

As noted above, Anna Kraft and her colleagues discuss the role of moderators in sensemaking, specifically schema consistency, legitimate power, and employee affect. They identify two phases of leaders setting up the sensemaking and then, how they influence how employees engage in sensemaking. Schema consistency moderates both the first and second phase of the process. This article suggests that some of the schema appropriate to leadership through layered crises include the Cynefin decision support heuristic, the Collins, et al., Crisis Typology Matrix, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and SAMHSA models for trauma-informed leadership.

For example, had Smith been trained and rehearsed in typing the crisis using the five Cynefin categories (including the liminality zone) and the Crisis Typology Matrix, he would have been able to call upon suggested ways of understanding each crisis. Had he already used trauma-informed policies, procedures, and practices, he would have had shared schemas to both lead through the crises and holistically care for the traumatic realities.

Regarding the potential of a religiously informed approach, we note that Smith led first with the resources of a Christian worldview. Smith and his teams framed their experiences in biblical and theological terms. In the early phases of the sensemaking process, they pointed to scriptural passages, covenanted to pray and care for one another, and cast messages of hope in a God who walks with them through fire, flood, valley, and mountain. They made sense of what is happening drawing on the meanings of their Christian faith. They engaged in prophetic meaning making toward each other and within their communities.<sup>40</sup> Their iterative sensemaking behaviors of sensegiving and sensereceiving draw on spiritual memories and dispositions. Like Joshua, the congregation can be “strong and courageous” in the face of a pandemic. Gamaliel’s wisdom of not prejudging what might be of God reminded all parties that they can trust God to sort out who is right and who is wrong in the midst of the wave of disaffiliations. Habakkuk’s theodicy gave permission to be angry at God while clinging to the hope of the Lord’s provision. Even in the face of a tragic failure to protect children and the ensuing lawsuit, the West Plains District can trust the God of justice and mercy.

From a religious perspective, specifically Christian, these aforementioned schemas, however, are limited. Although the Crisis Typology Matrix explicitly but superficially uses biblical references, the three schemas do not explicitly integrate spiritual dimensions of an overtly Christian approach. Christian leaders, as well as leaders from other religious traditions, will need to draw deeply from the wellspring of resources in their traditions to make spiritual sense with their communities of faith.

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<sup>40</sup> This is a form of what Kira J. Swanson calls “sensecrafting.” See her January 2015 unpublished dissertation, *The Stories We Tell Ourselves: How Leaders Can Work with Sensecrafting*. Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Publicly Available Content Database. (1658214341). Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.asburyseminary.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fstories-we-tell-ourselves-how-leaders-can-work%2Fdocview%2F1658214341%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8380>.

## **Prophetic meaning making: The religious leader's crisis response**

### *Memorializing crises as a form of prophetic meaning making*

While sensemaking and sensereceiving are necessary for any organization to move through the remainder of the crisis event and complete the recovery process, it is of particular importance when addressing the spiritual needs of a faith community. People of faith seek to understand the revelation of God as the sensemaking and sensegiving framework for all of human experience. This requires the religious leader to look beyond theoretical frameworks that apply to an organization. The Christian worldview schema must play a prominent role.<sup>41</sup>

Crises are memorialized throughout the Bible. For example, the Psalms often recount God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and the failures of faith in the ensuing generations (e.g., see Psalms 78, 80, 81, 105, 106, 114, 135). Old Testament prophets develop themes of God's presence and activity through eras of exile and calamity. New Testament writers draw upon those ancient stories, as well as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to make sense of the new revelation of God in Christ and through the sending of the Spirit.

For the organization that gathers and exists in community around its Christian faith, sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensereceiving take on a more intense importance as it actively experiences God's general revelation in nature and special revelation through the written word (scripture) and the Living Word (Jesus Christ via the Holy Spirit). Special revelation may also come through dreams, visions, miracles, and testimonies of the God we encounter as revealed in Christ and the Bible. Sensemaking and sensegiving in a Christian worldview become acts of narrative and take on a prophetic voice.

As with sacred texts, the voice of God is often experienced through humans and given to other humans for the benefit of

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<sup>41</sup> For example, see Clay Routledge, Christina Roylance, and Andrew A. Abeyta, "Further exploring the link between religion and existential health: the effects of religiosity and trait differences on indicators of meaning in life," *Journal of Religion and Health* (2017) 56:604-613.

the individual and the larger community. This is the voice of the prophet. In order to serve in this prophetic role, the religious leader accesses Christian resources to root the sensemaking process in the truths of the faith. The leader aggregates diverse voices into a prophetic narrative for the community, framing the sensemaking in biblical, theological, and pastoral terms. Adjustments in schema consistency unfold within the context and resources of a Christian worldview.

## **Conclusion**

Leaders navigate crises utilizing schemas that offer meaning to what is being experienced. Those schemas might include crisis typologies, organizational sense-making models, trauma recovery patterns, and trauma-informed care practices. For the Christian leader, Christian worldview resources are often the primary schema for meaning making as leaders and members make, give, and receive sense.

The increasing probability of multiple and simultaneous crises, as witnessed in the West Plains District case study, calls for religious leadership that anchors meaning making in Scripture and theology within the religious community while also drawing from other schemas like crisis leadership and trauma-informed leadership sources. Meaning making is multi-directional. At the same time, especially in times of trauma, Smith demonstrates the unifying power of sensegiving Christian truths long rehearsed in the faith community. These truths had become embedded, more or less, well before the crises of 2021 and they helped shore up resilience and hope across the district.

The authors offer this case analysis to demonstrate a pattern for religious leadership that is anchored in the resources of a Christian worldview while also identifying and embedding additional schemas across organizations already facing layered crises. The long-held faith dispositions of the West Plains District provided commonly-embraced values and beliefs on which to draw. Smith called upon the shared spiritual legacy as the primary schema for meaning making in the face of layered crises as the community exercised crisis leadership, sought to heal trauma, and pursued meaning during and after critical events.

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## REIMAGINING RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE SOCIAL

### IDENTITY MODEL

JACK BARENTSEN

#### Abstract

*The dynamics of religious leadership have changed substantially. Institutional arrangements of religious leadership no longer represent a viable understanding of these dynamics. The Social Identity Model of leadership offers a prism that unveils distinct themes that helpfully reorient religious leadership for the present day: (a) Religious leaders are fundamentally identity leaders. (b) Their power originates in group identification, which in turn empowers group members for joint action. (c) Leader identity and group identity must resonate well for religious leadership to be effective. These aspects are explained and illustrated in this essay.*

#### Introduction

The dynamics of religious leadership have changed substantially. This hardly requires argument for the readers of this journal. Surveying just the last five issues of the *Journal of Religious Leadership*, I found these suggested reasons for the current disfunction of religious leadership:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I surveyed *JRL* issues 20.1 (Spring 2021) through 22.1 (Spring 2023) for this sufficient but not exhaustive indication of the journal's contents. For those who wish to trace these references, the *JRL* issues can be consulted online through various databases, as well as on <https://arl-jrl.org/journal-of-religious-leadership>.

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- faith and church practices that have lost touch with their theological roots, missional purposes, and sociocultural contexts;
- an inordinate focus on programmatic, hierarchical, and capitalistic models of leadership to “fix” organizations;
- alienation and isolation caused by consumer identities, digitalized individualism, and capitalist logic;
- racial injustice, colonialism (including White supremacy), and gender inequalities, resulting in imbalanced structures of power and unquestioned privilege;
- social, cultural, and ideological conflicts due to increasing polarization.

With a list so diverse and comprehensive, it is unlikely that any one model or proposal for religious leadership will make the day. This is also evident in the five surveyed journal issues. Various alternative approaches to leadership have been recommended to move toward better ways of understanding and practicing leadership:

- foster relational leadership, built on mutual love, humility, and vulnerability;
- develop adaptive, formational and co-creative approaches to leadership;
- refocus the practices of faith communities as missional, with special attention to neighborliness and hospitality;
- collaborate with civic agencies and organizations in community-building and capacity development of neighbors and residents;
- develop intercultural competencies, like storytelling and advocacy, to build bridges across social and ethnic gaps;
- include liberative practices in leadership to lead and serve marginalized populations;

- develop conflict leadership skills to reveal and use the constructive and adaptive potential of conflicts.

In addition to these alternative approaches, the members of the Academy of Religious Leadership (the sponsoring organization of the *JRL*) proposed models of interpretive,<sup>2</sup> sensemaking<sup>3</sup> and innovation leadership<sup>4</sup> to lead better in uncertain, liminal situations.<sup>5</sup> Yet others have advocated entrepreneurial,<sup>6</sup> narrative,<sup>7</sup> and servant leadership<sup>8</sup> approaches, with one (relational) proposal focusing on ecclesial leadership as friendship.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the field of religious leadership is diverse and vibrant, with more consensus about the causes for the disfunction of religious leadership than about the best way forward.<sup>10</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the latest ARL conference targeted “reimagining religious leadership,” hence also the focus of this issue. There is an increasing realization by scholars and practitioners of religious leadership that current institutional arrangements of religious leadership no longer represent a viable understanding of how institutions and their leaders relate to their

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2014); Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Lisa R. Withrow, *Leadership in Unknown Waters: Liminality as Threshold to the Future* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Volland, *The Minister as Entrepreneur: Leading and Growing the Church in an Age of Rapid Change* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Vaughan S. Roberts and David Sims, *Leading by Story: Rethinking Church Leadership* (London: SCM Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Malte Detje, *Servant Leadership: Führen und Leiten in der Kirchengemeinde im 21. Jahrhundert*, vol. 23, Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Many other journals have signaled the same consensus around causes of leadership disfunction, such as *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Journal of Leadership Studies*, or *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*.



members and constituencies, and indeed to society at large. What promise, then, does this issue of the *Journal* hold to advance the debate? Clearly the challenge rises above the capacities of any one individual or association to resolve, though we co-labor diligently to increase our understanding and improve our practice of religious leadership.

My own contribution to this debate has focused on small-scale descriptive studies of leadership and change. I investigated changes in the authority structure of church leadership,<sup>11</sup> the effect of the discourse of innovation and entrepreneurship on church leadership,<sup>12</sup> the role of embodiment in church leadership,<sup>13</sup> and the relevance of servant leadership and change leadership for church leaders.<sup>14</sup> I sought to comprehensively harvest empirical research on church leadership to move toward a new understanding of and model for church leadership.<sup>15</sup> Though I am a system-builder at heart, my practical theological orientation tells me that a comprehensive model for the future of religious leadership is not likely to turn up any time soon. So, what could I contribute to the task of reimagining religious leadership with such diverse pieces of research?

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Barentsen, “The End of Authority – and Its Legitimate Future: A Theological Assessment,” in *The End of Leadership*, ed. J. Barentsen, S. C. van den Heuvel, and P. Lin, vol. 4, Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 13–29. For additional publications for footnotes 11–15, see <https://etfleuven.academia.edu/JackBarentsen>.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Barentsen, “The Pastor as Entrepreneur? An Investigation of the Use and Value of ‘Entrepreneur’ as Metaphor for Pastoral Leadership,” in *Metaphors for Leading - Leading by Metaphors*, ed. S. Jung et al., vol. 6, Management – Ethik – Organisation (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 75–88.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Barentsen, “Pastoral Leadership as Dance: How Embodiment, Practice and Identity Shape Communities and Their Leadership,” *Practical Theology* 12, no. 2 (2019): 312–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1591796>.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Barentsen and Dustin D. Benac, “The Value and Impact of Servant Leadership Discourse in Church Leadership Studies,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Servant Leadership*, ed. S. Dhiman and G. E. Roberts (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 489–516; Jack Barentsen, “New Pathways for Religious Leadership: Change in Highly Traditioned Organizations,” in *Routledge Companion to Leadership and Change*, ed. S. Dhiman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 296–313.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Barentsen, “Practising Religious Leadership,” in *Routledge Companion to Leadership*, ed. J. Storey et al. (London: Routledge, 2016), 260–77.

The common denominator in much of my research is the Social Identity Model of leadership. I first encountered this model in NT studies in the fall of 2007, when reading Philip Esler's commentary on Romans. He proposed that Romans was not so much Paul's classical doctrinal exposition as his "bid for leadership in Rome."<sup>16</sup> Esler's proposal gripped my imagination. After investigating this model thoroughly and checking my understanding with key scholars in the field (Alexander Haslam,<sup>17</sup> Michael Hogg<sup>18</sup>), I applied it first to New Testament studies.<sup>19</sup>

The Social Identity Model became instrumental in developing my understanding of religious leadership and informed much of my research on religious leadership. I found that Social Identity Theory has investigated contexts of social stability as well as contexts of social change.

In times of social stability, social identity is stable, group boundaries are clear, and formally appointed leadership is generally considered legitimate. This fairly describes the situation of faith communities and religious leadership for most of the twentieth century. Today, in times of social change — with the rate and extent of change increasing every decade — social identities readily change, group boundaries shift, and legitimate leadership resides more with the authentic leader or influencer with whom one identifies than with formally appointed leaders in institutional structures.

In both contexts, leaders might engage in strong identity maintenance and firm boundary management, whether as routine

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<sup>16</sup> Philip Francis Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 1–2, 12, 138, 169.

<sup>17</sup> S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Daan Van Knippenberg, and David E. Rast, "The Social Identity Theory of Leadership: Theoretical Origins, Research Findings, and Conceptual Developments," *European Review of Social Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2012): 258–304.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership Development in Corinth and Ephesus*, vol. 168, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

leadership strategy in times of stability or as resistance strategy in times of change. In both contexts, leaders might engage in creative identity adaptation, whether as innovative strategy at a time when little changes or as routine operation in times of high change. With current trends of deinstitutionalization and loss of trust in formal leadership, the dynamics of identity are gaining visibility, but they have always underpinned the dynamics of groups and leadership. In other words, social identity provides an analytical framework for leadership in group contexts that is applicable — to put it simply — in ancient, modern and postmodern contexts of leadership.

Social Identity Model has served my imagination well by offering a lens through which to see current leadership dynamics afresh. In other words, the Social Identity Model of leadership is not first of all a normative model for how leadership ought to be structured and practiced, but a *heuristic lens* to uncover the dynamics of leadership in various group settings, often as it is incorporated and thus hidden in institutional arrangements.

My contribution to the future of religious leadership in this article is not to suggest one or two particular aspects that deserve special attention, but to share my discovery of a particular theory that enables us to see certain leadership dynamics in a fresh light, whether hidden in older or current institutional arrangements, or as manifested in various new approaches to doing church and being a religious leader.

I do, of course, have some thoughts about faithful church leadership in our new age, but I propose that we can only move forward through the wilderness of new leadership dimensions and proposals, if we succeed in finding some common language and meta-level concepts to understand what leadership is and how to discern its faithful practice. When we see religious leadership afresh, we can nurture renewed theological imaginations — usually in interaction with sacred texts and religious traditions — to develop new practices, strategies, and structures of religious leadership that are suitable for late modernity in the West.

## Seeing Afresh

In a fascinating sociological study, Rosa analyzes the modern condition (of Western societies) in terms of acceleration and resonance.<sup>20</sup> Our main goal, says Rosa, is to achieve moments of authentic connection with nature, society and ourselves, moments of resonance that become sources of hope and meaning in our hurried lives — even though such moments often are fleeting. To achieve such moments of resonance, we dominate our environment, including humans and animals, with ever more efficiency and productivity, which allows us to increase our share of the world.

With ever more resources available to us, sustainable only by the continual acceleration of innovation, production, and consumption (“to stand still is to fall behind”), we finally hope to achieve resonance. However, the subjection of the world to our striving for dominance, and the increasing pace of acceleration, serves to mute the world rather than to generate resonance, and breeds alienation more than connection. Hence, the promise of resonance remains evermore elusive ... “if only we had a few more resources.”

Churches and their leaders also have participated in this competition between domination and resonance. Managerial approaches of the Church Growth Movement in the 1980s promised growth and increasing contemporary relevance of the Christian faith when certain principles and practices were carefully followed and adapted. Unable to stop church decline in the West, more innovative approaches began to take shape under the labels of the Emerging Church (US) or Fresh Expressions (UK) in the early 2000s and 2010s, promising new vitality in neighborhoods with previously unreached segments of the population.

Despite hundreds of hopeful initiatives, these movements too have not succeeded in stemming the tide of church decline.

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<sup>20</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019).

Charismatic Christianity is reportedly growing the most,<sup>21</sup> and various cycles of charismatic renewal continue to promise a new wind of the Spirit, if only we believe in the Spirit's miraculous ministries, or practice specific spiritual disciplines that generate a new resonance with the Spirit's ministry. Although these movements are far more complex than these few comments can indicate,<sup>22</sup> it appears that each of them, in the spirit of the modern age, seeks to shape, control, and even dominate particular church structures in relation to their secular environments, in order to secure growth in terms of numbers of people and resources, which in turn promise increasing alignment and resonance with God's mission and the Spirit's ministry.

In spite of these efforts, 30 percent of the US population are now identified as "nones," expected to increase to 50 percent by 2070.<sup>23</sup> Statistics for the UK and Europe are even less hopeful.<sup>24</sup> One wonders whether the new spiritual and institutional arrangements advocated by various movements have really fulfilled their promise so quickly to see widespread and long-lasting change based on their desire to be attuned to and experience better resonance with God's work in this world. It seems each time the promise of alignment and resonance is temporary, even fleeting, so even innovative religious structures fall mute relatively quickly as the momentum for renewal and resonance passes to the next movement. In other words, where once institutional structures nurtured resonant relationships with God, the community and the world, many of these structures have now fallen mute, and even their innovation cannot stem the tide of church decline.

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<sup>21</sup> RNS Press Release, "Spirit-Empowered Christianity Is One of the Fastest Growing Global Movements, New Study Shows," *Religion News Service*, February 25, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/02/25/spirit-empowered-christianity-is-one-of-the-fastest-growing-global-movements-new-study-shows/>.

<sup>22</sup> For more elaboration, see my "New Pathways for Religious Leadership."

<sup>23</sup> The "nones" claim no religious belief or affiliation. Pew Research Center, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

<sup>24</sup> Pew Research Center, "Being Christian in Western Europe" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018).

A recognition is growing, that traditional institutional dimensions of church have fallen mute — at least for large segments of the Christian population. Due to modernity's tendency of acceleration and alienation, this even applies to many of the more contemporary, innovative ecclesial structures. Within the field of leadership studies, this is broadly recognized as the “end of leadership.”<sup>25</sup> That is, leadership in its older corporate, often hierarchical and managerial approaches, is over; new models and structures of leadership are emerging for a hyperconnected world. Within the field of congregational studies, this results in the recognition that traditional institutional church structures no longer offer meaningful contextual understandings of the dynamics of community, identity, and leadership.<sup>26</sup>

This changing paradigm in leadership strongly affects personal leadership trajectories. From my own interview research on pastoral leadership and change, it is evident that pastors cope with what they report as a loss of authority or that they struggle with fading or changing identity boundaries that threaten their own leadership effectiveness. These struggles indicate that for a group leader to function with harmony and effectiveness, a certain level of resonance between leader identity and group identity is necessary — to which we will return below.<sup>27</sup>

Much can be learned by running fast and experimenting creatively; yet, to seriously reimagine religious leadership, churches and their leaders need new understandings of the dynamics that

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<sup>25</sup> cf. Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership* (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2012); Jack Barentsen et al., eds., *The End of Leadership? Leadership and Authority at Crossroads*, vol. 4, *Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> e.g. Stuart R. Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World, After Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Jack Barentsen, “Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction in a Changing Social Context,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 14, no. 2 (2015): 49–80; Jack Barentsen, “Changements dans les structures d'autorité de l'Église – comment les interpréter ?,” in *Autorité et pouvoir dans l'agir pastoral*, ed. Arnaud Join-Lambert, Axel Liégeois, and Catherine Chevalier, *Théologies pratiques* (Namur: Lumen Vitae, 2016), 267–78.

generate resonance between believers, their sense of participation with God's mission in the world, and their religious leaders.<sup>28</sup>

This raises the question, How do we obtain a fresh, more salient understanding of these dynamics in a late-modern, religious context? Investigating these dynamics requires tools or a set of lenses that allow sufficient critical distance to attend to the practice of religious leadership afresh, as if seeing it anew; that also allows close affinity with the practice, norms and beliefs of religious leadership. This article proposes the Social Identity Theory of leadership as such a lens.<sup>29</sup>

### The Social Identity Theory of Leadership<sup>30</sup>

Much of religious life and leadership takes place in the context of groups that are deliberately gathered, even spiritually constituted, around particular (usually authoritative) religious beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, and experiences that are foundational for the community's existence and central in its operations — the topic of biblical, systematic and practical ecclesiologies. Because leadership arises within groups, leadership inevitably has a social identity dimension that inherently affects leadership practice.

Groups are constituted by *similarities* within (the ingroup) as well as by significant perceived *differences* with nongroup members (outgroups).<sup>31</sup> Thus, identification with one's faith community highlights ingroup *similarities* ("we are one," "we believe and practice the same things," "we share common religious experiences"), while simultaneously highlighting *differences* with outgroups ("we

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<sup>28</sup> Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Hogg, Van Knippenberg, and Rast, "Social Identity Theory of Leadership"; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*; Niklas K. Steffens et al., "Advancing the Social Identity Theory of Leadership: A Meta-Analytic Review of Leader Group Prototypicality," *Organizational Psychology Review* 11, no. 1 (2021): 35–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386620962569>.

<sup>30</sup> I summarized basic aspects of Social Identity Theory in JRL issue 14.2 (2015), "Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction," 53–57.

<sup>31</sup> The so-called meta-contrast principle, which is explained in the next few sentences. See Hogg, Van Knippenberg, and Rast, "Social Identity Theory of Leadership," 262.

are not like ... other faith traditions, the world, other religions, etc.”). This is not to deny differences *within* the group, but these are often overlooked or represented as insignificant for the group’s identity. Nor does this deny similarities with the outgroup, for e.g., Americans share a great deal of cultural beliefs and practices, which noticeably inform American religious communities. However, groups, including religious groups, often emphasize their unity, their belonging together, and hence their social or group identity, over against other groups in their social and religious context. We refer to this as the *socioreligious* identity of the religious group or community.

In some contexts, religious belonging and identity become a significant factor in social interaction. This significance is labeled *salience* within Social Identity Theory. Salience refers to situations and contexts in which social identity and social identification are highly relevant, both socially and religiously, for the belonging and functioning of group members together, as well as for their social interaction with other segments of society (the outgroups).

For those without religious affiliation, socioreligious identity might appear to be salient only when religious groups congregate: usually religious group members and their leaders consider their socioreligious identity salient in many more areas of life. Hence, how socioreligious identity is framed as an influential factor in religious as well as social life is a matter of contest and leadership.

Leadership in a context of high group salience is not only a matter of adding leader traits and skills to the group, or of healthy individual relationships between group members. Rather, identity-shaped leadership functions to model and reflect group values, defends and promotes group interests, and addresses members’ needs for self-esteem, security and belonging, and more.

In general, leadership theories revolve around one or a few of these aspects: inspirational influence based on group beliefs and values (transformational leadership); the leader as model of group values (authentic leadership); enhancing community relationships (LMX leadership); or serving people by defending their interests



and encouraging personal development (servant leadership). Most of these aspects can be seen as an outworking of various aspects of social identification.

Hence, to speak of group or social identity as an important factor in leadership is not to add yet another dimension to the already full palette of leadership theory, but to point to the social and psychological underpinning of most leadership processes. Even so, the social identity framework of leadership is unfortunately largely overlooked in traditional leadership research.<sup>32</sup>

Several key concepts from Social Identity Theory are especially important to religious leadership. First, social identities are always *comparative*, highlighting ingroup similarities as well as outgroup differences. These similarities and differences are, at least in part, a matter of perception and representation. Hence, religious leaders usually attempt to influence various dimensions of comparison to heighten the distinctiveness and value of socioreligious identification with their community.

This is evident in the way in which religious leaders perceive and portray relationships between the church and the world (or between churches). For instance, even though a church in, say, my own context of Belgium has much in common with Belgian culture, church leaders often highlight the differences between the church and Belgian culture to raise the value and salience of religious identification in their context. They often use theological concepts, principles, and narrative, to point to spiritual, moral, and cultural differences with “the world,” while emphasizing the spiritual and moral unity of their own religious community. In Christian contexts, religious leaders usually employ sermons, worship, and pastoral care to shape these dimensions of religious belonging, frequently without awareness that these practices are forms of identity management.

Second, social identities are *cognitively represented* as prototypes. A group prototype is a mental representation of “who we are,” a fuzzy (rather than sharply defined) set of aspirational attributes of the group’s ideals. A group prototype is usually defined with

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<sup>32</sup> Hogg, Van Knippenberg, and Rast, 264.

reference to ingroup similarities and outgroup differences.<sup>33</sup> For instance, in a traditional context of denominational competition, the group prototype likely will highlight group members who can clearly articulate the group's differences (in spirituality, beliefs, practices, etc.) from other Christian communities, who are seen to be loyal to one's own community in practice, and who engage in competitive behavior such as denouncing those with different beliefs and practices, or proselytizing among those who differ.

In the postmodern West, where religious communities have lost much of their social bedding and relevance, the group prototype might instead focus on religious participation in the public square, on discerning and enhancing God's mission in the world, and on bridge-building relationships with civic partners and other "outsiders." Or again, in a majority world context of religious persecution, the group prototype can highlight group members who were willing to sacrifice and personally suffer for the community, who were unwavering in their commitment to the community's beliefs and practices, and who nevertheless clearly communicated the faith to their persecutors.

Third, the stronger people identify with a group, the more attentive they are to information about the group prototype, which they obtain most easily from ingroup members that are perceived as prototypical, that is, as embodying the values, beliefs and practices of the group.<sup>34</sup> Such *prototypical members* are thus highly influential in shaping the perception of other group members regarding the most significant attributes that define their socioreligious identity.

Clearly, prototypical members play a central role in social identification, and they influence what counts as leadership — which is why Social Identity Theory portrays leaders as "entrepreneurs of identity," a notion to which we will return below. In religious communities, such prototypical members (often but not always the formal leaders) strongly influence the selection, ordination, and appointment of religious leaders, which involve

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<sup>33</sup> Steffens et al., "Advancing the Social Identity Theory of Leadership," 37–39.

<sup>34</sup> Hogg, Van Knippenberg, and Rast, "Social Identity Theory of Leadership," 262–64.

complex procedures to evaluate the fit between an aspiring religious leader (with or without formal theological training) and the community, on local as well as translocal (denominational) levels. In the language of social identity, these group interactions serve to evaluate the level of prototypicality of the aspiring leader with respect to the socioreligious identity of a particular community. Subsequently, such leaders become a primary source to inform, model and disciple members into the mode of being religious that is central to that community and its socioreligious identity.

Fourth, research has pointed out *motivations* that determine the strength of social identification: self-esteem, continuity, security, self-efficacy, distinctiveness, belonging, meaning, beliefs and values.<sup>35</sup> These relate to the evaluative dimension of social identities, determining the value of particular social identities to its group members. Religious leaders usually interact with these motivational identity dynamics, which are correlated with theological concepts like being loved by God (self-esteem), belonging to the Body of Christ (belonging, distinctiveness, continuity), and experiencing the work and gifts of the Spirit (self-efficacy, empowerment, participation, meaning). Such correlations evidently need more careful elaboration than this mere mention. Yet clearly, religious leaders can raise or lower the value of religious identification for their members by monitoring and influencing member motivations for socioreligious identification.

Fifth, the value of a social identity also relates to its *affective dimension*. Social identification generates various emotions that express the level of an individual's attachment to a particular group or the level of identity threat that an individual experiences. Pride, happiness, and hope accompany social identity enactment that is positive, affirming and enhancing the value of this social identity. Shame, anxiety, and anger accompany social identity enactment

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<sup>35</sup> Vivian L. Vignoles et al., "Beyond Self-Esteem: Influence of Multiple Motives on Identity Construction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 2 (2006): 308–33; Vivian L. Vignoles and Natalie J. Moncaster, "Identity Motives and In-Group Favouritism: A New Approach to Individual Differences in Intergroup Discrimination," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 46, no. 1 (2007): 91–113.

that is negative, deviating from or even contesting the beliefs, attitudes, or practices of one's social identity. The stronger the social identification, the stronger the positive or negative emotions.

These emotions, in turn, affect one's social identification: they might reinforce social identification if the emotions enhance involvement, strengthen commitment, or press toward conformity, but they might also weaken social identification if an outgroup identity appears to be more valuable than one's ingroup identity, especially in a social context where leaving one's own group and joining another has potentially more benefits than costs.

Religious leaders thus have a substantial emotional effect on their members, depending on how they lead in identity enactment, handle identity threats, and regulate attendant emotions. Recognizing these emotions as, at least in part, accompaniment of certain identity dynamics provides insights and tools for religious leaders to regulate these emotions, in addition to interpreting these emotions in spiritual and theological language.

Thus, the comparative nature of social identity, with its cognitive, evaluative, and affective dimensions of comparison, already indicates several correlations between the Social Identity Theory of leadership and the practice of religious leadership within religious communities and organizations. Community formation and identity performance are existential features of faith communities, and this theory is particularly well suited to investigate that identity dimension of religious leadership. The theory provides a descriptive, analytical account of leadership in terms of social interaction, group dynamics, and social context, and is based on research in various fields (business, education, nonprofits, politics, social movements, etc.).

Yet, every theory has its limits, and the major one to be noted here is that it does not take into account spiritual or theological realities. This is, of course, not what the theory was designed to do, although it doesn't rule out those realities either. It is important to complement Social Identity Theory with theological theories of religious leadership, such as Branson and Roxburgh's proposal that religious leadership should begin with the acknowledgment of God as primary agent in any situation, and of God as acting through

the Spirit within the entire community and not only through its leaders. Human leaders are agents as they collaborate more or less faithfully with divine agency.<sup>36</sup>

After this initial sketch of how Social Identity Theory can enlighten the practice of religious leadership, I come to the core of my proposal, namely that the Social Identity Theory of leadership gives theologians and theological educators a fuller grasp of the social and religious identity dynamics of religious leadership. Like a prism refracts a beam of light into its underlying distinctive colors and wavelengths, Social Identity Theory illumines the entrepreneurial, empowering, and aligning potential of religious leadership.

### **Refraction #1: Religious leaders as entrepreneurs of identity**

One of the foremost findings of the Social Identity Theory of leadership is that leaders are “entrepreneurs of identity.”<sup>37</sup> Leaders carry out many tasks, for which they need a variety of skills, but it is the relationship between their own self-perception as group member and the ingroup prototype that predicts the extent to which they are seen as leader and the extent to which they can be effective. The potential for leadership expands to the proportion that leaders are seen as “one of us,” reflecting their prototypicality in a particular ingroup, and “doing it for us,” reflecting how these leaders are perceived as advancing and championing group interests.<sup>38</sup> Thus, prototypicality is a vital factor in leader emergence and effectiveness.

Yet, leadership is not simply the result of and determined by processes of social identification. These processes, in turn, position

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<sup>36</sup> Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions*; See also Stephen K. Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009); Jackson W. Carroll, *As One with Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry*, 2nd and revised ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Hogg, Van Knippenberg, and Rast, “Social Identity Theory of Leadership,” 267–68; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 121ff.

<sup>38</sup> Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, chapters 4 and 5.

leaders as trustworthy sources of information, which enables them to influence, shape and adapt the group's social identity, which then mobilizes group members to adapt and enact group identity. On the one hand, group members perceive some of their own as prototypical group members, attributing leadership status to them, which, on the other hand, permits these same prototypical leaders to use their influence to not only maintain, but also to shape and innovate the group's identity. It is precisely the trust and leadership attributions through prototypicality that allows the leader to adapt and innovate, leading scholars in the field to describe leaders as "entrepreneurs of identity."<sup>39</sup>

Leaders influence group identity in a number of ways, which is described under the labels of artist, impresario, and engineer.<sup>40</sup> (1) As *artist of social identity*, leaders craft a relevant sense of social identity. This is not merely a repetition of existing dimensions of group identity, but also contains an element of improvisation or artistry, shaping dimensions of identity in interaction with group members and their social environment.

For instance, many innovative efforts in church planting lead to Emerging Churches, Fresh Expressions, or Pioneer Places, with leaders seeking alternative ways for faith communities to relate to their immediate context (neighborhood, city) in (re)establishing a civic presence. Certain elements of being church in its traditional forms are no longer followed, while new activities and rituals are being developed for a new context with different people.<sup>41</sup> While certain core beliefs and values remain consistent, other practices and values are adjusted to fit a new style of church in a new context. These adjustments are not simply a case of change management but are fundamentally a creative adaptation of socioreligious identity.

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<sup>39</sup> One might well argue that leaders and followers reciprocally construct each other in a dialectical dance of social identity. However, the opportunity for innovation and identity entrepreneurship rests more with highly prototypical members than with average or even deviant group members.

<sup>40</sup> Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 148–65.

<sup>41</sup> David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts, and Michael Volland, *Fresh! An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

Of course, numerous faith communities resist such creativity, but that too is a feature of identity leadership. In situations where change is perceived as identity deviation or identity threat, the leadership task is perceived as faithful and firm maintenance of valued standards of identity. This too is an attempt by religious leaders to maintain a relevant sense of socioreligious identity in a particular context. Obviously, the interpretation of what counts as relevant identity marker in a particular context is quite different from one faith community to another.

(2) As *impresario of social identity*, leaders influence group identity by the way they preside over group activities and rituals which express and celebrate group identity. A salient ingroup identity binds individuals together in a community of meaning and belonging. A typical manner by which the salience of a particular identity is highlighted flows through collective group activities. Leading group activities, like political rallies, company parties, or church rituals, positions leaders as impresarios (celebrants) of social (socioreligious) identity.

For instance, religious leaders perform rituals such as baptism and Communion (Eucharist). In baptism, whether as adult or infant, the religious identification of the person to be baptized is (symbolically) transformed, usually in the presence of the community as witnesses of this act of religious identification, and as celebrants together of their common religious identity. Hence, every baptism is a reaffirmation and celebration of socioreligious identity for all those present who have already been baptized, which in turn serves as a “testimony” of the value this mode of socioreligious identification to those present and not yet baptized.

Similarly, Communion features bread and wine to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This serves as an affirmation of faith in these historical events as basis for shared Christian identity, but even more, this celebrates the Lord’s presence within the community as the very life of the community. Many other rituals similarly express elements of shared socioreligious identity: the way Christians assemble for worship (some in lively chatter

emphasizing community, others in silence emphasizing reverence), the ritual of taking up the offering, even such mundane rituals as drinking coffee and tea after the service, and many more.

Although all community rituals can and sometimes are performed in a perfunctory manner, it is the impresario dimension of identity leadership that suggests leaders are most prototypical, and their socioreligious identity most salient, when they perform these practices in such a way that they affirm, perhaps reshape, and celebrate the community's sense of socioreligious identity.

(3) As *engineer of social identity*, leaders heighten the value of ingroup identity by mobilizing members and creating structures that will realize group norms, practices, and beliefs. The leadership task of creating identity-embedding structures for everyday life is the domain of Christian formation and discipleship, which aims to shape daily life as enactment and expression of Christian identity. This involves personal spiritual practices such as personal Bible reading and prayer, corporate spiritual practices such a participation in church worship and small groups, as well as societal spiritual practices such as work ethics, neighborliness, diaconal involvement, and volunteer community service. Hence, these identity-embedding structures include but are not limited to proper participation in church ritual, since they relate to incorporating one's socioreligious identity in everyday life.

In this way, social identities not only serve to mentally organize existing social reality, but they also enable people to function in complex social environments. Moreover, identity-embedding practices often carry visions of "future social realities."<sup>42</sup> Group members act in concert with other group members, not only to affirm and celebrate their common identity, but also to influence society at large based on their vision of these future realities. The aspirations and hopes that are nurtured as part of social identity are embedded in everyday life, not only of ingroup members but also of outsiders. This clearly motivates many forms of social engagement by members of faith communities. When successful,

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<sup>42</sup> Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 162.



such spiritual practices broaden the effect of one's socioreligious identity on society at large, increases the plausibility of these future visions, and raises the value of that group identity.

Needless to say, this is usually contested by other groups with a different vision of future social realities, as is clear in politics, business, and religion. This task requires leaders to recognize resistance from various social forces that affect ingroup members, and to improvise new practices for coping with or overcoming these resistances. This task is not simply a challenge of innovation, but is part of the overall challenge of the leader as engineer of identity. When leaders fail to embed the group's vision of social identity in interaction with other groups in society, the value of their group identity decreases, which might result in the leader losing prototypicality, thus eroding the basis for leadership.

This dynamic can offer a partial explanation for church decline in the West. Due to secularization, individualization, and many other factors already mentioned above, the broader social effect of churches has declined and faith has become a private affair. The impresario function of leadership remains (somewhat) intact, since traditional church practices can still be executed, but overall, religious leaders and their communities struggle to maintain a robust level of societal engagement — the engineer function of leadership — that would affirm the plausibility and value of their socioreligious identity beyond their own faith community.

Without adequate attention to adapting visions of socioreligious identity — the artist function of identity leadership — this might lead to a loss of value and plausibility for their socioreligious identity, so that many ingroup members either search for an alternative socioreligious identity that reconnects them with one another and their social context in a credible and hopeful manner, or else they abandon their faith community altogether.

Returning to the image of the prism, this is the first refraction of religious leadership. Religious leaders, like other leaders in politics, business, or health care, lead by creating a salient vision of socioreligious identity as artist of identity. This involves modes of communication to (re)interpret Christian tradition and

contemporary culture to maintain a vital connection between both. They also celebrate their socioreligious identity as impresario of identity in the meetings and rituals where they preside, so that group members can engage in Christian meaning-making. Finally, they create identity-embedding structures of socioreligious identity as engineer of identity, so that Christian meaning-making can be turned into Christian daily living. This last task is the ultimate “proof of the pudding,” since it demonstrates and realizes the future vision nurtured within the faith community.

Religious leaders from various traditions fulfill these tasks in different ways. Some fully engage with society; some engage mostly with their own members to affirm and secure their socioreligious identity; and most function somewhere between these two trajectories. But however religious leaders respond to their religious and social challenges, it is vital to recognize that their leadership is part of the hard work of identity management, which is barely realized in the literature on church leadership.<sup>43</sup>

## **Refraction #2: Power and empowerment through social identification**

Power, and its close cousin authority, are constructed through processes of social identification. Traditional theories of power emphasize that power is based on the control of resources that others desire. To obtain access to these desired resources, followers accept the leader’s influence and direction, not because they value these actions intrinsically, but because they value the leaders’ resources. In the process, followers gather around individuals with these resources and thus organizations and groups are formed. Traditional theories of power tend to assume that power essentially enables a leader to get things done against the will of the followers.

A Social Identity Theory of power starts at the other end, with group formation and social identification.<sup>44</sup> Social identification

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<sup>43</sup> A good but “solitary” exception to this oversight is: Carroll, *As One with Authority*.

<sup>44</sup> For this argument, see John C. Turner, “Explaining the Nature of Power: A Three-Process Theory,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2005): 1–22; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 144–47.

draws individuals together in groups, where certain highly prototypical individuals gain trust and influence, resulting in leadership attribution and leadership roles for prototypical group members. To the extent that these leaders are seen as “being one of us” and “doing it for us,” they not only gain trust but also access to valued group resources. These resources, in turn, allow group leaders to act on behalf of and alongside group members to achieve valued group goals.

When this power is formally recognized as legitimate, we speak of authority, which is the exercise of power *with* and *on behalf of* those people who identify with the group.<sup>45</sup> This might lead to power *over* or even *against* individuals, (1) when group members significantly deviate from expected or normative group performance, (2) when the behavior of the outgroup appears to threaten the group’s identity, or (3) when a leadership group distances itself from the larger group and uses its legitimate authority to force the group in a particular direction.

Furthermore, to exercise power *on behalf of* and *with* group members, is not to take power away from them (as a carrot that will then motivate them to action), but is to share and multiply power. That is, through social identification, identity leaders enhance and leverage the agency of group members in their context, so that their collaboration expands the value of their socioreligious identity. Hence, processes of social identification enable leaders to empower ingroup members for meaningful participation and social action.<sup>46</sup>

In short, resources and power belong to the group. Power is not a zero-sum game, so that greater power for the leader comes at the expense of the power of individual group members. It is rather the opposite: the more power the leader wields *on behalf*

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<sup>45</sup> Barentsen, “The End of Authority – and Its Legitimate Future: A Theological Assessment”; For authority as a social construction by the group, see David J. Stagaman, *Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, and Nick Hopkins, “Social Identity and the Dynamics of Leadership: Leaders and Followers as Collaborative Agents in the Transformation of Social Reality,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2005): 547–68.

*of* and *with* the group, the more group members grow in power to attain group goals through their identity performance.

How does this dynamic of power through identification work in the domain of religious leadership? Many churches feature a significant degree of formal, hierarchical authority that closely supervises member participation. Empowerment of members in this context appears to focus on internal alignment with the guidelines and proposed practices of the religious leaders. Power *with* and *on behalf of* the people is practiced by the religious leader hierarchically as intermediary between God and the people.

The priest or pastor brings the people before God in prayer and worship, and communicates divine benefits to the people through baptism, Communion and various other rites. The people's agency at this level is primarily determined by their willing, even obedient followership that makes them fit to receive these benefits. Of course, group members are also involved with various social activities and material concerns of the faith community, but this level of participation appears not to be directly related to divine benefits. Here, empowerment relates primarily to expressing and maintaining allegiance to ingroup concerns and activities.<sup>47</sup>

In other churches, power *with* and *on behalf of* the people is practiced by empowering the community in multiple ways. One dimension of empowerment comes through facilitating church members in their relationship with the divine and with one another in the community. Other dimensions of empowerment focus on mobilizing church members for service, within the church, the neighborhood, and the city, and in collaborative community networks. Leadership structures are generally less hierarchical, although some leaders might have significant authority, with a focus on the outward mission of the church. Here, empowerment relates to expressing and even celebrating religious identity in a wider circle of societal concerns and civic involvement. The entire

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<sup>47</sup> Some see this as typical features of Christendom: emphasis on the church as institute, with structures of belonging and membership regulated through ordained clergy. See Murray, *Post-Christendom*.

community is empowered by the Spirit, to practice power *with* and *on behalf of* the church community for the good of the larger civic community.<sup>48</sup>

If participation and empowerment are primarily conceived of as receiving God's gracious gifts, for instance through the sacraments, then reception of these graces counts as empowerment. Note that this leaves substantial power with the religious leader as intermediary, who has significant reward and potential coercive power to discipline members into appropriate religious behavior in to be admitted to these sacraments.

If participation and empowerment, however, are more broadly conceived as contributing in multiple ways to the community and its presence in society, then power is more broadly shared, such that even outgroup members might experience divine empowerment. This reflects two different, but not necessarily opposing, visions of Christian socioreligious identity. A vital, vibrant church in the first sense is a church that regularly fills with people who expectantly participate in religious ritual as hopeful recipients of divine grace. A vital, vibrant church in the second sense is a church where the ministry is broadly shared with the entire community, so that it overflows and reaches those outside.

The shift from a greater internal focus to a more external focus of authority and empowerment reflects the broader cultural phenomenon where, until fairly recently, access to valued resources usually passed through the hands of leaders. However, with the growing democratization of knowledge and experience, mediated by increasingly sophisticated digital technologies, in a society where resources are abundantly available (at least in the West), individuals are not dependent on leaders for access to resources. Instead, they want to have voice in contemporary societal dilemma's, sometimes by active participation. Leaders can mobilize followers through social identification for collective social action, giving them a

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<sup>48</sup> This perspective is often represented in the literature on missional churches. See Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York, NY: Morehouse, 2015).

collective voice for their concerns and empowering them to actively participate.<sup>49</sup>

Theologically, such empowerment is supported by Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12-14, where he proposes a community identity in which all members are empowered to contribute to the community, and where each of these contributions should be recognized as equally valuable, without respect to persons or social status.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Paul envisions a community where access to (divine) resources is not limited to a few leaders, but where leaders act to empower the entire community. Such leadership is evidently culturally embedded, so that both modes of empowerment just described above are suitable ways of empowerment. Whether one of these two or yet other modes of leadership are a better fit, depends on the socioreligious identity of the faith community and their vision of how they relate to their social context.

A significant prophetic critique of modes of empowerment comes from Old Testament prophets, with their critique that the Israelites did not care for the poor, the disenfranchised and the foreigner. That is, those that would tend to be perceived in some way as outgroup members, are to be intentionally included in the care of the community, and thus in God's care, which empowers these outsiders religiously but also socially to fulfill their community roles in a setting of respect and care. Similarly, with his teachings and miracles, Jesus empowered many people to renew their participation in the community that they had been forced to leave over issues of ritual impurity or immoral behavior.

The prism of social identity leadership reveals the dimension of power in religious leadership to depend on processes of social identification. Since social identification relates, among other things, to including and excluding people, an important task of religious leaders is to develop sensitive awareness of how to

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, "Towards a 'Science of Movement': Identity, Authority and Influence in the Production of Social Stability and Social Change," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2013): 112–31.

<sup>50</sup> Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*, 97–98.

steward their power, whether with, on behalf of, through or over their ingroup members and the outgroup. As a general rule, an overall increase in collaborative agency, by both leaders and group members, is a healthy indication of community life with a robust sense of socioreligious identity; a decrease in agency, or a rise of competing agencies, should lead to intense reflections about the processes of social identification and empowerment.

### **Refraction #3: Alignment of leader identity and community identity**

Much of leadership research focuses more on the leader than on the group. One such line of research focuses on leader identity. Through self-awareness, growth in knowledge, and developing skills, a leader grows in effectiveness and develops a *leader identity*, whereby the leader is seen as distinct from the average group member.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, *identity leadership* focuses on how leaders orient themselves toward the group in which they participate. Although *leader identity* and *identity leadership* represent different lines of research, there are some important connections with the Social Identity Theory of leadership and its findings about leader emergence and leader endurance.<sup>52</sup>

As explained, leaders emerge within a group through their prototypicality: they are seen as representing and embodying the group's beliefs, values, and practices, and they seek to empower group members to advance group interests. Research shows that prototypicality predicts that some group members are liked more than other group members. That is, prototypicality generates a higher level of social attraction toward prototypical group members than toward other group members. Consequently, prototypical leaders generally have more friends within the group than nonprototypical members.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert G. Lord and Rosalie J. Hall, "Identity, Deep Structure and the Development of Leadership Skill," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2005): 591–615.

<sup>52</sup> See also S. Alexander Haslam et al., "Reconciling Identity Leadership and Leader Identity: A Dual-Identity Framework," *The Leadership Quarterly*, April 26, 2022, 101620, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101620>.

In addition, group members develop a greater degree of trust toward prototypical members because of their visible commitment to and often sacrifice for the group. They also become more attentive to suggestions about group performance from these prototypical members, which means that other group members are more likely to perceive these prototypical group members as leader. The processes of social attraction, growing trust, and attentiveness to communications from prototypical members generates prototype-based attributions of leadership for them.<sup>53</sup> Hence, leaders emerge within a group based on their prototypicality, relative to the social context of the group.

Once a leader emerges from the group, his/her leadership remains vulnerable to changes in social (or religious) context. Contrary political pressures might shift the group prototype into the opposite ideological direction. A crisis in the group's functioning could bring more entrepreneurial (and previously marginal) group members to the fore as prototypical. Changes in the composition of group membership, with some members leaving and others joining, may result in new trends that shift the perception of prototypicality. And, of course, changes in the life and goals of the leader might cause a shift in the values and practices that the leader is willing to embody. In other words, various circumstances, mostly beyond the control of the leader, can result in "a redistribution of influence within the group," which leaves the leader less prototypical and less influential than before the shift.<sup>54</sup>

Yet group leaders are not simply at the mercy of such shifts for their ability to lead. Leaders employ various strategies to maintain or even enhance their prototypicality and to protect their leadership

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<sup>53</sup>Michael A. Hogg, "A Social Identity Theory of Leadership," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 3 (2001): 190–91; even leader charisma is demonstrably attributed to prototypical leaders by this mechanism, see Michael J. Platow et al., "A Special Gift We Bestow on You for Being Representative of Us: Considering Leader Charisma from a Self-Categorization Perspective," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (2006): 303–20.

<sup>54</sup>Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identification, Group Prototypicality, and Emergent Leadership," in *Social Identity Processes in Organizational Contexts*, ed. Michael A. Hogg (Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, 2001), 206.



influence. (1) They might resist the loss of prototypicality by representing the issues at hand in a simplified manner that reduces the ambiguity, is less open to alternative interpretations, and presents themselves (once again) as prototypical leaders for the occasion. (2) Leaders could choose to deal with ingroup deviants (or even create an imaginary one, the proverbial straw man) to show themselves the “strong man” capable of dealing with this threat.<sup>55</sup> (3) Furthermore, leaders may re-emphasize the established vision of social identity to shore up support or gain new supporters, as happens when leaders celebrate the group’s identity during certain group milestones. (4) Alternatively, leaders might adjust their own vision of social identity to match the new reality and adjust their own behavior in the process.

Clearly, the dialectic between group identity and leader identity is a delicate one, where each responds to the other, as well as to changes in the social, political and religious context. It takes but little imagination to picture a political, business, or religious leader for each of the various strategies listed in the previous paragraph.

Leaders might simply adapt to the group and do whatever is necessary to maintain their position of power and privilege, using the social identity dynamics in a self-serving manner — which often results in losing prototypicality and credibility at a more fundamental level. However, leaders could also employ these strategies with the intention of protecting the group and enhancing its social relevance — while of course also benefiting their own position of leadership.<sup>56</sup>

These identity dynamics can be framed in terms of resonance (see introduction above). For a group leader to function with harmony and effectiveness, a certain level of resonance between leader identity and group identity is necessary. For instance, in an

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<sup>55</sup> Hogg, “A Social Identity Theory of Leadership,” 191–92.

<sup>56</sup> One example is how the apostle Paul defended his role as apostolic founder of the church in Corinth. See Jack Barentsen, “The Social Construction of Paul’s Apostolic Leadership in Corinth,” *HTS / Hervormde Theologiese Studies (Ignatius van Wyk Dedication)* 74, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i4.5191>.

earlier study I described a situation where a relatively young pastor from Presbyterian background was called to pastor a conservative, Baptist church to initiate change.

This pastor presented his own leadership as very different from anything that went before, which played to the community's sensed need for change, and simultaneously framed his own role as prototypical change agent.<sup>57</sup> Thus, this pastor generated resonance for his ministry as change agent in a Baptist church where his different identity might have created dissonance.

In another situation, drawing from my unpublished interview research, a pastor reported an increasing divergence between the church's identity and his own leader identity — a loss of resonance. As his Christian Reformed Church turned increasingly toward evangelical forms of worship, he found himself firmly connected to his more traditional identity as Reformed Pastor. He was not willing to move along with his church's change trajectory, nor able to simply tolerate its shift to continue to serve. He also found it fruitless, even unethical, to try to resist the change that many of his church members sought and welcomed, so he decided not to try to bring the church back to its older vision of religious identity. Consequently, having lost prototypicality and resonance, he decided to resign and took a pastorate in another church and another denomination where he was welcomed.

These two pastors did not describe their professional journey with the identity language with which I described it, but their pastoral intuition, shaped by years of service, shaped their interaction with the church while considering different leadership postures to match the church's needs. In our continually changing context, it is vital for religious leaders to be able to name the identity dynamics of how their leadership relates to their community's vision and needs.

The language of socioreligious identity and prototypicality provides concepts and words so that different leadership strategies can be consciously considered. This greater awareness and increased intentionality might contribute to healthy adaptive leadership, and to preventing unnecessary disappointments and conflicts.

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<sup>57</sup> Barentsen, "Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction," 65–67.

A resonant relationship between leader and community identity enables religious leaders to serve effectively while maintaining personal integrity and balance. As communities need agility in navigating rapidly changing contexts, so also leaders need agility to flex with their communities to maintain resonance and prototypicality.<sup>58</sup>

### **Social Identity Theory as a prism for religious leadership**

In summary, the Social Identity Theory of leadership demonstrates religious leadership to be fundamentally a form of identity leadership, shows that power and empowerment are dimensions of group dynamics that are significantly governed by the processes of social identification, and unveils the delicate relationship between leader identity and the socioreligious identity of the community in its particular context.

It is now time to make up the balance of appreciation for and limitations of the theory.

#### *Appreciation*

As a leadership theory that focuses on group and identity, Social Identity Theory is eminently suitable to unravel many less understood dynamics of religious leadership. For many religious communities, being a community is not simply an organizational form that happens to be needed to support purposes external to the group, like a company instituting small groups to increase productivity or heighten innovation. Instead, being a community is a purpose in itself; the ‘groupness’ of religious communities is part of what it means to be religious. Hence, a theory that takes the group as its basic unit of analysis, even as a fundamental structure of organizational life, has close affinity with what it means to be religious, and can be expected to be fruitful in interpreting group dynamics in religious communities.

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<sup>58</sup>Theories of authentic leadership and narrative leadership also touch on these types of dynamics, but with a more limited frame to address the contextual challenges. See Raymond T. Sparrowe, “Authentic Leadership and the Narrative Self,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2005): 419–39; and Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*.

Furthermore, a vital outcome of religious communities is the expression and celebration of their socioreligious identity. Their identity is not a byproduct of a particular manufacturing process, but an essential part of expressing their religious aspirations and desires. Although a religious identity has unique features as compared to other forms of identity, the concept of social identity is sufficiently broad and general to encompass many of the elements of religious identity. Here, again, Social Identity Theory has close affinity with what it means to be religious.

### *Limitations*

Yet, Social Identity Theory cannot, by itself, generate a theology of ministry, since it does not address vital theological concerns. Despite its already significant complexity, it does not address the presence of God or the activity of the Spirit. It is not equipped to discern the confluence of human and divine agency, which is a vital factor in any theology of ministry. As Branson and Roxburgh argue, one of the primary failings of much of the literature on church leadership is a failure to account for divine agency in a context where secularization has rendered divine agency nearly incomprehensible.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in an earlier meta-review of empirical research on religious leadership, I argued that “representing the sacred” was one of the four core dimensions that qualified leadership as religious.<sup>60</sup> Evidently, the Social Identity Model cannot deal with these spiritual realities. However, in not locating agency only with the leader, but in the intricate relationships between leaders, members, and contexts (including other outgroups and other voices), the model is principally open-ended toward incorporating reflections on divine presence and activity in constructions of identity, without prejudging their likelihood or truth value.

Again, the Social Identity Theory cannot aid religious leaders in discerning where and how God is at work, nor in how they can lead the community to participate in God’s mission. It only offers, like other social science theories, language, and tools to understand

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<sup>59</sup> Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions*, 41.

<sup>60</sup> Barentsen, “Practising Religious Leadership,” 272.

vital and often unexplored dimensions of leadership, where leaders and group members collaborate to define identity and purpose in a particular context. Yet, in locating power and agency within this type of group collaboration, the theory is principally open to the interpretive processes of community interaction that must take place if a religious community is to discern its calling and identity in relation to their perception of divine action.

Many other dimensions of religious leadership remain, for which Social Identity Theory offers no tools: the divine call to religious leadership, the sacramental role of the leader as Christ-representative, belief in divinely instituted authority of the religious leader, or the belief that spiritual realities are the very foundation of the community and its identity, to mention but a few. Yet, it has been adequately shown that the theory can be used to highlight important dynamics and aspects of religious identity and leadership, so that we can see religious leadership afresh, the first step toward reimagining religious leadership.

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## PILGRIM PRACTICE: REIMAGINING RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP ON CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

KYLE J.A. SMALL

### Abstract

*Pilgrimage offers a new metaphor and practice that moves the practice of leading and the research of leadership beyond strategies, tactics, and skills into discovering questions, reflecting on failure and success, and discerning the spirit. There are multiple religious pilgrimages throughout the world and across religions. The Camino de Santiago is one Christian pilgrimage traversing Spain and Portugal. This article explores lessons and narratives discovered through pilgrimage on the Camino utilizing autoethnographic methods for reimagining religious leadership in conversation with Kosuke Koyama, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Hannah Arendt, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*

### Introduction

In the particular, we find the cosmos. Flannery O'Connor says it well, "The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it; and it's well to remember that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene."<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Abraham Heschel similarly invites a posture toward the particular, "What fills us with radical amazement is not the relations in which everything is embedded but the fact that even the minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma. The most incomprehensible fact is the facet that we comprehend at

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 67.

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all.”<sup>2</sup> This disrupts the social *scientist* in me that wants to test and retest everything to find a more universal and generalizable truth, yet it honors the sacramentalist in me that discovers God through the elements of water, wine, and bread. This is the difficult work of becoming a scholar in religious leadership.

This is not only plausible in the scientific and sacramental realm but equally so through exploring one’s own life. Jungian psychology took this turn in the 1960s and continues to offer possibility for the field of religious leadership. Joseph Campbell offers such perspective, “Every one of us shares the supreme ordeal — carries the cross of the redeemer — not in the bright moments of his tribe’s great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair.”<sup>3</sup>

Pilgrimage is my doorway to understand religious leadership as it reclaims bodies within the discussion.<sup>4</sup> This need not be a universalizing principle but a heuristic one that reshapes the nature of the research agenda in leadership studies and human formation. It relies on land (an ancient path), time, a body, an experience, and reflection. It does not necessarily equate to walking, though I do think religious pilgrimage requires movement that is embodied, active (experiential), slow, and reflective. I take my cues from several sources: Scripture (God engages people on the way); Kosuke

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 47. Heschel may have also said, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement, to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2008), 334.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow lightly from Charles Taylor’s desire to undo the current “excarntation” with a return to embodiment (incarnation.), yet more so I borrow from psychology that understands the power of the body for memory, trauma, healing, and knowing. My experience on pilgrimage was a physical discovery of what I had previously read on embodiment and healing. On Taylor, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 771. On the body, trauma, memory, and knowing see, Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2015); Peter A. Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences* (Berkeley, Calif: North Atlantic Books, 1997).

Koyama (God walks slow),<sup>5</sup> Alice Walker (experience is a *chase* with the Divine),<sup>6</sup> John Dewey (experience is not the teacher; reflection is),<sup>7</sup> and Peter Drucker's popular quote, "Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection, will come even more effective action."

This theological methodology of the cosmos found in the mystery of the particular has shaped my own views of religious, or spiritual, leadership.<sup>8</sup> I have wondered how my recent experience as a pilgrim might shift the way we understand religious leadership. I have long thought that *religious* leadership needed clarified metaphors and practices rooted in its descriptors, namely in religion,<sup>9</sup> spirituality,<sup>10</sup> incarnation and transcendence.<sup>11</sup> Pilgrimage is an expansive phenomenon that might serve as a metaphor and practice. As practice, pilgrimage invites leaders into intention, presence, and attention to the particular.

*The Camino de Santiago*, commonly known as "The Way," is a pilgrimage in and around Spain and Portugal, concluding in Santiago. This path was made popular by Martin Sheen through his performance in *The Way*,<sup>12</sup> but it was made spiritual by the millions of pilgrims who have made the way over the last millennium.

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<sup>5</sup> Kōsuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, *How We Think* (D.C. Heath, 1910), <https://books.google.com/books?id=WF0AAAAAMAAJ>

<sup>8</sup> See Kyle Small, "Cosmology, Coram Deo and the Camino," in *Before the Face of God: Essays in Honor of Tom Boogaart*, ed. Dustyn Keepers, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 97 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Church Press, 2019), 77–90.

<sup>9</sup> N. J. Demerath, ed., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations*, Religion in America Series (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Louis W Fry, "Toward a Theory of Spiritual Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 14, no. 6 (December 2003): 693–727, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2003.09.001>. The spiritual leadership paradigm in the broader field of leadership continues to borrow from Fry's 2003 article. For more on how spirituality in leadership is evolving, Fry's own cv is helpful, [https://www.tamuct.edu/syllabi/docs/CV/W00000252\\_Fry\\_Louis.pdf](https://www.tamuct.edu/syllabi/docs/CV/W00000252_Fry_Louis.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

<sup>12</sup> *The Way*, 2010.



There are many routes; the most common are The French Way, the North Way, and the Portuguese Way. The Camino is similar to other pilgrimages whereby pilgrims seek rest, renewal, and clarity by walking.

The ancient religious practice of pilgrimage was rooted in walking along an ancient path. However, just as all spiritual practices might evolve toward inclusive participation while holding to the sacred intention of communion, pilgrimage has expanded to include other modes of practice such as disability studies<sup>13</sup>, popular writings<sup>14</sup>, and figurative considerations.<sup>15</sup> Pilgrimage as practice and process is open to everyone and is not limited to those who can walk. The spiritual practice of pilgrimage takes shape essentially as communion with God, self, others (and land) through an intention to enter solitude and slowness along a sacred path. Pilgrimage as *figurative* journey is a bit of a misnomer; pilgrimage does require a body and distance, but how that occurs is open and possible.

Many popular leadership offerings have too often been rooted in speed, competition, and efficiency. Pilgrimage is one way to reshape the discussion. The ancient practice of pilgrimage is about intention toward slowness and stillness; in the Christian domain, pilgrimage joins with the psalmist who declares, “To you, Lord, silence is praise” (Psalm 65:1). In this way, pilgrimage reframes leadership within theological practice and embodies Kosuke Koyama’s theological notion of a three-mile-an-hour God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Visibly invisible: a pilgrimage as a disabled minister* (Place of publication not identified: Grosvenor House, 2010); Hannah Thompson, “ Lourdes’s Monsters: A Critical Disability Studies Reading of the Spectacle of Disability,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 55, no. 2 (July 2018): 171–83, <https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2018.16>.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Gray and Justin Skeesuck, *I’ll Push You: A Journey of 500 Miles, Two Best Friends, and One Wheelchair* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale Momentum, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998). See the recently published article, Lisa M. Hess and Hirschfield, Brad, “It’s More Complicated Than We Know: Pilgrimage as Metaphor and Method,” *Spiritus* 23 (2023): 117–35.

<sup>16</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*.

I have completed three pilgrimages and explored the same question each time: How does the practice of walking and becoming a pilgrim awaken and reorient the questions of leading?

### **“Reimagining Religious Leadership”**

“Reimagining Religious Leadership” — the theme of the 2023 ARL Conference — begs a question: Which word gets our attention — religious or leadership — and how do we reimagine both when the terms on their own have much ambiguity and discord in the academy, religious institutions, and popular culture? “Religious leadership” begs clarification. The precursor term is unclear — is “religious” social scientific or is it humanities, philosophy, or theology? Schools and departments of religion, within higher education, are most often schools of social science and not schools teaching Scripture, theology, formation, or spirituality. For many, religion is a term for stewarding human behavior with an agnostic view of transcendence.

When it comes to religion, what do we mean within the *Academy of Religious Leadership*? What is the current imagination that we are seeking to revise and reimagine? Is this Weber’s/Parson’s view of religion as protestant capitalism that lives with an iron cage led by leaders who are “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart”<sup>17</sup> or is this Durkheim’s vision of religion as “man’s [*sic*] search for meaning?” Is it Emerson’s corpse-cold vision of American religion, or is it William James’s view of religious experience as an anchor that eclipses doctrine, dogma, and ecclesial structures? I recognize that the names listed thus far are academics from the West, which is precisely part of the problem. Koyama and Walker are but two expansive voices that reorient the discussion on religion and assist in reimagining religious leadership. Depending on who we encounter for our definition of religion, this shapes the dialogue and the assumptions of onlookers regarding the reception (or brand) of our academy.

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<sup>17</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings*, ed. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2002).

Hannah Arendt is another expansive voice. She assists in reimagining *religious* leadership in line with pilgrimage as an active engagement. In 1964, she raised a question to the University of Chicago Divinity School about the relation of action and philosophy that is so important to constructing a Christian theology of leadership: “If love of neighbor is a central command of God and the modern era a turning over of all tradition-values, then ‘why was the *vita activa*, with all its distinctions and articulations, not discovered after the modern break with tradition and the eventual reversal of its hierarchical order?’”<sup>18</sup> She contends that action has often served second seat to the philosophical. In theological terms, the *vita activa* (active life) equally comes in second to the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life).<sup>19</sup>

Reimagining religious (and Christian) leadership must hold these two worlds together as friends: the *contemplative* life, which *imagines* a love for God and oneself and an appreciation, even desire, for the goodness therein; and the *active* life, which *demonstrates* an appreciation and desire for “love of neighbor” and the goodness

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<sup>18</sup> Prior to this, Arendt writes, “Traditionally, therefore, the *vita activa* received its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; a very restricted dignity was bestowed upon it because it served the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body. Christianity with its belief in the hereafter, whose joys announce themselves in the delights of contemplation, conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* while, on the other hand, the command to love your neighbor acted as a counterweight against the estimation unknown to antiquity. But the determination of the order itself, according to which contemplation was the highest of human faculties was Greek and not Christian in origin; it coincided with the philosopher’s way of life, which as such was found superior to the political way of life of the citizen in the polis. . . . Christianity, contrary to what has frequently been assumed, did not elevate active life to a higher position, did not save it from being derivative, and did not, at least not theoretically, look upon it as something which has its meaning and end within itself” In Arendt, 167–68.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt raises the question that is central for the construction of a Christian theology of leadership, dare I say, religious leadership: “If love of neighbor is a central command of God and the modern era a turning over of all tradition-values, then ‘why was the *vita activa*, with all its distinctions and articulations, not discovered after the modern break with tradition and the eventual reversal of its hierarchical order?’” Hannah Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 167–81.

in the Other. Without the latter, one who imagines or appreciates goodness without embodiment or action seeks to become a philosopher-king; without the former, one who enacts service for others but not love for self becomes a peasant. The paradigm given by Christian tradition is neither, but instead friendship (John 15).

Reimagining religious leadership through pilgrimage holds these seeming polarities of contemplation and action together. This is common to the experience I heard from other pilgrims whether they identify as deeply religious, nominally Christian, spiritual but not religious, or walkers seeking adventure. Tied together is the ordinary and embodied *action* of walking with careful, daily, contemplative *reflection*.

### **Reimagining religious leadership experience through autoethnography**

Because religious leadership includes the life of the leader,<sup>20</sup> pilgrimage is one way to examine and imagine religious leadership. Over and again, I have engaged with leaders (as a professor, pastor, coach, and consultant) who are unsure of how to engage the larger or deeper existential questions within themselves that reflect who they are as they lead amid the hurry and tarry of organizational pressures or community demands. They feel stuck or trapped. Pilgrimage is one way to slow down and step away from the chaos into the deeper questions of spirituality and faithful action.

John Dewey is right that experience teaches little; yet reflection on experience is where learning occurs. Peter Vaill said it even better, we are always “reflective beginners.”<sup>21</sup> The practice of reflective beginner has a method in autoethnography. Autoethnography is the

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<sup>20</sup> Peter B. Vaill, *Spirited Leading and Learning: Process Wisdom for a New Age*, The Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998); Fry, “Toward a Theory of Spiritual Leadership”; Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within*, Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996); Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Peter B. Vaill, *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

pursuit of a thick description of oneself within an environment.<sup>22</sup> As method it explores the description and asks the question: “What am I learning by examining my identities, power, privileges, and penalties within cultural contexts?”<sup>23</sup> This is not only a good question for social researchers, but equally so for religious leaders. Autoethnography does not pursue a grand universal truth, but rather it pursues a particular way of understanding a life that can be noted, shared, and interrogated. By doing so, a particular life becomes a text that invites amazement and suspicion, as well as imitation (mimesis) and innovation. Autoethnography blurs the lines between “social sciences and literary writing” just as this journal does when it tries to live between the field of religion as hermeneutics and leadership as social science.<sup>24</sup>

The 2023 ARL conference shared a longing for such narrative practice. Those gathered were asking for stories, concrete examples, and thick descriptions of how theories, models, and analyses operated in context. Autoethnography has emerged as a helpful, academic methodology. Several volumes have been written on the method and its merits as a form of inquiry.<sup>25</sup>

### **An attempt at autoethnography for exploring religious leadership**

I am not sure when I first became a pilgrim, but I know it was early in life. Somewhere between walking with my grandfather as a child and walking aimlessly with friends in my hometown, I realized with Wallace Stevens that, “Sometimes the truth depends

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<sup>22</sup> Sherick A. Hughes and Julie L. Pennington, *Autoethnography: Process, Product, and Possibility for Critical Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Hughes and Pennington, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed., (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2002), 86.

<sup>25</sup> See the extensive bibliography in the recently published volume: Tony E. Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Second edition (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).

upon a walk around the lake.”<sup>26</sup> In 2018 I extended the practice of walking and entered the practice of pilgrimage along the French route of the *Camino de Santiago*. This was part of a sabbatical originally rooted in scholarly questions. I am not sure if I had a religious experience, a spiritual experience, or just some plain old human experience on my pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela. Yet I know that my sabbatical appointment permitted me to go in search of the intersections of pilgrimage, leadership, spiritual formation, and my own life.

Since then, I have also walked *The Portuguese Way* and *The Camino Real*. I will offer analysis of my experience substantiated by my journal entries, Scripture, and poets. My reflexive perspective finds its way as I look back to understand what has happened since these journeys originally took place. In no way is this a panoptic sourcing, and indeed the reader will see and attest to more than even I can offer. Autoethnography refers to this as “member checks.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, the autoethnography has a deeper read through attestation by the reader. Verification, if this is even a goal, is then fulfilled by the reflection of the reader asking, “is this sensible?”<sup>28</sup>

### **Reimagining leadership through pilgrimage**

In an age of authenticity, the self has a power for disclosure; this self as disclosure may very well be God’s method for renewing religion and transcendence.<sup>29</sup> Joseph Campbell, likewise, via the end of mythology and via Jungian psychology, pointed the way to the power of self-disclosure to open worlds and even reform society: “[Humanity] is now the crucial mystery. [The person] is that alien presence with whom the forces of egoism must come to terms, through whom the ego is to be crucified and resurrected, and in whose image society is to be reformed. ...for the ideals and

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<sup>26</sup> Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, ed. John N. Serio and Chris Beyers, Corrected edition; Second Vintage books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Hughes and Pennington, *Autoethnography*, 84.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

temporal institutions of no tribe, race, continent, social class, or century can be the measure of the inexhaustible and multifariously wonderful divine existence that is the life in all of us...”<sup>30</sup>

This is my discovery as a pilgrim, teacher, and researcher of religious leadership. Over the course of three pilgrimages, I continue to discover lessons for the field of religious leadership through the personal endeavor of walking. These lessons are practices that when embodied disclose some layers of what, how, and why of religious leadership. I offer the lessons here and will provide a brief exploration of each.

1. In the face of the unknown, take the first step.
2. Release the scripted questions.
3. Go slow: life grows at its own pace, don't rush it.
4. Walk alone: solitude grows the heart larger.
5. Eat together: everyone is a pilgrim traveling somewhere, tread lightly.
6. Entertaining angels unaware: The Camino provides.
7. The light shines in the darkness: God shows up in our anxiety.
8. The Cross is available to be found throughout creation: it will pierce and bless.
9. The pilgrim thanks; the tourist demands: there is a power to awaken through light faces, big hearts.
10. The face of a pilgrim is (sometimes) light.

### **In the face of the unknown, take the first step**

There are three Caminos: the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual. It is unclear their order or importance, but simply that

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<sup>30</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 337.

they all occur if a pilgrim is available. This is the integrating nature of pilgrimage. The physical Camino is technical. The pilgrim asks questions related to getting from here to there. The focus is often on the logistics of packing, food, hydration, and rest. The emotional Camino is mental and disorienting. Many pilgrims who walk the French way discover this on the *meseta*;<sup>31</sup> it is tiring even though it is flat. The pilgrim wakes up to unacknowledged and perhaps overwhelming emotions, whether sadness, anger, despair, or disappointment. Some pilgrims find latent joy. Some pilgrims fight this experience; others flow into and out of it with grace and mercy. The third, spiritual Camino is embodied, affective, and grounding. The pilgrim who integrates these can walk knowing the Camino protects, provides, guides, and assures. It is not clear where each Camino begins, but once it starts, it will not end...ever.

The work of a pilgrim is not to analyze which Camino is present, but simply to take the “first step,” as David Whyte invites.<sup>32</sup> Each day I would begin my opening steps by reciting a prayer from Thomas Merton and hope to meet myself, others, God, and the land on the way:

My Lord God,  
 I have no idea where I am going.  
 I do not see the road ahead of me.  
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
 nor do I really know myself,  
 and the fact that I think I am following your will  
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you  
 does in fact please you.  
 And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

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<sup>31</sup> The *meseta* is a 180 km (110 miles) stretch between Burgos and Leon on the French Way of the Camino. The *meseta* is flat and hot. It lacks shade and bears down on the pilgrim. It is often considered long and monotonous, yet mystics and pilgrims have long considered it central to the spiritual and emotional unfolding of pilgrimage.

<sup>32</sup> David Whyte, “Start Close In,” in *River Flow: New and Selected Poems, 1984-2007*, Revised ed (Langley, Wash.: Many Rivers Press, 2012).



I hope that I will never do anything  
 apart from that desire.  
 And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the  
 right road,  
 though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, will I trust you always though  
 I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
 and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.<sup>33</sup>

### **Release the scripted questions**

I entered the Camino with many questions: Work-related, marriage-related, health-related, spirituality-related. I had thirty-three days ahead of me, and 500 miles to demand that God show up on the Camino and solve my problems and answer my questions. I was so self-concerned and fixated; I demanded that the Camino solve everything for me. I needed answers and could not imagine returning home with unresolved questions.

By day seven or so, I was alone most hours of the day. I began to forget some of my questions; I was growing irritated with others. I sensed a voice saying and noted in my journal, “Did the Lord really just say to my Spirit, ‘Let those anxious, arrogant, controlling questions go. Keep silent. Keep walking?’”

I wrote in my journal a few days later: “It is commonly asked, ‘Why Camino for you?’ The answers vary from adventure to challenge to vocational clarity. Few mention Jesus or faith though some mention spiritual awareness or clarity. I must admit that whatever I answered early on has become dust, and I have yet to understand what the Camino is for me. I am beginning to let my questions go. Now I am just walking...”

The releasing of the spin cycle of my mind and the letting go of specific questions about work or people, moved me from merit to mercy, from anxiety to gratitude, and from angry to awed.

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<sup>33</sup>Trent T. Gilliss, “Thomas Merton’s Prayer That Anyone Can Pray,” *Onbeing. Org* (blog), n.d., <https://onbeing.org/blog/thomas-mertons-prayer-that-anyone-can-pray/>.

Somewhere along The Way I received the following via email, and it served a companion in quieting the anxious questions, “Avoid lengthy conversations in your head, particularly if they are negative, resentful, or even excessively romantic. These conversations are essentially unreal.”<sup>34</sup> I experienced this as a walking pilgrim; but even more, I try to live as a journeying pilgrim at home in order to leave behind ambition (merit), anxiety, and anger.

### **Go slow: Life grows at its own pace, don't rush it**

After the first days of walking, blisters emerged from my excessive speed. I wrote in my journal, and I think this is true with the practice of leadership: “Blisters: Slow is the way, if you don't learn to go slow, no worries — The Way will have its way. It will conspire with the body against the controlling mind that has been too long addicted to speed. And once the body knows how to go slow (again), it will become an available practice upon returning home...or so I hope.”

Going slow is difficult for most American pilgrims, this one included. Paulo Coelho offers several exercises for the pilgrim.<sup>35</sup> The first and most important is the Speed Exercise. This is when a pilgrim walks as slowly as possible, painstakingly slow, for twenty minutes. The exercise invites one to notice one's immediate surroundings. Pilgrims notice seeds, plants, and snails. These living things often go unnoticed and underfoot. Things are growing and moving around the pilgrims' footsteps albeit at their own pace and seemingly without concern.

Kosuke Koyama said it this way:

I find that God goes slowly in his educational process of man. Forty years in the wilderness points to his basic educational philosophy. Forty years of national

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<sup>34</sup> From The Enneagram Institute, “Personal Growth Recommendations for Enneagram Type Fours,” *Type 4* (blog), May 23, 2023, <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-4>. I resisted checking email on the Way, yet receiving this was a curious electronic blessing.

<sup>35</sup> Paulo Coelho, *The Pilgrimage*, trans. Alan Clarke, (New York, N.Y.: HarperOne, 2021).

migration through the wilderness, three generations of the united monarchy, nineteen kings of Israel, and twenty kings of Judah, the hosts of priests and prophets, the experience of exile and restoration—isn't this rather a slow and costly way for God to let his people know the covenant relationship between God and man?<sup>36</sup>

He continues:

God walks slowly because of his love for us. If he did not love, he would have gone much faster. Love has its speed. It is an inner speed; a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is slow yet it is Lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love. ...It goes on in the depth of life, whether we notice or not, whether we are currently hit by the storm or not, at 3 miles per hour.<sup>37</sup>

### **Walk alone: Solitude grows the heart larger**

There is alone and there is loneliness. The first is solitude; the latter is despondency. Bonhoeffer has an excellent excursus on this in *Life Together*.<sup>38</sup> He writes,

Many persons seek community because they are afraid of loneliness [*der Einsamkeit*]. Because they can no longer endure being alone, such people are driven to seek the company of others. ...Those who take refuge in community while fleeing from themselves are misusing it to indulge in empty talk and distraction, no matter how spiritual this idle talk and distraction may appear. In reality they are not seeking community at all, but only a thrill that will allow them to forget

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<sup>36</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Volume 5: Life Together*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

their isolation [*Vereinsamung*] for a short time. It is precisely such misuse of community that creates the deadly isolation of human beings.

I usually enjoy being alone if the day is met with my children or spouse or a good friend. I do not enjoy being lonely, where the inner voice is unsure of its belonging and future. But I suspect many leaders fear loneliness, so many of us refuse to *be alone*.

The Camino will expose what is needed through the finest of lines between alone and loneliness. Being *alone* finds found its way with me on my first Camino following several days walking with two new friends. They departed for their own right reasons. When they left, I realized: "My pilgrim friends (Asia and Andy) left the Camino today, so I am alone. Spent the quiet walk filled with gratitude and tears for the abundance of love in my life. So many friends, family, and colleagues came to mind. The Camino is beyond gift. Being alone gives me space to recollect with gratitude."

I experienced a deep sense of *loneliness* on my third Camino. I only knew this because it contrasted so sharply with the joyful sense of solitude I experienced on the first and second. My journal captures the difference between being alone and loneliness:

I am a %\$#%^ mess. Every day I have been alone and without an English-speaking companion. I get stuck in my head with intrusive, judgmental, dangerous thinking. I reflect on life and make up stories of betrayal and misery. I recognize my issues with trust, yet the stories continue to come alive, and no matter how hard I try, they do not cease. I have no idea why these thoughts occur, but they feel so strong that I cannot believe they are not real. Is this the beautiful mind or is this intuition about reality? Brene Brown says conspiracy is when we fill in the absence of data with stories. Is this projection, paranoia, or reality? I find myself doing this with events in parenting, work, and marriage. I do not know how to deal with myself in these moments.

## **Eat together: Everyone is a pilgrim traveling somewhere, tread lightly**

Pilgrimage holds the balance of individual and communitarian, of solitary and solitude. The pilgrims I encountered along the way adopted a saying, “walk alone; eat together.” I could share dozens of stories of meeting other pilgrims on the way. These stories are best illustrated through the selfies we took at rest stops, cafés, and albergues (hostels). The Camino provides the right person to companion (literally, “one with whom we break bread”) on the way. Solitude becomes more beautiful because of companionship, and the reverse is equally true.

Halfway through the 2018 Camino I delighted in meeting new pilgrims on the way and reflected on the power of collective pilgrimage and its religious possibility,

The remainder of the day discovered new pilgrim friends. I never really know how I meet people, but we simply become friends and enjoy whatever time we share together. There is something in this practice that might help the church in the USA get beyond its political infighting and malaise. Every person is a pilgrim, and each meeting may be the last. Engage hospitably.

Four days later I continued this theme, “Last night ended so joyfully. Six of us took a rest day and ended the evening lounging in the hammocks with the other peregrinos (pilgrims). The social nature of The Camino is so joy-filled; there are so little expectations; few if any judgments; and ongoing openness to one another. Everyone is a pilgrim, and (almost) every pilgrim is looking for connection.”

This lesson and the one above are curious; being alone in solitude made me more available when in community. Being in community, and the anticipation of connection, deepened my ability to walk in solitude.

### **Entertaining angels unaware: The Camino provides**

I was hungry while walking. I was walking with blisters one day and met a woman from France. We knew several of the same people from the American Church in Paris. She could tell I was lacking in nutrition and offered me some granola. Managing nutrition and hydration is central to the physical Camino, and failing to attend it amplifies (and dare, I say complicates) the spiritual and emotional Caminos. But attending to the physical also enlivens the spiritual and emotional Caminos. When pilgrims are open to receiving, the Camino provides. The image of Genesis 18 and the Oaks of Mamre comes alive. Sometimes I came upon strangers and simply wanted cake. Other times I wanted a meal, and a stranger came upon me with an offering. There is a providential spontaneity to the provisions.

As we walked by apple trees, a farmer greeted us and offered us fruit from his tree. We ate, and our bodies were energized for another leg of walking. The Camino is filled with angels, and when the eyes of a pilgrim are open, we find the God who provides. During the third Camino, I was walking on the day of Corpus Christi. There was a raucous noise coming from the other side of the wall. The partygoers peered over their fence when they heard footsteps. They were overjoyed, celebrating the national holiday. In their festive stupor, they offered us sardines and white wine. This provision was multifaceted: Celebration, resurrection, and provision came together. There are countless stories of such delight, and whether in Spain on the Camino or at work in the office, provisions are available to leaders who live with open hands and hearts. This is the Way.

### **The light shines in the darkness: God shows up in our anxiety**

I made a night walk halfway into my first Camino. I packed my bag, managed my feet, and departed at 2:10 a.m. I texted my wife to let her know I was doing it. I think she was concerned, but Wi-Fi was too slow to receive her warnings before I left the albergue. I walked out of *Carrion de los Condes*, which was a 1-kilometer city walk. I came to the end of the road and investigated the dark abyss that was my path ahead. The fear I experienced was significant. I

worried about bandits (as if it is still the Middle Ages), animals, and my health—what if I acquired a kidney stone on the trail? The likelihood of another pilgrim coming by in the next two hours was unlikely. Even so, I went.

At one point my hat rubbed against my bag and clinked the shell attached to my pack. The noise was loud enough that I screamed and put my sticks up in defense. There was nothing to worry about, but my expression of fear was a signal I was not comfortable. To be honest, the fear made me feel vitally alive.

Emotional resilience is not tested when we are in control or when things seem to be going well; it is tested when the physical and cognitive resources are depleted. David Whyte puts it eloquently in his poetry,

When your eyes are tired/the world is tired also.  
 When your vision has gone, /no part of the world can  
 find you.  
 Time to go into the dark/where the night has eyes to  
 recognize its own.  
 ....  
 The night will give you a horizon/further than you  
 can see.<sup>39</sup>

There is something about living and leading in the dark. The darkness of the night is big. The night can contain all my feelings, my thoughts, and my worries. I felt so alive and free walking at night or early in the morning. The darkness was a gift to me, and the day proceeded from the liveliness of the night. I begin to understand why Nicodemus came by darkness to Jesus; it is so alive.

Leaders need to sit in the dark. This is where leaders face and feel the emotions so many feel when choosing to follow our lead. The uncertainty and the ambiguity conflict with the expansive possibilities that linger ahead.

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<sup>39</sup> David Whyte, "Sweet Darkness" in *The House of Belonging: Poems* (Langley, Wash.: Many Rivers Press, 1997).

## **The Cross is available to be found throughout creation: it will pierce and bless**

Augustine said it best,

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?<sup>40</sup>

This is true on the Camino. The echoes of Scripture speak from every corner of The Way: the acorn shells marked by the cross; the fields of wheat and grain that span miles; and even the presence of donkeys that echo Balaam's story.

I think that's it. The Bible living in every moment and on every path of our life. It's not terribly intellectual but it is emblematic of Jesus and the Spirit, who come in the moment. Jesus came as fully human and divine, the Spirit as helper and power. Both are present in the moments of The Camino. Taking this home opened my eyes to the presence of God's work in and through the world. I returned from all three Caminos amazed at how God's presence is completely independent of us and yet understand the invitation of Abraham Joshua Heschel to radical amazement.<sup>41</sup>

The Cross is a similar symbol along the Way. The Cruz de Ferro (a.k.a. Iron Cross) just beyond the town of Ganzo, is the altar call moment of The Camino. By the time pilgrims arrive, they have been walking for several weeks and have traversed the three Caminos several times. I was skeptical of arriving at Cruz de Ferro, for I grew up attending Bible camps and had said yes to Jesus through tears and smoke many times before.

Pilgrims have their own intimate moments at the Iron Cross, but my moment was captured in my journal, "The Iron Cross is a powerful place, both for me and my pilgrim friends. We prayed the

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<sup>40</sup> Augustine and Vernon J. Bourke, *The Essential Augustine* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 123.

<sup>41</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism*.



Lord's Prayer together. Jesus in the power of the Spirit seems to say, 'On the Camino I will draw close to you. Some of you will call me love, truth, awareness, enlightenment. But it is me. I've had many names but no matter how you know me, I am coming close to you. Whether you see me or not, I see you; I love you. Buen Camino.'"

The question for religious leaders is whether and how we discover a larger world in our noticing? Bolman and Deal refer to this as the symbolic frame: What are the living myths and parables the disclose spiritual significance amid the mundane? The grounded nature of symbols as elements and the grander meaning within is a pathway for rediscovering transcendence.

### **The pilgrim thanks; the tourist demands**

I entered an albergue halfway through the French way in 2018. There was a sign posted above the registry; "the pilgrim thanks, the tourist demands." This captured the sense of what we were up to as pilgrims — learning gratitude. The notion of making demands versus expressing gratitude is a leadership that can be learned. Marshall Rosenberg's work on compassionate connection or nonviolent communication<sup>42</sup> invites such discovery, and the practice of making requests versus demands is the grounding of Amy Edmondson's work in psychological safety.<sup>43</sup> For the pilgrim this is learned by reclaiming one's feelings, recognizing one's needs, and relying on the hospitality of strangers for a bed, a meal, or a shower.

The Camino reminded me how much I love people — longtime friends; short-term enemies; strangers. I love meeting people and gathering stories as pilgrims seek to find and offer healing energy to one another. ...I do this as a professor in teaching; I do this as an administrator through leading. The practice rooted in solitude reminded me of the real work in leading — human flourishing, both yours and mine. I cannot help but think of Robert Greenleaf's great test for (servant) leaders, "The best test, and difficult to

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<sup>42</sup> Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, Calif.: PuddleDancer Press, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2019).

administer, is this: Do those served grow as people? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants/friends, themselves?”<sup>44</sup>

### **The face of the pilgrim is (sometimes) light**

My first Camino was a mystical gift; I found God through love, beauty, and solitude. My third was a disaster, or so I say. The juxtaposition can be found in my recollections:

In 2018 I wrote, “The first day of the Camino is 25 km (15 miles, roughly). It is one mile up and over a 12 miles route. Then it is 1/2 mile down over the course of 3 miles. It is the most physical day of the Camino. I was seven miles in as I took a photo. I was amazed that I had ascended above the clouds and could no longer see where I had been. The journey was in front of me, but the beauty was often recognized from looking back.”

After three weeks on the Camino in 2018, I posted a photo of me that was taken and shared by someone else. It was a scene from listening to a fellow pilgrim leading many others in American country music songs. His native language was Spanish (from the Canary Islands), but he sang English beautifully as he strummed his guitar and invited a sing-along. It was a delightful Camino moment. I posted the photo on Facebook and a friend wrote, “How light you look in your face. It’s been a while since lightness has shone from you.” On one hand this was painful to recollect that mostly shadows, to recall Tolkien, had emanated from me in prior months; on the other hand, this was pure gift. I was returning to the soul I had lost. The Camino invites the pilgrim to return to the beauty that has too often been lost.

There is a lightness on the face of pilgrims. But there are times when pilgrims are fighting their own demons or seeking to escape the world; the Camino does not permit escape but instead requests

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<sup>44</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, ed. Larry C. Spears, 25th anniversary ed (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 2002). I offer “servant in parentheses for several reasons, primarily because of a comment from Patrick Lencioni, “servant leadership” is a bit redundant. Even more Jacquelyn Grant has an article to challenge the language of servant leadership, See Jacquelyn Grant, “Sin of Servanthood.”

presence. Refusing this invitation to presence, painful as it might be to experience, results in contorted faces.

At the end of my Camino in 2022 I wrote,

These Caminos do not keep sequential order physical-emotional-spiritual. This Camino was physically inconsequential. I had difficult days, but it was the spiritual and emotional way that took over. As I revisit my photos, I realize how I missed much of the beauty and scenery as I was battling my emotional and spiritual patterns.... One day I decided to walk until the emotional and spiritual weights released. After 13 hours of walking and *achieving* 67 kms or 40 miles, I quit walking. The next day I woke up and continued again.

This was my first experience in true misery on pilgrimage, but it was not my first experience witnessing a pilgrim facing their demons. I met Jeremy on the Camino in 2018. His face refused to lighten up. He's American, and I could sense a tightness in his soul the first time we met. He wasn't unfriendly; just distant. He was looking for something along the way, and it manifested in an attraction to another pilgrim. When she rejected his requests, I watched him quickly make his way along the Camino. A few days later I asked if he was still around, and someone said he took a bus to Santiago. He quit early.

I had judgments about Jeremy but also curiosity: What was alive in Jeremy that made his soul tight and difficult to rest in the Camino rhythms? What led to the decision to take a bus to the end? Why is it hard to be present amid the beauty of walking and meeting other pilgrims?

In 2022, I met the Jeremy that lives in me. The day I walked 67 kilometers was exhausting. My soul was tight and my mind busy. I reflected ten days into the Portugal route,

I am tired of being alone; I feel like I am always in isolation. Isolated in my job; isolated in my town; isolated in my family. My sense of belonging continues

to wither. I wake up in the morning; do some things; go to bed. Sometimes I work out and meet folks. Most days it is 45 minutes of heavy lifting and then back home. This feels similar at work. I drive 37 minutes to the office; sit at my desk; sometimes talk to my colleagues; and then drive home. There is the occasional lunch with a colleague, but mostly it is alone time. I don't need more alone time these days; I need friends. I need mental healing amidst a toxic nervous system trying to remain whole and alive. I haven't had thoughts of death for some time, but these past few days, dying seemed like a much easier road. This isolated activity is exhausting when the nervous system seems far from whole. So, Jeremy isn't so strange to me after all.

The Camino as pilgrim practice is a reminder of the tension leaders face every day. How do leaders find the time to do the personal and reflective while also attending to the care of souls?

### **Reimagining research agendas for religious leadership**

Pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline and a metaphor for reimagining religious leadership allows action, reflection, and intention to shape religious leadership research beyond the problematic era of "great man" research that sought to establish archetypes and personality systems rooted in thin reads of history. It also moves through social construction into the domain of action and incarnation. Pilgrimage as metaphor for the *practice* of religious leadership shifts the agenda away from a post-positivist agenda that pursues certainty and one-best-way methods.

Pilgrimage as a paradigm for *research* in religious leadership invites narrative, qualitative inquiry, and autoethnographic agendas that invite individual leaders to explore stories that shape

one's arc of leading by exploring both the traumas of life<sup>45</sup> and the cues of hope.<sup>46</sup> This is not memoir but autoethnography that seeks a thick description, ala Geertz, but from the individual rather than the community. Similar to ethnography, when others read it and then see it or experience it, their resonant response is "yes and amen."

Pilgrimage moves the practice of leading and the research of leadership away from strategies, tactics, and skills and into discovering questions, reflecting on failure and success, and discerning the spirit for the current and coming days in a leader's and organizational/community life. In brief, pilgrimage as metaphor and practice invites engagement with difficult circumstances, and leaders explore areas that are otherwise often resisted.

The Camino becomes a leadership curriculum to form leaders; it offers an experiential environment for field study. Finally, pilgrimage as metaphor and practice invites the field of religious leadership to consider incarnation and transcendence for rediscovering both religion and leadership.

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<sup>45</sup> Parker Palmer writes, "There is a name for what leaders experience during this prolonged period of patient waiting. It is called 'suffering' (which is the root meaning of the word "patience"). Suffering is what happens when you see the possibilities in others while they deny those same possibilities in themselves. Suffering is what happens when you hold in trust a space for community to emerge, but others lack the trust to enter the space and receive the gift. Suffering is what happens while you wait out their resistance, believing that people have more resources than they themselves believe they have. But leaders do not want to suffer. So we create and maintain institutional arrangements that protect leaders from suffering by assuming the worst of followers and encouraging leaders to dominate them by means of power" in Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

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**THEOLOGY AND THE VOCATION OF LEADERSHIP**

SUSAN L. MAROS

KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI

MARK LAU BRANSON

**Abstract**

*This essay is based on an Academy of Religious Leadership panel discussion between Susan L. Maros, Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi, and Mark Lau Branson, each of whom have recently published books at the intersection of the vocation of leadership and theology. The essay summarizes the content of the three texts and highlights the themes of discernment, community and context, divine and human agency, and storytelling as intrinsic elements within the vocation of religious leadership. This conversation will benefit religious leaders and leadership educators in the practice of vocational discernment.*

**Introduction**

For members of the Academy of Religious Leadership (ARL), leadership is a theological praxis. The vocation of leading, and the teaching of leadership, are matters of theology whether explicitly or implicitly. Our praxis — what we believe about God and how we embody those beliefs in behaviors and actions — is woven into the three books that we wrote and examined. One major benefit of the ARL is how our friendships and gatherings encourage our writing,

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shape our critical interaction, and allow us to find and evaluate important resources. In the ARL conference panel presentation in 2023, Branson focused on Maros, Lizardy-Hajbi focused on Branson and Roxburgh, and Maros focused on Lizardy-Hajbi. We looked at the vocation of leadership, important theological matters, and what frameworks and tools might benefit teachers in schools and churches.

This essay summarizes each of the three books with attention to the purpose and audience of each text and asks the authors to respond to a question concerning their work. We then reflect on common themes between the three books and how these texts might be useful to religious leadership practitioners and educators.

### **Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager**

Mark Lau Branson, with coauthor Alan Roxburgh, wrote *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager* as a theological and cultural examination of the leadership theories commonly adopted by religious leaders. Building on that analysis and their explorations into biblical texts, Branson and Roxburgh offer alternatives to late-modern leadership as practiced in Christian organizations. Theories embedded in contemporary secular leadership approaches and shaped in the context of modernity do not explicitly attend to God's initiatives — and they shape habits that focus on human agency informed primarily by rationalism and control. Examples of these modalities include holding environments, interpretive leadership, social imaginaries, learning communities, action-learning, social construction, improvisation, alterity, diffusion, critical theory, and organizational change. Branson and Roxburgh's main argument is that most Euro-tribal churches — those with a majority from white European backgrounds and traditions — “have not paid attention to the agency of God in a disruptive world but have subsumed God's agency to models and frameworks borrowed from the narratives

of late modernity.”<sup>1</sup> The lie of modernity that leaders and churches have bought into is that “we are the primary agents in control of the forces at work in our contexts,” not God.<sup>2</sup>

Lizardy-Hajbi notes how timely Branson and Roxburgh’s book was for her as she had spent the previous seven months working with a large, affluent, Euro-tribal church to guide them through a purpose and vision discernment process. This is a church that is highly educated, incredibly theologically and politically progressive, actively living out its commitments to social justice and environmental care, and quite anxious about declining numbers and an aging membership. Members have bought into modernity’s wager — hook, line, and sinker. After months of attempts to guide them into a process of deep listening — to the Spirit, to one another, and to their community — they are still relying primarily on their own knowledge, expertise, and skills to “fix” the problems they face. If they just have the right marketing plan, they can attract younger members with children. If they just sell their building and move to another location, they will be able to sustain the current number of paid staff. If they change their worship style, they will attract a similarly progressive demographic. If they can hire the right senior pastor, that individual will have all the solutions they need. Save for a few faithful folks, the church has — as Branson and Roxburgh state — ignored the reality that “discernment is more critical than innovation” and assumed that the fate of their church is under their control.<sup>3</sup>

After chapters that trace the cultural formation of modernity and resulting theological missteps,<sup>4</sup> Branson and Roxburgh

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions*, 34. Related to this, something that was important to the authors was the connection between modernity and the subsequent colonization and racism of our era, with primary references to Jennings and Hanciles (p. 41-9). These social ills are specifically pegged to the founding and shape of modernity.

<sup>3</sup> Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Branson and Roxburgh provide dedicated subsections on Trinity, Incarnation, anthropology, creation, and eschatology; see chap. 3.



provide chapters in several Bible books (Jeremiah, Matthew, Acts, Ephesians) that focus on how we are called to interact with God's initiatives, asserting that "God is up to something far bigger and more important than fixing Euro-tribal churches or making them more attractive and relevant." What is needed now, they argue, are leaders who focus on how we are called to interact with God's initiatives, who reside in the in-between spaces of life beyond the certainties of modernity — our *habitus* of faith — and who call us to orient ourselves to God's activity within that community.<sup>5</sup> While social analysis, plans, and leadership models may have an important role to play, Branson and Roxburgh believe that such tools and strategies have supplanted the more critical tasks of discerning God's activity within their context and then joining God in that activity. Although readers might diverge at times with how Branson and Roxburgh engage Scripture, their work is substantive and provocative. Also, the theoretical work they do is a major contribution to this field, but readers will wish for stories of the kind of leadership they are promoting. Regardless, readers will appreciate the larger themes named within these scriptures, as well as their connections to important frameworks, that each point toward the centrality of discerning God's activities in community.

This is a helpful text not only for religious leaders and congregations — especially those who are beginning to rethink who, why, and how they are — but also for seminarians who are in the process of leadership formation, inviting them to consider what is most central to the vocation of leadership. This is a particularly fitting text for those with majority Christian students in either master's degree or Doctor of Ministry programs. Ultimately, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions* is the kind of work that reimagines leadership away from what has been into what might be, into a new *habitus*, if we are attentive enough to perceive what the Spirit is doing in this time of great upheaval and transition in our religious worlds. It theologically reorients leadership to be primarily a

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<sup>5</sup> They give significant attention to metaphors as they develop their proposal of "space-between" as a provocative leadership metaphor; Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions*, 10, and chapter 8.

function of listening and interpreting and, most importantly, doing so alongside others, not in front of or ahead of others.

*Lizardy-Hajbi's question to Branson:* You reference Euro-tribal churches in the book and your affiliation with those churches. What do you see as the significance of this emphasis in light of your subject matter?

*Branson:* My coauthor and I are both cisgender white males. We've done a lot of work in Korea and some other international locations, but we acknowledge the limitations of our perspective and decided not to claim authority beyond our own experiences. We love the larger conversations and the changes, nuances, and questions that arise. The conversation in this essay is an example of the kind of work I appreciate: bringing together diverse voices and resources that others might not bring together into a conversation. Having conversations among diverse communities is significant in a broader sense. In several chapters of our book, and notably in the chapter on Acts, we address the importance of alterity. We would say you cannot discern God's initiatives if you're just with people like yourself. It is impossible. In Acts we see God constantly challenging the initial players. Think of the longer stories around the biblical figures of Cornelius or Lydia, for example. To think we can shift modernistic practices of strategizing in our church boardrooms in isolation from diverse contexts is absurd. That's not where discernment about God's work is going to be learned. By way of example, in my own church — Susan Maros and I are a part of a bilingual, intercultural, intergenerational Latina church in Pasadena — I had the privilege recently of leading a *Lectio Divina* exercise, which we do regularly in the place of a sermon. The sermon the preceding week had been on the Great Commission in Matthew. As we reflected on this passage as a community, every small group focused on the word "doubt" in Matthew 28:17:

“When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted” (Common English Bible). I’ve never been in a group where everybody focused on the word “doubt” in this passage. We considered the significance of this point and what to do with it. Jesus doesn’t argue with the disciples or give them a new theological paradigm. Since they will be in the world, locally and beyond, Jesus gives them the vocation of mentoring others to be *learners of God’s initiatives* (which is what “make disciples” means), and that type of learning is how their doubt will be met by God’s presence and provisions.

Engagement with alterity seems to be key to discerning God’s initiatives and orienting ourselves to them. One of the harder issues in discerning vocation and discerning leadership, especially for students who are not engaged in communities of difference, is engagement with alterity in a reflective, prayerful, and conversationally humble manner. Doing so is how we discern what God is doing in our communities.

### **Calling in Context: Social Location and Vocational Formation**

The concept of “vocation” has become colonized by dominant societal constructs that undercut important Christian priorities. Susan L. Maros has provided a compelling textbook of theology, theories, and narratives that can guide a more generative and faithful approach to vocational discernment. “We cannot examine what we cannot recognize”<sup>6</sup> is an important confession for those of us who seek to increase the reflective capacities of our students. Maros effectively challenges long-standing definitions of vocation, names assets and problems created in our sociocultural environments, and calls us to practices for a journey (rather than just for a job). She calls attention to the preoccupation with jobs, the role of income, the priority on individualism, and assumptions about meritocracy which are often expressed in an anxious quest for certainty. These

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<sup>6</sup> Susan L. Maros, *Calling in Context: Social Location and Vocational Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 116.

challenges make her theological work richly informative and generative. Maros is explicit about her theological assumptions. Like Branson and Roxburgh, she believes that God is actively involved in the world, inviting individuals and communities to participate in that transformative work in one's life and community. Her theological assumptions are grounded in scriptural explorations into biblical characters' sense of call, with special attention to the calling of women, too often ignored when considering call stories. She encourages self-awareness and critical reflection on the cultural and contextual lenses through which we interpret these narratives. Furthermore, Maros incorporates connections to missiology to provide additional depth and perspectives to the exploration of vocational discernment.<sup>7</sup> "The ultimate purpose of this exploration," she writes, "is to be able to perceive God's work in the world and God's invitation to participate in that work with greater clarity and accuracy."<sup>8</sup> Maros attends to powerful elements of our cultures such as race and ethnicity, class and socioeconomic status, gender, and intersectionality. She is clear that we embody multiple identities, some rooted in our families of origin, and that the maps shaped by our overlapping identities and contexts bring us both orientation and distortions. Reflection on these elements helps us "discern the ways in which God has shaped and is shaping us in particular contexts and to then discern the implications for our next faithful step."<sup>9</sup>

Journey is a key metaphor throughout the book as well as in the biblical passages she draws upon. Telling stories of the journeys — including biblical, personal, and collective — is key to how we see and engage God and each other. Storytelling articulates personal and communal responses. Maros provides an amazing set of stories from students, friends, and colleagues. These stories not

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<sup>7</sup> Maros engages important voices regarding theology and missiology, for example Walter Brueggemann, Justo Gonzales, Paul Hiebert, Christine Pohl, Soong-Chan Rah, Alexia Salvatierra, and Love Sechrest. She also draws from resources in psychology and sociology, particularly Erik Erikson, Michael Emerson, Janet Helms, and Beverly Daniel Tatum.

<sup>8</sup> Maros, *Calling in Context*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Maros, *Calling in Context*, 149.

only include those in explicitly religious organizations (churches, nonprofit organizations) but also vocations in media, business, and politics. The book is never far from a narrative grounding. On several topics the book would benefit from deeper dives. Maros does emphasize the importance of understanding call as a corporate matter, but the book lacks stories about how a group's discernment of its corporate call was then incorporated into the calls of individual participants. The attention to understanding discernment as a journey is helpful, but readers would benefit from stories and guidance concerning temporary calls, U-turns, and disorientations in contexts. And regarding theology concerning human and divine agency, Maros doesn't explore that mutuality as God adapts to human agency through midcourse changes of the callings to groups and individuals.

While *Calling in Context* is not explicitly framed as a book on leadership, that theme is always in the background. Definitions and concepts about leadership are implied throughout in such things as vocabulary like authority and power, and mostly by example. Stories and concepts often concern people gaining positional or personal authority (and therefore leadership) in churches and other organizations. Maros is most explicit about leadership in comments on Moses and Deborah, and she gives special attention to matters of gender discrimination. Leadership is culturally constructed, with the resulting benefits and problems, and vocational questions are intertwined with these variations. Maros does not claim to be addressing diverse forms of leading, though her overall explorations are beneficial for those exploring vocations related to leadership.

A unique framing of Maros' work is that she assumes that "vocation" and our work with Scripture are socially constructed and need reflection. She names God's work in cultures, contexts, and especially social structures. She repeatedly reminds us that vocation is a journey — wandering, progressive — and includes character, relationships, competencies, and legacy as elements of vocation. God uses rubble, she writes, and God shapes our vocations in the midst of both affirmation and threats.<sup>10</sup> As a professor with years

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<sup>10</sup> Maros, *Calling in Context*, 222.

of experience in churches, Maros brings her own awareness and reflections, attentive to organizational dynamics, diverse social settings, and formal and informal instructional experiences — which means the book is well designed for other professors and leaders who have opportunities to guide the development of current and future leaders.

*Branson's question to Maros:* You emphasize the importance of calling as a corporate matter but did not include stories involving a group's discernment of its corporate call and how individual calls were incorporated into that collective calling. Could you speak to this?

*Maros:* Yours is a question I am still pondering. I note in Scripture that God's call to groups, particularly Israel as a nation, is the central concern within which individual callings are located. God does assign individual tasks to specific people but this is always done within the context of God's purposes for the collective. And God's concern for the collective — Israel or the church — is always in the context of God's concern for the world. One of my emphases in the book is the tendency in the United States to be individualistic about the discerning of calling. We ask, "How do I discern my call?" emphasizing the first-person pronouns. When we include community in that conversation, it is the community's role in helping the individual discern their individual calling. There is some good literature on vocation for the common good. Yet, even then, it is the individual discerning their individual calling to contribute to the common good, not the community collectively discerning its calling and defining what the common good is for that community. If we focus at all on the common good, it is generally my individual discerning of what I am supposed to do to contribute to the collective.

I've had students who read the book and ask for additional resources about discerning collective calling. At this point in time, I don't have a story of a community discerning its collective calling and of the individuals in the community thinking about their vocations in light of the group's vocation. Even as I continue to listen to my students and colleagues who are in more collectivist contexts, I wrestle with that listening. My ears have been so formed by individualism that I have a hard time hearing and understanding stories about a collectivist nature of calling.

As an example of this dynamic of listening being influenced by context, I was recently second reader on a doctoral dissertation that focused on the process of vocational discernment and development in francophone West Africa.<sup>11</sup> The problem the author, Kelly Kumbu, emphasized was the challenge that comes for people in collectivist contexts when they sense a call to vocational ministry contrary to their families' expectations and desires. The point of raising this example is to note that there is not a "sweet spot" between individualism and collectivism that we should attempt to reach as an ideal. Instead, the point is to be reflectively self-aware how our contexts shape our assumptions and experiences. The crux of the matter lies in cultivating critical self-awareness. It is imperative that those of us who are in the United States recognize our inclination toward hyperindividualism and comprehend the advantages and disadvantages inherent within it. By doing so, we can enhance our awareness of the costs associated with our chosen path.

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly Kumbu, "Hating Father and Mother: Overcoming Communal Constraints on Focused Living Among Francophone West African Christian Leaders," Doctor of Intercultural Studies dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2023.

## Explore: Vocational Discovery in Ministry

Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi edited *Explore: Vocational Discovery in Ministry* with Matthew Floding. The text includes over forty short chapters by practitioners, educators, and academics, several of whom are well known in their respective circles and beyond.<sup>12</sup> The two opening chapters of *Explore* aid those in preparation for ministerial leadership to be oriented to the tools of discernment. Each area of endeavor is represented by four chapters — one framing chapter and three personal narratives — with various leadership roles and occupations represented from pastors to varieties of chaplains (college, military, hospice, etc.) to clinical pastoral educators to academics to nonprofit leaders, spiritual entrepreneurs, ecumenical/interfaith leaders, and beyond. This text is framed as a resource for Master of Divinity (MDiv) students contemplating vocational discernment and next steps in their own formation and for the field education supervisors, mentors, and instructors who work with them. As Lizardy-Hajbi writes in her introduction, this collection “aims to encourage and equip you in your vocational discernment by informing and enlarging your imagination.”<sup>13</sup>

Four themes are clearly and consistently engaged throughout the book. First, discernment is present whether formal in the sense of a specific process or, more often, informal in the processes of living life and noticing God’s work in circumstances and experiences. Second, community is a strong theme, with the role of individuals and groups in discernment and personal development often referenced. Beingness is a third theme as people named their contexts and identities and reflected upon inner-life dynamics such as personal passion or giftedness. Authors often named their social locations, their geographical and organizational locations, and their significant personal identities. In addition to a variety of roles represented, a number of theological traditions and racial-ethnic-

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<sup>12</sup> Contributors include Will Willimon, Melissa Florer-Bixler, David Emmanuel Goatley, Miguel A. De La Torre, Traci Blackmon, Karen Oliveto, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, and Tyler Sit, among others.

<sup>13</sup> Lizardy-Hajbi and Floding, *Explore*, ix.



cultural identities are clearly identified so that this book has some breadth of representation in background and circumstances.

Lastly, the most central and obvious is the theme of occupation. Each of the eleven vocational pathways is a particular career direction. This suggests an underlying fundamental assumption that vocation is primarily about what one does for a job. Lizardy-Hajbi does differentiate in her chapter between purpose (the *telos* toward which a life aims), call (time-bound, episodic expression of purpose), and vocation (“the long arc of a life spent searching for purpose and acting out callings”), and in none of these terms does she focus on career.<sup>14</sup> These differentiations and nuances are not carried through in the chapters, however, which is perhaps more a comment on the nature of edited volumes than a critique of the editors. The fundamental definition of calling or vocation as expressed in the narratives of the book seems to be one’s job, and vocational discernment is primarily about identifying the job to which God is directing a person. A strength, perhaps, is that while the book focuses on “ministry” roles, the diversity of types of occupations under that rubric does offer people who are preparing for “vocational ministry” a wider field of possibility than simply seeking ordination as a traditional pastor of a local congregation. In this regard, the book may not wholly resolve the tension between exposing students to the breadth of roles (i.e., jobs) that their gifts and strengths might be best suited for and focusing on vocation as a broader process of discernment within the contributors’ first-person narratives.

A text of this nature is useful for its focus audience — students in MDiv programs — to contemplate a variety and diversity of ministerial vocations and note the evolving nature of vocations as narrated. The richness of the stories shared in this volume would add to any discussion within a course that is designed to assist MDiv students in reflecting upon their sense of calling. The design of the text with four chapters addressing each area of endeavor allows for a nuanced conversation that does not simply get caught in one story but can consider the diversity of life paths and experiences

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<sup>14</sup> Lizardy-Hajbi and Floding, *Explore*, 5.

that might lead an individual to discern God's invitation for their participation in that arena of ministry.

*Maros' question to Lizardy-Hajbi:* You mention enlarging imagination as an aim of the book in your introductory chapter. What is the role of imagination in vocational discernment? What part do stories play in this process?

*Lizardy-Hajbi:* I love imagination. In this particular volume, I wish that the authors had dared to push the boundaries of imagination further. The beauty of an edited book lies in the opportunity to gather diverse perspectives and compel authors to explore new realms. However, I long for a more extensive exploration of the possibilities of imagination. Moreover, I yearn for the chance to extend the boundaries of the discussion beyond the confines of traditional ministry contexts. While we encompassed categories like spiritual entrepreneurship and bi-vocational or multivocational ministry in the book, I believe there is room to transcend even those conventional labels. Nonprofit work, among other avenues, deserves recognition within this broader scope of exploration.

I think God is doing something new in this time and place. It is within this context that we actively collaborate with God in expanding our understandings of vocation, not simply as the time-bound tasks of leadership in community, but as a lifelong piecing together of the various elements of our identities, experiences, and discernings, responding to what the context needs in the present moment. In this manner, discernment becomes the way in which we transcend and surpass the conventional categories that have traditionally delimited our understanding. My students desire to effect meaningful change. Among them, I am privileged to work with a student who aspires to develop a social media platform akin to Facebook, but

one that fosters a greater sense of belonging rather than division. Additionally, several students work in the realm of artificial intelligence, leveraging its potential to create communities of belonging. As just one example among several in the book, there is a narrative about a medical doctor who embraces what one might consider bi-vocational ministry, yet he transcends that label as a chaplain living with his family in an intentional community of young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and health care professional students. As an educator, I consistently strive to stretch boundaries and ignite imagination, though they themselves are more often the ones who are stretching my own boundaries around calling and imagination.

### **Common Themes**

Although these three texts have different purposes and somewhat different audiences, there are a number of themes and elements of focus that they have in common at the interface of leadership, vocation, and theology. These themes include the centrality of discernment, the role of community, the theology of God's agency and human agency, and the importance of storytelling as a theological resource. Each of these themes are addressed in turn in this section.

#### *Discernment*

The theme of discernment is present (to a greater or lesser extent) in all three books. The authors' theological environments influence how they define "discernment" and how they understand God's role and the role of human beings to be in the process of discerning. In particular, these authors (and the communities they represent) have differing views on the relative place of human agency and God's agency. A number of nuances of discernment come to mind when reading Branson and Roxburgh's book. For instance, how does one discern in ways that remain attentive to dynamics of culture, race, privilege, gender, and the broader structures at play within late modernity? If it's a fairly homogeneous community doing the

discerning, especially if they are Euro-tribal (the term Branson and Roxburgh use), are there limits to what can be discerned? Can we assume that folks will listen/discern in ways that invite a deep self-reflexivity and a stirring of their hearts to individual change, as well as communal change? Branson and Roxburgh's chapter on Acts emphasizes that discernment cannot happen without alterity, and the final chapter offers some important praxes around imagination and improvisation, relinquishing power and control, and critical reflection, among others. We note, however, that our society has few examples of Euro-tribal leaders and congregations being able to engage a praxis that is shaped by this kind of radical humility and deep listening together. Modernity is the water in which we collectively swim, and some like those waters because they have benefited from them for a long time. This is precisely the audience that needs to read this book.

*How* we discern — not just the relevant elements of discernment — receives varied and promising attention in Maros' text. Maros is explicit that we engage discernment knowing that we are in the midst of both brokenness and grace (our own and that of others). Notably, she attends to how theology shapes discernment — specifically how theological traditions (such as Pentecostal or Reformed) and practices make us more or less attentive to elements like direct revelation, or authoritative elders, or encounters with Scripture. What we expect discernment to be, how we expect God to engage us in our contexts and experiences, is shaped by the practices, assumptions, and values of the communities in which we are formed and in which we are seeking to discern God's presence. Discernment is thus not simply a discipline conducted in a particular manner but a spiritual practice that both shapes and is shaped by the values and beliefs of the community in which it is engaged. Discernment of vocation was a common theme among the narratives in *Explore* even while there was little definition or overt theological exploration of the practice in the varied sociocultural and theological locations of the contributors. One element of discernment occurring regularly in the narratives was the importance of mentors, family, friends, and other community members as collaborators and co-listeners in the

process of discernment. This social dynamic was so significant that community forms another of the common themes between the three books.

### *Community*

Branson and Roxburgh envision the community as the locus of discernment, seeking to equip leaders to facilitate this communal work. Maros locates vocational formation in the context of community as a primary source of formation. Upon reviewing chapter titles in Lizardy-Hajbi and Floding's text, it becomes apparent that the term "community" features prominently, exemplifying the recognition of the community's influential role. This observation is particularly intriguing, considering the prevalent focus among seminary students on discerning their individual calls and roles. Lizardy-Hajbi noted that vocation has an intergenerational dimension in her personal experience. It extends beyond her immediate surroundings and encompasses connections with those who have come before her. Community should not be limited to individuals physically present in a room or those united by specific values or ideas. Communities can exist in virtual realms; and they can include individuals who are no longer alive, such as deceased parents or other ancestors, who still remain an integral part of one's community. Considering this, we contemplate how we can reframe our individual roles within complex systems, especially within institutional frameworks. Addressing the issue of individualism in discernment, Lizardy-Hajbi participated in the design of a foundational course for all professional master's students at her institution titled "Identity, Power, and Vocation in Community." The course aims to address the importance of understanding one's identity and vocation within the context of belonging to specific communities. Students are encouraged to identify and reflect upon the communities to which they belong — formally, informally, and otherwise — and to discern their roles within them. Through this process, they engage in discernment alongside their expressed communities of belonging.

Maros was a part of shaping a course for all incoming MDiv students at her institution titled "Vocational Formation

in Seminary.” In this course, she emphasized the significance of students’ social locations as context for the shaping work of God. Similar to Lizardy-Hajbi, and addressed in her text, she sees the dominant cultural value of individualism in the United States as having a significant effect on students’ expectations about their formation and their intentions and expectations for their experience in seminary. The challenge is to encourage students to think beyond “my” ministry and “my” calling to consider the collective calling of a faith community and the implications this has for the individuals within that community.

We note that Patrick Reyes’s book, *The Purpose Gap*, presents a chapter discussing the vocations of both institutions and communities. Reyes proposes that rather than being singular entities, we exist as constellations, networks, and partnerships.<sup>15</sup> This concept serves as an exemplar that resonates with all three authors. While Maros and Lizardy-Hajbi’s books could have specifically offered more individual narratives, we would find it intriguing to encounter a text that focuses on collective narratives and the process of a community discerning its calling.

### *Theology of God’s Agency and Human Agency*

Fundamental to Branson and Roxburgh’s text is their assertion of the centrality of God’s agency. Their work with biblical texts focuses on ways that God’s presence and initiatives invited and interacted with women and men. They name the fallout of modernity, in which God’s agency is not recognized, even by leaders who use God’s name. Creatively, when explaining potentially helpful leadership resources, they specify how those frames can be re-envisioned if faith communities reorient them to God’s initiative. They describe several practices needed for such communities to develop habits of discernment and participation.

While *Calling in Context* does not overtly state a theology of agency, Maros’ model of vocational formation is that God is the caller and humans are the called. The dynamic tension between God’s agency and human agency is a thread throughout

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick B. Reyes, *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021).

her exposition. Maros addresses the assumptions and cultural “maps” that individuals and communities bring to the process of vocational formation. Among these assumptions are beliefs about the nature and character of God and of human beings. For some people, particularly the Pentecostal adults that were a part of Maros’ doctoral research, calling is only a calling when it comes directly from God. Within this tradition, there is a strong tendency to focus on biblical stories that include direct revelation from God while other stories with less specific identification of God’s direct action are disregarded as examples of calling.<sup>16</sup> Particularly evident in the accounts by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) contributors to *Explore*, there is a discernible theme of divine guidance permeating their journeys. The presence of such guidance is manifest throughout the entirety of their experiences and settings. Notably, the voices of several African American ministers within the text resonate strongly and clearly in this regard, emphasizing the role of God’s guidance. As a person of faith, Lizardy-Hajbi herself conceptualizes God as a collaborative co-conspirator on the journey of life rather than a front-facing, authoritative entity. As a result, she perceives God and herself as dynamically changing beings, influencing one another. It is crucial to note that this perspective reflects a non-Western paradigm, underpinning her understanding of how God shapes change and is simultaneously transformed in the process.

This question of the relative role of God and humans is an important one for students who are pursuing higher education degrees specifically because they are seeking to discern whether or not God has called them to a particular role or because they feel certain God has indeed called them, or for the student whose theological view of God’s agency is more one of process. One’s own religious background and tradition inform the shaping of such theological perspectives, which likely reside somewhere along a broader spectrum of beliefs regarding divine and human agency. This is true for each of the authors and how they frame agency within their respective texts. Nonetheless, leaders and communities

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<sup>16</sup> Maros, *Calling in Context*, 36-38.

of faith tend to fall into what Branson and Roxburgh identify as modernity's wager, seeking to use their human agency to address issues with human wisdom. Clearly, one of the roles of religious leaders is to facilitate the community's consideration of actions to be taken. This includes leaning on human skills and capacities as well as cultivating a praxis of collective discernment, attending to God's actions and invitations.

### *Storytelling as Theological Resource*

Much of the Branson-Roxburgh text rests on biblical foundations for prioritizing and discerning God's agency through four narratives and their contexts: (1) Jeremiah and his role as an interpretive leader in an unstable time for the Israelites; (2) Matthew and the importance of learning communities; (3) Acts and attentiveness to God's disruptions; and (4) Ephesians and the upending of organizational culture and power.<sup>17</sup> They believe that faith communities can gain new insight and capacities when we bring our own narratives alongside the biblical narratives in prayerful, imaginative exercises.

As has already been noted, Maros offers storytelling as a theological resource as one of her foundational theological assumptions. Her choice to include diverse "call stories" throughout the book reflects this commitment. While she does not give overt direction or explanation of storytelling as a theological resource, the number and diversity of stories told — by the author and included as first-person narratives by people telling their own stories — keeps the discussion of vocational formation grounded in the lived experiences of the people doing the discerning.

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<sup>17</sup> They explain their practical theology approach to biblical texts and the call to discernment in "Intermezzo 1"; Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions*, 71-9. Their approach is akin to what Joel Green distinguishes as an alternative to the common movement from the meaning of a text to application; they work at the intersection of Green's interpretive movements -- from "behind the text" (history, context, and the narrative quality of the texts) to "in the text" (language and structure) to "in front of the text" (meaning is in the interaction of readers and texts). Joel B. Green, *Seized by the Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 20008), chap. 4.



Lizardy-Hajbi and Floding's work relies on first-person narratives almost entirely, not as a prescriptive means for how calling or vocation should be understood, but as an invitation to how the particularities and nuances of one's identities and experiences have been shaped into one's present ministry work and contexts. In reading through the *what* of each individual's story, however, the *how* in which they reflect upon their own identities and experiences and theologically situate them (or not) relative to God's agency becomes one of the more intriguing elements in the book.<sup>18</sup>

Educators might use stories as points of discussion or prompts for reflection among students. These three texts offer three different applications of storytelling. Branson and Roxburgh might assist seminary students in considering how to listen to the stories of Scripture in a new way as resources for informing our engagement in the world. The calling stories included in Maros' text might offer students ways to see themselves and their experiences as valid and welcome at the table where a discussion of vocational formation is taking place. Lizardy-Hajbi and Floding have gathered a virtual buffet of stories to feed the narrative imaginations of students.

### **Conclusion: Impact on the Vocation of Leadership**

Within our varied sociocultural and theological identities and backgrounds, we collectively believe that the vocation of leadership will — and must — look and feel vastly different in the present and future than it has previously and must rely upon a dynamic discerning of God's presence and activity in this time and in this place. Each of our books offers a particular response to the disruptions occurring within various settings of the church and in the world at large. Our hope as authors is that these resources might be a starting point for broadening imaginations around the shape and substance of leadership and community — each of which moves beyond Western, Euro-tribal perspectives.

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<sup>18</sup> According to John W. Creswell, "Narrative' might be the *phenomenon* being studied, such as a narrative of illness, or it might be the *method* used in a study, such as the procedures of analyzing stories told." *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 70.

We find it intriguing to ponder the reasons behind the prevalent issue of discernment in our current times. The disruptions we have experienced in our lives have rendered our customary, traditional leadership approaches ineffective. Consequently, the necessity for discernment extends beyond mere career choices and encompasses broader aspects of our existence and leadership. It is disheartening to witness numerous instances where individuals who, believing they had discerned their leadership roles, have exhibited significant flaws, be it in the realm of politics, the ecclesia, or other domains. Clearly, leaders are not infallible in their practices of discernment for their specific organizational contexts any more than we are infallible in the art of discerning God's activity in the world. We believe a large dose of humility and the application of critical self-reflection is warranted as we seek to be faithful religious leaders and to develop religious leaders for the challenges of today and the coming season.

The crux of the inquiry into the vocation of leadership lies at the intersection of theology, community, and context. None of these dynamics can be overlooked or disregarded without the whole of the leadership task suffering as a result. To consider the vocation of leadership is to engage in a profound exploration of how God, with divine agency, interacts with human communities amid the disruptive forces of this present era. As God has proven faithful through the witness of Scripture and through the testimony of our communities, so we trust that God will continue to be faithful to those who seek to follow after God's heart for the world.

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**LEADERSHIP IN A SECULAR AGE: DIVINE ACTION, THE EARLY  
CHURCH, AND RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY IN CONVERSATION**  
CARSON E. REED  
SHELBY COBLE

**Abstract**

*This essay identifies some key elements of growing secularity with a particular focus on the realities of isolation and human longing that gives rise to the search for meaning. Responding to these rising concerns, the essay will surface various aspects of trinitarian thought, especially perichoresis. Acts of the Apostles provides insight into the activity and presence of God within community. Then, Relational Leadership Theory will be used to explicate how leaders' partnership with God ought to include qualities of empathy, emotional intelligence, and sensemaking offering leaders an alternative way of being leading to a different set of practices for effective leadership in secular contexts.*

**Introduction**

Within the increasingly secular environment in the western world, ministerial leadership faces two particular challenges — the disappearance of an active God coupled with a distinct rise in distrust of external authority. As active consultants for congregations and denominations, we observe both of these factors in play as leaders wrestle with providing effective leadership. We wonder whether there is something about the secular cultural milieu present in contemporary contexts that might help inform theological reflection and ministerial action positively? We believe the answer is yes.

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So, in this essay we will briefly name two insights that arise from secularity that inform ministerial leadership. We will then highlight several elements of trinitarian theology and engage the book of Acts for clues to how leaders might partner with God's mission in this secular age. From our theological reflection we then utilize Relational Leadership Theory to offer some concrete practices for ministerial leadership that coheres with the secular cultural reality present in our time.

### **Leadership in a secular age**

What does it mean to live in a secular time? One might think of a decline in church attendance. Stephen Bullivant's recent sociological work, *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America*, insightfully surveys the rapidly growing demographic of younger adults leaving communities of faith as they dissociate from various religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> Yet for our purposes, reflection on secularity is less about affiliation with congregational life and more about an understanding about God's presence and action in the world.

To speak of secularity is to identify human experience as circumscribed by the material world. God has left the building, unneeded or perhaps has become an outworn trope. Humans find themselves living in what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the "immanent frame"<sup>2</sup> in which transcendence, the possibility of mystery, has all but disappeared. Humans are left with nothing but themselves. All action and progress are self-referential. To illustrate this dynamic, we only need observe what is going on around us: seemingly autonomous people doing what they think is best for themselves has quickly diminished whatever trust or authority institutions — governments, churches, schools, business organizations, or even nonprofit bodies — may have in our society.

Distrust of institutions is the name of the game. Social engagement is dissipating. Individualism runs rampant and communal engagements are contested at every turn. If God is

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bullivant, *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007) 539.

absent and institutions are not to be trusted, how can a person speak of a distinctly Christian leadership frame without simply moralizing about a few virtues that still sound good to the jaded ears of contemporary culture?

Enter the work of Andrew Root. His reading of Charles Taylor offers a path forward for this essay. Root argues that it is precisely the secular environment with its immanent frame that calls for a reclamation of a robust theology of a God who is actually present in the seemingly closed, material world. For Root, the closed world of materialism is not nearly as closed as secular folk think. And following Root, particularly in his book, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, ministerial leadership is one of calling attention to a God who is present.<sup>3</sup>

Root's primary source for such a claim is Karl Barth—the pastor, not the theologian. Barth responds unequivocally to the agnostic and lifeless aspects of early twentieth century Europe by declaring that, in fact, God is at work. Barth's theological project was driven by the recognition that theology was no longer determinative in church institutions and in the political and social dimensions of western culture. Following Barth, Root argues that a path forward for congregations and leaders is not to give in to the immanent frame, but rather to double down on God's action in ordinary life. The place of ministerial leadership might be challenged by radical doubt and distrust of institutional authority; yet, the role of the minister finds faithful resonance by calling attention to God's action in the world and pointing toward God's action for others.<sup>4</sup>

Secularity in western culture necessitates reimagining the work of ministerial leadership. If positional authority carries less freight, then what is left for ministers? This essay suggests that in the light of secularity, the work of leadership will needfully attend to an *altered way of being* for leaders that leads to a *different set of practices*

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Root explores this role of ministerial leadership in a thorough-going way in *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

for effective leadership. To understand this way of leadership, we propose a theological rationale for a way of leading that finds grounding in mutual, interrelational elements of the Trinity. And with that trinitarian understanding, we will utilize Relational Leadership Theory as a guide to practicing a way of leadership that fruitfully engages the secular cultural realities of the day. So, we begin with the Trinity.

### **Relationships, presence, and the Trinity**

The substance of God is relational. God exists as diversely divine Persons but united in communion and relationship.<sup>5</sup> The substance of God is not self-contained, nor exists without reference to another.<sup>6</sup> Relation is the very principle of God's being and is displayed through the Trinity. Through the Trinity, God's way of being is explored, which is fundamentally relational — a shared communion. The phenomena of the Trinity reveals — God who remained all-powerful and transcendent moved toward God's people in a more personal way through the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who died and was raised by God was also God, and the Holy Spirit that was poured out on the church is also God. The phenomenon is such that through each of these forms of God's being, there is only one God.<sup>7</sup> While this is a phenomenon with limits to comprehension and communication, its priority is communion. To think of the Trinity is to think of relations and therefore, to notice the distinctness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as Persons while recognizing they are never separate from one another. The names of the Trinity imply their relationship as the original community of oneness.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper One, 1991) 243.

<sup>6</sup> LaCugna, 245.

<sup>7</sup> David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 55.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 34, 40.

In the Trinity, a connection is revealed between God's own character and God's relationship with the world.<sup>9</sup> The life of God is triune and therefore does not belong to God alone. God comes to humanity through Christ with the activity of the Holy Spirit. This outreach is one of relationship and love that affords the reality of God's life with human beings and their lives with one another. God moved toward humanity so that humanity might move toward God and therefore toward one another. This movement is made possible through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and denotes a shared life between the Triune God and humanity.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the Trinity affirms how God comes to humanity, saves them in Christ, and remains with them through the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing mission of God to be in a relationship with people is displayed through the deliverance of God's promise to dwell among people. Through God's presence in the Holy Spirit, the church is working toward the mission of God.<sup>12</sup> The Holy Spirit not only points to God but is the indwelling presence of God. Access and relationship to God are extended to people through the Spirit in their midst.

God's people are no longer relegated to the temple to experience God's presence or walk with Jesus who was God in flesh, but now have access to God's presence within and among them through the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> As Jesus's presence saved people from their sins, the Holy Spirit's presence is a gift that sanctifies and empowers believers. The Holy Spirit allows believers to be transformed, to experience God's presence more fully in this life and in the anticipation of the life to come in eternity.<sup>14</sup>

Trinitarian personhood sets people on a journey in relationships with others with the aim of wholeness. The Trinity displays the reality that persons will never be able to complete the journey on

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<sup>9</sup> Cunningham, 57.

<sup>10</sup> LaCugna, 377.

<sup>11</sup> LaCugna, 400.

<sup>12</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019) 208-209.

<sup>13</sup> Duvall, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Duvall, 239.

their own.<sup>15</sup> All along, God is present with God's people. Scripture bears witness of this presence and Acts is no exception. The Triune God desires to have a personal relationship with people and enters human life and experience to facilitate a communion with God, with other people, and with the wider world.

This communal reality commits people to seek wholeness through involvement in close-knit fellowships, and to the development of healthy relationships.<sup>16</sup> Communal relationships are at the very heart of what it is to be human. The journey of seeking wholeness necessitates being in healthy relationships with others. Since there is no being without communion, nothing exists as a separate individual.<sup>17</sup> Christian spirituality and ministry is not an individual affair — separate from other individuals, but a transformational journey that takes place within the body of Christ and displays a commitment for all people to be united in love. People are made only through, with, and in their loving relationships.<sup>18</sup> We are created by a trinitarian God to live in an authentic communion with God and one another, a communion that God desires for *all* people.<sup>19</sup>

Used first by Pseudo-Cyril in the sixth century and later by John of Damascus in the eighth to describe trinitarian relations, *perichoresis* emphasized the reciprocal exchange in the mutual indwelling and penetration of the divine Persons by one another. As they are indwelling one another, their communion does not diminish or confuse their personhood. As perichoresis continued in usage, it was partnered with the metaphor of the divine dance. The dance, so intimate in its connection, has the divine Persons moving in and through one another in an all-inclusive pattern.

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<sup>15</sup> Seamands, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Seamands, 51.

<sup>17</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997) 16-18.

<sup>18</sup> Roderick T. Leupp, *The Renewal of Trinitarian Theology: Themes, Patterns, and Explorations* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) 134.

<sup>19</sup> Mark E. Powell, *Centered in God: The Trinity and Christian Spirituality* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2014) 94.



Unlike human dancing in which partners weave in and out between one another, the divine dance emphasizes the patterns and movements of the dance and they interweave together.<sup>20</sup> Based in perfect and intense empathy, the Father, Son, and the Spirit dwell in one another and communicate eternal life to one another. Jürgen Moltmann believes perichoresis within the divine Persons evidences the things that bind them are the same things that distinguish them. As the divine Persons are together in their unity, their uniqueness is not dissolved in the midst of that unity because they live in relation to one another. As the divine Persons relate to one another, they also exist in one another — living as equals in one another and through one another.<sup>21</sup>

To speak of the trinitarian Godhead is to see a “community of being,” a shared, united, and mutually exchanged relationship. The divine Persons of Father, Son, and Spirit are in a relationship that allows for mutual giving and receiving all the while maintaining interdependence. Each divine Person is a subject in which the others also indwell, effectively permeating one another all the while remaining distinct Persons. God is, as Miroslav Volf describes, not only Father, but also includes the Son and Spirit.

The encompassing nature of the indwelling of the others are what makes God the fullness of who God is. Volf adds that, the Son is only the Son as the Father and Spirit indwell him. If there was no indwelling of Father and Spirit to the Son, the Son would not be. Therefore, each divine Person within the Godhead, in their own way are related to the Other, without ceasing to maintain the uniqueness of its own Person. The divine perichoresis of unique Persons culminates in a communal unity of being, a trinitarian community of being in which the three Persons are reciprocally related all the while remaining distinct.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) 47, 71-72.

<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981) 174-176.

<sup>22</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 208-209.

This particular vision of a divine dance denotes the equality, mutuality, and reciprocity of the divine Persons. They indwell one another as the whole of God indwells each Person in a movement of direction toward and with one another, a symmetrical fellowship, an ever-circling movement. This circle of communion is not closed. God is not only dancing within the communion of divine Persons but invites human beings to join in the movement of God. As people share in the movements of the divine dance, they are also not only observers but participants.<sup>23</sup> While the Godhead is in relationship with human beings, this dynamic is limited since those people are in the Spirit, though not internal to the Spirit.

The personal interiority is one-sided as the Spirit indwells human beings and human beings indwell the character of the Spirit, not the Person of the Spirit. This dynamic is helpful in the encounters persons have with one another as persons cannot be internal to one another. In relationships, however, people give to one another and receive from one another. People reflect themselves in unique ways while also being affected by one another. The Spirit, common to everyone, allows the communion of mutual giving and receiving between individuals. The necessity is being in relationship with persons since one who is isolated cannot give or receive from another.<sup>24</sup>

As God is in communion with persons, those persons are in communion with God, and all are in communion with each other, as God moves and we are to move with God.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, people are to move together staying in sync with God. Perichoresis provides a model of communion undergirded by mutuality and interdependence. As God moves, the other Persons of the Godhead move together in one fluid motion. There are not leaders and followers in the divine dance but the reciprocal giving and receiving — giving again and receiving again.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Fiddes, 76-78.

<sup>24</sup> Volf, 212.

<sup>25</sup> LaCugna, 228.

<sup>26</sup> LaCugna, 272.

In the language of giving and receiving, perichoresis values inclusiveness, community, and freedom. LaCugna refers to Patricia Wilson-Kastner's values as ways of relating that are essential to the divine life and should therefore comprise the patterns of human interaction and communion together. Inclusiveness accepts someone in light of their common humanity, community focuses on interrelatedness while combating that which is destructive to genuine community, and freedom connects to the responsibility of people to set the correct conditions for genuine community.

Since these characteristics form the divine life together, these values shape the life of persons together — communities reflecting the way of the Trinity. “Perichoresis is thus the intradivine model for persons in the human community. Perichoresis takes place within God, and the human community is supposed to mirror or imitate this perichoresis in its own configuration.”<sup>27</sup>

God is God, in part, by the loving relationships that exist between the Godhead. Yet, as previously explored above, the relations that constitute the divine life have implications on an ecclesial level. The Spirit of God allows people in a community of faith to experience perichoresis. “The mutuality and reciprocity within the intradivine life is, for all of them, normative as the ontological ground for all human interactions.”<sup>28</sup>

The opportunity to apply the perichoretic analogy to all human beings is found in the reality of an individual's total environment. This environment creates human relationships that afford the opportunity for mutuality and reciprocity, of giving and receiving, which is only enhanced through life together. Fiddes acknowledges the purpose of trinitarian language is not to provide persons with an example to copy at a human level, but to draw persons into participation with God so that human life can be transformed.<sup>29</sup>

Graham Buxton, in his book, *The Trinity, Creation, and Pastoral Ministry*, expounds on the idea of transformation by demonstrating how various perichoretic themes are available in pastoral life.

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<sup>27</sup> LaCugna, 273, 276.

<sup>28</sup> Graham Buxton, *The Trinity, Creation, and Pastoral Ministry: Imaging the Perichoretic God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 149.

<sup>29</sup> Buxton, 153.

First, *community formation* is an expression of perichoretic life on the human level. Participation in the life of God directly affects people's participation in one another. The initiative of the Trinity, motivated by the desire for humans to participate in the self-giving life of love, has implications for how communities are perceived, shaped, how decisions are made, and how power is exercised. The second expression of the perichoretic life is *community realization*, which acknowledges participation of people in the life of God as determining an individual's participation in one another. Buxton believes perichoretic participation is realized as hospitality, among other things. As Buxton says, hospitality is a primary concept of God's being as God "creates spaces for human beings to experience in the fullest sense possible what it means to 'feel at home.'"<sup>30</sup> When people offer hospitality to one another, they invite the other to be "at home" with them and in doing so being receptive to the other. A community of hospitality is expressed with mutual care and love without superiors and inferiors.<sup>31</sup>

A third expression of the perichoretic life is *community operation*, which Buxton describes as the necessary "doing" that combines theory and practice to elicit transformation both within the church and outside the church.<sup>32</sup> When people engage communally in worship, mission, and compassion, Buxton believes the perichoretic reality becomes manifest and can be perceived through its demonstration. These incarnate expressions reflect the way God embodies relational love to God's people in the self-giving of the Son and invitation for all persons to participate in God's action in the world. If applied to the human perspective, the motif of dance becomes a sojourning together. People linger together in stages and phases, sometimes struggling, sometimes joyfully, but nevertheless moving toward renewed and deepened connections and reconnections with oneself and others.<sup>33</sup>

A trinitarian understanding of Christian faith is *living in communion with others, with the world, and with God*. It is,

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<sup>30</sup> Buxton, 152.

<sup>31</sup> Buxton, 161.

<sup>32</sup> Buxton, 153.

<sup>33</sup> Buxton, 190-193.

therefore, first and foremost a lived reality, and only secondarily an assent to doctrine or a commitment to an institution. And this is a fundamental insight into how to deal with a secular society for which theological language and Christian institutions are no longer valid or credible. It implies that ministry and mission to secular society *must begin with the demonstration of trinitarian communion*, the embodiment of Christ's life through the Spirit's power. Evangelism and mission, therefore, need to be practiced as a lived communion into which people are invited.

Communion with God is the only avenue toward a life lived communally. The early Christians bore witness to this communal life as Acts 2:42-47 suggests, through their believing, teaching, preaching, and healing. Their experiences of faith were not private but bloomed within the framework of Christian community.<sup>34</sup> The body of Christ, or Christian community, is crucial to flourishing in relationships with both God and others. The Christian becomes a part of the body of Christ at their conversion and joins a community called the church. The church's role is to participate in the ongoing ministry of Jesus to the world.

Participation in this ministry serves Jesus and by extension, is connected to the service of each other. The church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Only in relationship with the Trinity can the people of God grow toward God — afforded only by God's presence in the world.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, Christian leadership is an act of bearing with one another, just as God bears with God's people. Christian leadership also attends to how the people of God hear the gospel, practice prayer, gain new outlooks on the world, engage in being shaped by Scripture, and attend to the ongoing work of God.<sup>36</sup> This ministerial leadership is a participation in God's ministry by pursuing the trinitarian

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<sup>34</sup> Roderick T. Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God: A Trinitarian Tapestry of Grace, Faith, and Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Powell, 98-99.

<sup>36</sup> Powell, 102-103.

reality of union with Christ in relationship to others.<sup>37</sup> Christian leaders pay attention to God's *praxis*, reflect upon it, and partner with God's work in their particular context. Importantly, God's ministry and our reflection and practice of ministry is contextual and relational.

So, the epistemological starting point of Christian faith begins with the *givenness of God's relational presence* manifest as Christian communion. Turning toward the social imaginary of Acts, we hope to demonstrate the trinitarian God choosing to disclose the Godself to humankind in personal, relational ways. Reading the book of Acts is a reading of practical theology — engaging a narrative of God's action joined by the response of human participation and reflection.

### **God's action in Acts**

Looking for a biblical or theological framework to explore what leadership insight might emerge for contemporary contexts could go in a lot of directions. Acts may not be top of mind for many readers. Yet the dynamic life of the earliest church could yield some surprising and significant insight about leadership in a time of uncertainty and pluralism. First, the book of Acts is a set of narratives and speeches that disclose the ongoing story of the primitive or earliest church. The first community of Christians are seeking to find their way and to locate themselves within the larger culture.

As an emerging reality within first century Palestinian Judaism, the first Christians were a marginal community within a marginal community in the Graeco-Roman world. And Luke, Acts' presumed author, is fully aware of the social and political challenges that face early Christians. As Luke Timothy Johnson declares, the Acts of the Apostles is Luke's apology or defense of God's activity in the world by confidently telling an ordered story to assure Christian

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<sup>37</sup> Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, (2004) xxv.

believers.<sup>38</sup> This story, as Luke is quite aware, is quite cognizant of the political realities that face Christian communities.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Luke is not so much addressing the larger pagan world; he is writing for Christian communities. He is not particularly interested in a peaceful co-existence with Rome as is often expressed in the commentary tradition. Rather Luke is compelled by a vision that God's action is offering a new reality that is to be embodied by a distinct way of life. Thus, the emerging Christian practices within Acts are what Luke's theological knowledge looks like when it is practiced.<sup>40</sup>

Not only was the early church led by God's presence, but God's action prompted renewal for God's people. They were being invited to review their practices and rituals by taking the best of the past and adapting their practices and rituals for God's preferred future.<sup>41</sup> Their practices and way of being in the world, their expressed faith, was open for others to witness. Indeed, the term "witness" (used three dozen times) frequently is Luke's language for the church's work. Christians' practices in partnership, their witness to God's action summoned a distinction within the Christian community. Indeed, purpose of the church is to bear witness to God's way in the world by living it out and inviting others to participate.

Second, the dynamic life of the early church as it pursues the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit within these diverse contexts yields both rapid growth and significant challenges. All too often the

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<sup>38</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> As C. Kavin Rowe will note the massive stream of Acts scholarship for the past 300 years has consistently pointed out that Luke is articulating a way for Christians to live in a peaceful existence with the empire. C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2010) 3.

<sup>40</sup> Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 4-5; also note Mark Lau Branson and Alan Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Kavin Rowe, along with co-author Gregory Jones published in an online format a small but extremely useful book titled *Thriving Communities: The Pattern of Church Life Then and Now*. The authors identify six significant factors that shape the vitality and life of the earliest communities of faith. Rowe and Jones describe the renewal of practices in partnership with God's divine action in the world.

rapid growth of the early church is what comes to mind. However, Acts's narrative relates times of conflict, momentous sacrifice, and loss. The life of the early church is not a fairy tale; rather the early church faced significant persecution, misunderstanding, and chaos. All the while, the primitive church was future oriented and recognized that God was actively doing new things—even and especially in circumstances of conflict.

Third, the book of Acts describes the primary work of God in the world. Even within the name given to the fifth book of the New Testament canon — *πράξεις ἀποστολων* — the reality of action, divine action is in play. This term, *πράξεις* or praxis, refers to action — divine action. Working from a framework of practical theology that begins with close attention to God's action or activity to and through human beings, *we look for God's action* and orient ourselves to participate in that.<sup>42</sup>

Fourth, and related to the third point, the book of Acts offers insight into a trinitarian vision for ministry<sup>43</sup> that describes God's action and presence in the church and the world.<sup>44</sup> Because God acts and invites humans to participate in God's life and ministry, exploring Acts for clues to a trinitarian expression of human leadership and engagement as a deeper participation in the ministry

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<sup>42</sup> Gerben Heitink makes this connection in *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 7.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth began his theological program with the Trinity, making it quite clear that it was both central to his understanding of his subject, God, and that the Trinity was imminently practical. "The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 301.

<sup>44</sup> As a practical theologian, Andrew Purves would declare: "The doctrine of the Trinity is inherently a practical theology, for knowledge of God is knowledge of the God who acts. If God did not and does not act, we have no way of knowing anything about God, and neither, I must insist, would we know the truth concerning ourselves as other than mere material creatures trapped in the isolation of our autonomy." Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 32.



of Jesus Christ, for the Father, through the Holy Spirit.<sup>45</sup>

Through the narratives and sermons of Acts, Luke recounts a world where God is the primary actor. Ray Anderson says it this way: “All ministry is first of all God’s ministry. Every act of God, even that of creation, is the ministry of God. God’s ministry of Word and deed breaks the silence and ends all speculation about whether or not there is a God and of how deity might be disposed toward us.”<sup>46</sup>

From the beginning of the biblical witness God is doing and acting. The lively dynamic in Acts encourages the practice that Andrew Root proposes in contemporary contexts. If ministerial leadership presupposes God’s action, what does leadership look like when partnered within a trinitarian frame of a relational, present God? If God is an initiating leader, then what is the posture of human leaders within their Christian community? If God seeks relationality, then what role does relationality play in Christian leadership? To continue to prepare for such exploration we turn to wisdom from the social sciences emerging from Relational Leadership Theory.

### **Introducing Relationship Leadership Theory**

A significant shift in leadership theories has emerged in the past forty years. Moving from a focus on the individual who acts as leader and the leader’s traits, behaviors, and styles, many contemporary leadership theories focus significant attention to the

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<sup>45</sup>Following Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, on this definition. See Andrew Purves on this point: “To insist that the ministry of the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit is the primary subject matter of pastoral theology means that there is no faithful content to speaking forth and living out the gospel pastorally apart from knowing and sharing in the mission of the God who acts in and through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit precisely in and as a man for all people.” Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God’s People* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 5. See William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002) 14-15.

*social* phenomenon in dyadic and/or group structures.<sup>47</sup> Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) attends to the range of relational dynamics that surround leaders and followers.<sup>48</sup>

RLT's focus on the relationship dynamics between leaders and followers has to do with subjects of attention, care, communication, and empathy. Additionally, leaders do not function independent of followers; these are actors within a particular context that shape the practice of leadership. Leadership then is best described as a relational process.<sup>49</sup> This relational process yields insight into a theological commitment toward relationality and community.

At the outset, it needs to be acknowledged that RLT encompasses a variety of approaches. For our purposes, the constructionist view of RLT will be most insightful as it assumes that leadership is socially constructed through communication and the collective work of meaning making in the varied contexts of organizational life. This perspective is a more holistic approach because it looks at the relationships themselves and the processes that shape relationships.<sup>50</sup> Beyond the person of the leader (being) or what the leader does (doing), RLT focuses on the dynamic social reality of relationships in which people engage, decide, act, and dialogue with each other.

Within RLT, we want to focus on three qualities of relational systems by which leadership within Christian communities of faith are better able to foster greater trinitarian communion—namely the practice of empathy, the value of emotional intelligence, and meaning making.

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<sup>47</sup> Signaled in James McGregor Burns in 1978; see also the review of dyadic structures in Jayoung Kim, et. al., "State-of-the-Science Review of Leader-follower Dyads Research, in *Leadership Quarterly* 31(1) (2020): 101306.

<sup>48</sup> The rise in research and attention to RLT is noted by Alexandros Psychogios and Nikolaos Dimitriadis in "Brain-Adjusted Relational Leadership: A Social-Constructed Consciousness Approach to Leader-Follower Interaction," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (July 2021): 672217; see also Dihn, et. al. 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997; Murrell, 1997; Uhl-Bien, 2003; Dihn, 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006. Might well be the person who calls this Relational Leadership Theory.

<sup>50</sup> Guowei Jian, "From Empathic Leader to Empathic Leadership Practice: An Extension to Relational Leadership Theory," *Human Relations* 75(5) (2021): 933.

## Empathy

Guowei Jian notes a renewed interest in the social constructionist understanding of empathy.<sup>51</sup> According to Jian, empathy is a deliberate social practice with three foundational elements: generosity, care, and responsibility. First, *generosity* is displayed as an openness to others. Openness denotes a priority of recognizing the other and in doing so begins a circle of exchange to further the relationship. The second element of *care* benefits both the one caring and the one being cared for. In the relational context of empathy, to care for someone motivates people to empathize as the feeling of being empathized correlates to the feeling of being cared for. The attitude of care shifts the internal dialogue of persons from a posture of obligation to desire in terms of progressing the relationship. Finally, *responsibility* holds value for the other, and in doing so recognizes the other as needing a specific response. Therefore, each encounter invites a unique response. Leadership can be understood as a more general responsibility of care for others in one's context.

Jian proposes that empathy, grounded in generosity, care, and responsibility, begins with a mental redirection of attention toward another. Attention involves both a cognitive orientation as well as an “embodied communicative act through body posture, breathing, eye contact, and facial expression with an implicit message ‘I care’ and ‘I want to know how you feel and to understand what you say and experience.’”<sup>52</sup>

A second move of empathy occurs when attention yields curiosity with probing questions such as: What is going on here? What emotions are present? What relational dynamics might be in play that should shape my response? These types of questions keep one's focus on the relationship and the other, avoiding what Hoffman calls “egoistic drift,” when one's attention begins to shift away from an other-focused perspective and more toward one's own experience.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Jian, 936.

<sup>52</sup> Jian, 943.

<sup>53</sup> M. L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 56.

Jian describes a third move in empathy that invites the other “into the space between.”<sup>54</sup> Inviting someone into the space between entails providing a safe space of openness and appropriate vulnerability where the other can be heard and cared for. Invitations can take the form of open-ended questions, such as, “please tell me how you are feeling” or bodily cues that demonstrate alignment and affiliation.

An invitation into a common, hospitable space offers opportunities for meaningful engagement and emotional connectivity that moves transactional communication toward a relationship that is deeper, perhaps even transformational. Interestingly, hospitable spaces of meaning making often turn into moments of reciprocal engagement when both persons allow themselves to be vulnerable and “cared for.”

The fourth empathic move that completes the cycle in Jian’s proposal is connection. Connection potentially emerges from invitation; it is experienced through communication, listening well, and moving toward mutual understanding. Though the hierarchical power relations can distort communication, leadership that is exercised through empathetic connection can generate mutuality and reciprocity.

The relationship between people is best held with fluid expertise in which power and/or expertise shifts from one individual to another, specifically within one interaction. In this reciprocal mutuality, the hierarchical structure of leadership can fade as people construct relationships that are more life-giving and generative of greater connection. High levels of mutuality represent a connectedness in a relationship by which social ties are strengthened as each person’s interests and security are valued, forging a relationship that in turn comes to be “alive” or evolving constantly.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jian, 944.

<sup>55</sup> Clarke, 47-49.

## Emotional intelligence

A second dimension of RLT that we highlight is the role of emotional intelligence. Within an RLT framework, emotional processing is crucial to leadership. As Daniel Goleman would state it, “The emotional task of the leader is *primal* — that is, first in two senses: It is both the original and the most important act of leadership.”<sup>56</sup> Following the leading work of John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey, emotional intelligence reflects an individual’s ability to be aware of their own emotions as well as the emotions of others.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, emotional intelligence is highly influential in affecting the quality of relationships, along with its connection to helping people with mutual sensemaking.<sup>58</sup> Emotions affect the capacity to take risk and to engage in dialogue and problem-solving; they can foster reactivity and alienation. Similarly, emotions can trigger memory, shape moods, or affect the capacity to live or function in ambiguous or challenging situations.

Neal Ashkanasy and Peter Jordan offer a five-tiered model where emotion is in play within a community.<sup>59</sup> Taking all five levels into consideration — 1) the self, 2) between individuals, 3) in interpersonal communication, 4) among groups, and 5) within the whole community — leaders are better able to understand the personal situations of followers; it helps them adjust their actions to engage and provide support when needed.

From a follower’s perspective, emotional intelligence allows one to recognize the moods and feelings of the leader more readily to better anticipate the leader’s needs and respond to their concerns in an effective manner.<sup>60</sup> The greater the emotional intelligence within

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) 5.

<sup>57</sup> John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey, “Emotional Intelligence,” *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* (9) (1990): 185-211.

<sup>58</sup> Clarke, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Neal Ashkanasy and Peter Jordan, “A Multilevel View of Leadership and Emotion,” in *Affect and Emotion: New Directions in Management Theory Research*, ed. Ronald H. Humphrey (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008) 19-41.

<sup>60</sup> Clarke, 63-64.

a dyad or a group, the more potential there is for people to move deeper into relationships where shared trust, care, and constructive meaning making occur.

Data suggest that the development of emotional abilities is dependent on dialogical feedback with others in the community. Interactions on formal and informal levels create opportunities for reflection and dialogue to move one from an unconscious way of knowing to more conscious awareness.

Clarke offers these suggestions for developing emotional abilities of people. First, community matters; that is, people learn best in communities of intentional practice. To this end, communities and ministerial leaders intentionally cultivate the practices that develop greater emotional awareness. Second, the social structures of a community are framed for persons to share and develop an understanding of their emotions, exercising and developing specific emotional abilities within a generous and hospitable environment.

With greater emotional awareness, a greater sense of mutuality can be fostered and a greater participation in the very practices by emotional intelligence is cultivated. Finally, emotional development matures through modeling and observation. In other words, people observe others who are emotionally mature, and through largely intuitive and unconscious learning processes, participants imitate, reflect, and grow into emotional maturity.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, to develop a healthier relational system by way of emotional intelligence, leaders would do well to seek to develop the emotional intelligence of followers through contextual learning as a means of developing those abilities.<sup>62</sup>

### **Sensemaking**

The third insight that RLT brings to developing trinitarian communion in congregational leadership is in terms of sense- or meaning making: the process of making sense of the present

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<sup>61</sup> Clarke, 67.

<sup>62</sup> Clarke, 69-70.

context and to mutually find a way forward.<sup>63</sup> Sensemaking was first introduced in Karl E. Weick's work in organizational psychology. In the social-psychological realm, sensemaking is the complex set of processes by which people interpret phenomena to socially construct or enact their reality.<sup>64</sup> As Weick argued, "The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, sensemaking is the experience of being inserted into "an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of an experience in search of answers."<sup>66</sup> It is an ongoing collaborative process by which persons and groups create shared awareness and understandings so that experienced situations are meaningful.

Usually, we are only marginally aware of the ways we generate stories of plausibility to explain the way the world works and our part in it. But sensemaking rises to conscious, intentional levels when our worldview or conventions are disrupted, we are disconnected or alienated, or the system is thrown into chaos. To continue through uncertain or ambiguous circumstances, people develop plausible stories that make sense of the disruption and enables them to resume the interrupted activity and stay on the course of action or to generate different understandings that offer potential new courses of action. The interplay between the chaotic, ambiguous, or uncertain events and its interpretation is the act of sensemaking.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> We find Psychogios and Dimitriadis' definitional statement compelling: that "leadership is viewed as a never-ending meaning making story that is located in the ways that organizational members act and interact with each other, attempting to influence organizational understandings and produce outcomes." in "Brain-Adjusted Relational Leadership: A Social-Constructed Consciousness Approach to Leader-Follower Interaction." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (July 2021): 3.

<sup>64</sup> Clarke, 34.

<sup>65</sup> Karl E. Weick, "The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 3 (1993): 635.

<sup>66</sup> Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking," 410.

<sup>67</sup> Karl E. Weick, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, and David Obstfeld, "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking," *Organizational Science*, 16(4), (July-August 2005): 409.

Typical questions that aid the search for meaningfulness include: “What is happening here?” and “What does this mean?” Engagement with these questions confronts disruption, sense of ambiguity, or series of events by beginning to look for a meaningful and plausible way of understanding and addressing a challenging situation. The transition of engagement into sensemaking is the desire to bring meaning into one’s reality.

Since sensemaking comes to the fore of consciousness during chaos or disruption, attention focuses on things that are going wrong. The mental models or maps of personal and organizational life are challenged; plausibility structures are shaken. These models or maps are made through work, training, or life experience that people can recall and pull from to inform their specific situation. After noticing, a person can begin to label or categorize their experience, which leads to communication with another person, often seeking to find some degree of common ground to construct a collective narrative and worldview. Through reflection, one can select and connect various experiences from within their context to inform what is taking place in the present moment.

As experiences are connected to make sense of things, the question of “What is happening here?” transitions to “What do I do next?” Reflection and communication are central to answering this transitional question. The interactive conversation between persons draws on the resources of language, relationship, and experience to bring a situation into existence and formulate action to deal with the disruptive event. In doing so, relational interactions rooted in empathy, mutuality, and communication become vital to the process of sensemaking.

From a leadership perspective, the process of sensemaking can be directed, but cannot be controlled. Therefore, as Scott Cormode argues, the ministerial leader’s long-term goal, “is to help people discover and internalize a specific interpretive framework, one that will make it possible to see all of life from a distinctly Christian perspective.”<sup>68</sup> Each time a new situation is encountered,

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<sup>68</sup> D. Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 9.



people must figure out how to make sense of it. New events and experiences must be interpreted, and to be processed they must first be interpreted. Therefore, while secular forms of leadership aim to make meaning, Christian leaders are called to make *spiritual* sense. Cormode's definition of spiritual sense starts with understanding the longings and losses of the people entrusted to one's care. Spiritual sense is cultivated within community as leaders help to explain the spiritual meaning of people's common experience.<sup>69</sup>

The book of Acts provides many examples in which leaders were able to facilitate meaning making and help people come to interpret what was taking place and take action in the midst of great chaos and uncertainty. Acts 2 includes the iconic story wherein widely diverse people in a marketplace were amazed and perplexed by hearing in their own tongues the mighty works of God proclaimed by enthused, joyous disciples. The people asked themselves, "What does this mean?"

The story they told themselves to answer their question was that the disciples were drunk with wine. Peter responded, "These people are not drunk." They were in fact seeing and hearing the fulfillment of Jesus's promise of the Holy Spirit. Peter offers them a contrasting story to guide them toward a mental model that makes sense considering the confounding reality in their midst. Another story in Acts 10 tells of Peter and Cornelius making spiritual sense together as they decipher what God has shown them in separate visions. Both are leaders within their communities; God uses them to mutually create new meaning surrounding their visions from God and the implications for not only their lives but the various communities they lead.

Another important example concerns the new insights of the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15. The Pharisees, upon hearing of the conversion of Gentiles, demanded that they needed to be circumcised to maintain the law of Moses. Together, the assembly seeks to discern what is required of Gentiles who have committed to

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<sup>69</sup> Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020) 11.

Christ. The customary conventions of Jewish life are disrupted by the Holy Spirit's action and leaders within Jesus's community seek to help disciples make meaning of their daily lives and experiences in light of the new things God is doing among them.

Relating these biblical stories to RLT, the focus would not be placed primarily on a leader, a leader's abilities, or on leadership practices. Rather RLT reveals that leadership is the process of making meaning that emerges from conversational interaction formed through empathy and deepened in the practice of emotional intelligence. Indeed, as Cormode declares "leadership is more about making meaning than about making decisions, and making meaning is the process of creating names, interpretations and commitments to describe a situation."<sup>70</sup>

In other words, as Max DePree says, "the task of a leader is to define reality."<sup>71</sup> To name a situation, or to define reality lays the groundwork for a response, it sets people on a course of action. Christian leaders lead by providing a theological framework for the faithful action of a person experiencing something new.<sup>72</sup> Through relationships, leaders are able to foster within people the ability to internalize theological narratives to steward their interpretation of events and make sense of their reality. As a leader journeys with people, and are intentional about meaning making, they are postured with the role of giving people new vocabulary and theological frameworks to open the possibility of new ways of interpreting their situations. The ongoing relationship stewarded by a leader creates a safe place for people to begin constructing a course of action in response to their current realities.

Since the ministerial leader's aim is to point out God's presence in the world, one way to do this is by changing people's mental models. Cormode defines mental models as the categories used by people to make sense of the world, it is the image in one's head about how something should be. Often, mental models come to people through stories. Therefore, Cormode believes there are three

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<sup>70</sup> Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense*, 11-12.

<sup>71</sup> Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1987) 11.

<sup>72</sup> Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense*, 13.

ways to make spiritual sense. First, by planting language, specifically about God. When people have been exposed and introduced to language before they need it, the results will be more powerful. People need a prepared vocabulary for making spiritual sense of the things that matter in their lives. This prepared vocabulary comes through leaders planting language. Through repetition in using a prepared vocabulary, leaders can influence the people entrusted to their care by giving them new language about God.

Next, ministerial leaders attend to their work by making spiritual sense of what is happening. As previously mentioned, Weick's work shows that people engage in internal conversations that allow people to talk themselves into an interpretation of a given experience. The conversation plays out in an attempt to assign meaning to a new situation. Often, those conversations are not well-reasoned, but are stories. Since people reason by telling stories, stories are most often used to help make sense of a situation.<sup>73</sup>

To change a mental model is directly connected to changing the story people tell themselves. Finally, leaders make spiritual sense by reinventing practices. Cormode believes embodied beliefs and enacted stories are Christian practices. Living out the stories people have heard through practice is a form of imitation. As practices are enacted, they become ritualized stories that are a means of acting out faith in narrative pathways. Practices help to form identity, and reinforce narratives that can inform experiences.<sup>74</sup>

For leaders, especially Christian leaders, the task is to make spiritual sense of the lives entrusted to their care. This spiritual sense making is providing people with categories through doctrines and stories, which are needed to help people narrative their lives. The new narration in a people's lives gives them new ways of seeing the world and acting within the world.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 74-75.

<sup>75</sup> Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 32.

## Leadership in a secular age

What learning emerges out of the matrix of the issues raised in this essay? How can the two identified concerns of secularity — lack of God’s presence and distrust of other people — inform a theologically derived approach to ministerial leadership?

Modernist secularity challenges religious communities with radical doubt and distrust of institutions. Communities of faith can faithfully respond by becoming more vividly the ever-expanding embodiment of God’s trinitarian action in the world. Ministerial leadership needs to be reimaged in this respect, such that communal relationality defines its primary nature and purpose. Through a robust trinitarian understanding of relationality and God’s presence and action as reflected in Luke’s vision of early Christianity in the book of Acts, ministers find the necessary theological resources for ministerial leadership. Luke offers Acts a particular way of reflecting on reality; he creates a social imaginary, a way of being in the world.<sup>76</sup> To give practical shape to such ministerial leadership, RLT offers ministers specific ways of being through seeing leadership as a dynamic and mutual process of being in relationship. Likewise, the practice of empathy, the active engagement of emotional intelligence theory, and the work of sensemaking all serve the minister as she bears witness to God’s action and presence while living in the dynamic and life-giving reality of relationality with those she leads.

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<sup>76</sup> Following the philosopher Charles Taylor, Carson Reed explores this in “Practical Theology in Diverse Ethnic Community: Matthew’s Gospel of Model of Ministry” *Restoration Quarterly* 60(3) (2018): 163-70.

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**BOOK REVIEW*****THE PURPOSE GAP: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES OF COLOR TO FIND MEANING AND THRIVE***

By: PATRICK B. REYES

Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corp., 2021

238 pp. paperback.

ISBN 978-0-664-26670-7

Patrick Reyes, senior director of Learning Design at the Forum for Theological Exploration, identifies himself as a Chicano Christian thinker and writer, involved with minoritized communities to enable them to overcome cultural disadvantages and to close what he calls the “purpose gap” to live lives of purpose and meaning. This formal description receives depth through autobiographical accounts in this book that describe in detail Reyes’s origins and the struggles that he, his family, and his people face to survive in a setting that is designed to keep them marginalized: a cultural context of White dominance that steals the purposes and lives of Black and Brown people. He aims to empower his Chicano and Latinx people to break through the bonds of racism, disadvantage and colonialism, not by learning to adapt to and cross over to the colonial structures of White power as he himself had to do in his doctoral work, but by designing life-sustaining structures with adequate resources on their own terms, fitting their own cultural contexts.

The book opens with a fascinating critique of self-help books, which work fine for children of privilege (“focus on your dreams, develop your talents, work hard, achieve success”), but never for Black or Brown people. Resources are unequally stacked to favor White children, and most institutional structures protect that privilege, while his own people are at risk even when jogging in a White neighborhood or when relating to the police. Even the stories of typical US heroes are very White in their orientation,

while stories of his own people from Mexican or Latinx descent are full of pain. Their native language was not Spanish (forced upon them by their conquerors), their culture and tradition go unseen. They are continually canceled, always fighting to be heard, and only gaining access to resources when adopting to the majority White culture. This defines the purpose gap: the lack of opportunities and resources for some peoples to achieve their dreams of a fulfilling and meaningful life. Most social and economic systems, sustained by “the Powers,” are intent on maintaining that gap. Reyes’s aim is to find new ways of designing purpose, not based on dominant cultural narratives where minorities only belong if they cross over but based on their own distinct cultural narratives and ideals of belonging. This section closes with a meditation exercise to envision a person who speaks words of love, an exercise the author has done with many individuals and groups. It is the basis for closing the purpose gap: knowing that you are loved!

So how does Reyes propose to close the purpose gap? A first step is to recognize the power and vocation of institutions and organizations. Turning the other cheek, read through Walter Wink’s enactment, subverts institutional power and offers a basis for redefining organizational vocation, since it forces the powers to reflection on for which people it will create opportunities. This is vital for “low opportunity neighborhoods,” where dedicated institutions are direly needed, in contrast to “high opportunity neighborhoods” that are often abundantly serviced.

A second step is to build constellations of people rather than focusing on single superstars. A strategy retreat with deans at Yosemite illustrates that we are wowed not by the sun (too bright, burns one’s eyes) but by stars in their multitudes and by nature in its pristine manifestation. Similarly, famous sport stars shine not merely through dedicated focus and long practice, but always in community. Closing the purpose gap means focusing on thriving communities instead of on lone-ranger heroes.

Third, social systems are so entrenched that only dedicated networks of communities and institutions will be able to create social structures that can bridge the purpose gap. It takes “people work” to sustain such networks and leverage them for collective

liberation. Based on a particular reading of the story of Jesus healing the paralytic, Reyes urges his readers to carry their own corner if we want to be successful in bridging the gap.

My reading of Reyes's book questions my own social location. I am White, male, highly educated and a tenured professor of practical theology in Europe. I am implicated in the racism and colonialism that the author and his people have suffered. Have *I* stolen the future of his children and his people?

Reyes's proposal also questions my theological location. How do his people experience divine redemption through the cross and resurrection? What would the abundant life that Christ promises look like for his communities that often struggle simply for survival? The author's proposal to rehabilitate the medium of Endor (162) to help his people recover their cultural identity and religious roots feels odd, but evidently the medium was marginalized in ways that Reyes interprets as like the marginalization of his people. A theological view from the margins offers different perspectives from which I have much to learn, lest my own Christianity implicitly and unintentionally marginalizes people who are my brothers and sisters in Christ.

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**BOOK REVIEW*****FREEING CONGREGATIONAL MISSION: A PRACTICAL VISION FOR COMPANIONSHIP, CULTURAL HUMILITY, AND CO-DEVELOPMENT***

BY: B. HUNTER FARRELL WITH S. BALAJIEDLANG KHYLLEP

Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2022

264 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-5140-0068-7

Hunter Farrell, former director of World Mission for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and present director of the World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, along with Bala Khyllep, associate director of the WMI have produced a superb resource for congregational mission leaders. For those of us teaching leadership, this book embodies practical theology at its best, doing the theological work of reflecting on the church's practice in deep and helpful ways. For those of us resourcing congregational leaders, this can be a guide to helping congregations from multiple backgrounds engage in God's mission in more reflective ways. Intentionally writing for "evangelical, Catholic, or mainline Protestant" (3) congregations, and utilizing interviews, experience, and research from diverse perspectives, Farrell and Khyllep seek to help Christian congregations "strengthen the faithfulness and effectiveness of your congregation's participation in God's mission" (6). They make a case the present major activities — short-term mission trips, support of orphanages, child sponsorship programs, and prepared meal-packaging programs — are "mission strategies made in our own image" (7). They understand mission theologically, and they define it as "joining God in the spreading circle of relationships transformed by God's unconditional love and forgiveness" (7). Based on this, they offer "three stones" on which to build faithful mission activities — a theology of companionship, cultural humility, and empowering co-development. Based on this, they divide their book into two sections that engage these "three



stones” (15). Section One offers a chapter on each one, unpacking what they mean. Section Two connects these concepts to the mission practices they wish to see reformed. Along the way, they offer seven practical exercises for congregations to use for evaluation and preparation. Each chapter also has reflections questions for use in congregational study.

In their first section, Farrell and Khylllep give an overview of mission history. They acknowledge the good that came from this work and ask the question, “Is our privilege blinding us from seeing those who the system exploits as God sees them” (31)? They believe that we can “untangle the racist colonial script we inherited about God’s mission” or “continue to act out of a position of power and an implicit sense of entitlement” (43). They tell this story in a careful way, acknowledging that this can be challenging for congregations who have only heard stories of missionary sacrifice (which they also acknowledge as true.”From this critique of mission practice, they develop a theology of companionship, by which they mean “mutual accompaniment, shared vulnerability, centerness on the sending God, and mission from the margins” (43). This theological piece will be very helpful to congregations who have not done much reflection on why they do what they do. It will also be challenging to those whose sense of mission is only about personal conversion or those who sense of mission is only about social improvement. Farrell and Khylllep challenge reductionisms that collapse the gospel into theological affirmations or activism. Tied to this theology of companionship is a cultural humility that is “not a lower view of oneself, just a more accurate one” (101). Finally, there is a commitment to co-development, which seeks to understand working with others in mission “stripped of the paternalistic assumptions of “*I develop them*” (116, italics in original). This theological foundation seeks to do mission in ways that respect others, listens for God’s actions, and honors agency of those already present in a community.

In the second section Farrell and Khylllep work with these three “stones” through the practical issues of short-term missions (STMs), orphanages, child sponsorship, and prepared meal-packaging programs. They provide history and context, giving

the positives and negatives of each of these practices. With STMs, they acknowledge in the last fifty years they are “by far the biggest and most profound way American congregations participate in God’s mission” (144). While there are significant criticisms of STMs, they are unlikely to go away, and Farrell and Khylllep propose ways that they can become a catalyst for transformation of American congregations and those visits. These include long term partnerships, action/reflection as part of the experience, and viewing STMs as part of a spiritual pilgrimage. This kind of reflection with suggestions is repeated with the other practices, except for orphanages, which rarely care of vulnerable children well and “raise serious questions for our theology of mission” (221). Along the way, Farrell and Khylllep seek to capture the best of the mission impulse — love for God, care for children and vulnerable, a desire to help the world — and connect it to practices that will accomplish these ends in a theologically mature way. Their desire is to help American congregations participate in God’s mission all over the world in noncolonialist ways that honor Jesus’ self-emptying ministry. They provide solid analysis and years of experience as they describe what to do and give tools to accomplish this.

Overall, I would gladly give this book to pastors who are working with congregations on thinking through their mission practices. For some congregations, particularly those who have sponsored a child for years and years or simply packed kids off to a mission trip through an agency, there would need to be careful work to help them unpack these concepts and not be overwhelmed with shame and its often-accompanied partner — anger. In the seminary classroom, I would commend this book as an excellent example of practical theology. It combines historical accuracy with theological sensitivity to make clear plans.

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**BOOK REVIEW*****LEADING FAITHFUL INNOVATION: FOLLOWING GOD INTO A HOPEFUL FUTURE***

BY: DWIGHT ZSCHEILE, MICHAEL BINDER, TESSA PINKSTAFF

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023

162 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-5064-8876-9

Dwight Zscheile, Michael Binder, and Tessa Pinkstaff, all of Luther Seminary and the Faith+Lead Institute, have gifted us with a small book on experimentation, leadership, and faith-filled seeking in a rapidly changing world. While those who have been around the “adaptive change in the church” conversation for a while will not find much new conceptually here, they will find careful and theoretically astute but thinking without jargon. Those who are new to thinking about change in the church will receive an exceptionally clear guide to processes to engage, both personally and congregationally. Everyone will find acknowledgment of the COVID-19 pandemic, which helps make the book timely and not feel dated. These writers also are clear about the presence and action of the Holy Spirit as the “primary leader of the church, and role of human leaders is to listen to and be led by God” (11). As a Reformed Christian, I was struck by my own tradition’s emphasis on the providence of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ. For those of us not from the Lutheran tradition, I think we will be helped by experiencing the gaps exposed in our own thinking as we sense these gaps. For those more clearly from a Lutheran tradition, this will fit well into their own work.

The writers use Acts 16, with the story of Paul and his companions’ encounter with Lydia in Philippi, as a narrative frame for their theory and practice. The writers deftly weave in and out of the story in each chapter to make connections between scripture, congregational vitality, and the work of God. They begin

with a careful definition of faithful innovation, stating that it is the “process of learning new ways to embody Christian identity and purpose in a changing cultural context” (4). They want to keep the focus on God’s actions and not just congregational survival, and they are clear that innovation is not about a “late-modern Silicon Valley culture of uninhibited disruption of institutions and cultural norms through technology” (13). Instead, innovation is “the adoption of a new practice in a community” (14). This simple definition gives clear focus to the writers’ work. They define leadership as a “process of relational influence” (15), which they draw from Peter Northouse and could lead to interesting class conversation about leadership, its multiple definitions, and how to exercise specifically Christian leadership. Zscheile, Binder, and Pinkstaff begin their content presentation with some cultural framing. Rather than just a list of changes in culture, they engage Ted Smith’s concept of early American history being an “Age of Association” (23). They contrast this with Charles Taylor’s concept of post-1960 America becoming an “Age of Authenticity” (24). This significant shift becomes an important pivoting point for congregational leadership and innovation. This material, combined with Acts 16, is the theoretical framework that they present. For those of us teaching, there is valuable material here for reflection and classroom discussion.

After helping their readers think about the difference the gospel makes in our lives, Zscheile, Binder, and Pinkstaff move to the process “heart” of the book. They present three chapters where we learn how to listen (Chapter 2), act (Chapter 3), and share (Chapter 4). When we listen properly, “the conversation shifts from talking about institutional survival to learning how to join in the work God is doing in the world” (40). They present listening practices of Dwelling with the Word, Spiritual Journey Conversations, and Prayer Walks. These practices are carefully explained and each one has the potential to stretch people beyond typical comfort zones of privatized faith and life. Acting is around action learning experiments that are “a planned set of actions that help us behave our way into

new thinking so that we learn how to address the challenges we are facing” (64). These experiments are geared toward changing the lives of those who are involved. Thus, they are not instrumental in their function (designed to use others). The authors are careful not to overpromise that going through this kind of process will transform a congregation according to members initial expectations. Instead, the authors continually point to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of participants into more faithful, curious, and open people. Finally, congregational members share what they have learned with others, and how they have involved a widening circle of the congregation. This is reflection practice because the authors “believe that the public sharing of congregational stories is one significant way God intends for people to be welcomed into God’s kingdom in the twenty-first century” (100). This process of listening to God/community/one another, then acting in trusting/risky/experimental ways, and then sharing how they have seen God at work is a primary way to engage in figuring out to faithfully innovate in a very different cultural context.

Explaining how this process will affect a congregation, the authors make a case of curiosity and wonder and then present a case for a “mixed ecology” (117) of forms of Christian community. Particularly for those who have only experienced a traditional congregation, this could be a section that broadens their sense of how God works in Christian community. Finally, the authors engage the leader in leading faithful innovation. Acknowledging that this can be hard and discouraging work, they point to the need for leaders to be connected to the Source of our own faith. For them, “some of the core work of leaders is getting back in touch with who God is” (131). Their attention to congregational dynamics and leader spiritual health is a demonstration of the practical experience of these authors. This is not theory abstracted from reality — it is a process that has been tempered and formed by actual engagement with real congregations and real people.

This book benefits from its size and focus. It would be great to give to a group of pastors who want to work together and support

one another as they engage their congregations in working toward a healthier future. In a classroom, this book would be great to help students make connections between theories they are learning and ministry engagement. It is a helpful and timely addition to how we help congregations engage in a changed and changing world.

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**BOOK REVIEW*****THE LIMINAL LOOP: ASTONISHING STORIES OF DISCOVERY AND HOPE***

By: Timothy Carson, ED. Cambridge, United Kingdom:

Lutterworth Press 2022

184 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-0-7188-9583-9

Timothy Carson, pastor and curator of The Liminality Project and co-founder of Guild for Engaged Liminality and The Liminality Press, invites us to consider the arena of liminality in the midst of global crises in ecology, mental and physical health, war, social inequity and dislocation, and spirituality, the arts, and more. In his anthology of twelve essays found in *The Liminal Loop*, Carson offers what he calls liminal guides to accompany us through the in-between spaces in this moment of history. I offer no critique of the book because I am a contributing author and wish to pose no conflict of interest, but I do celebrate the depth and variety of wise contributors to this collection and to the growing field of liminality studies. Carson opens the collection with Suzan Franck by describing the universal arc of passage, known as a path of initiation: old world through threshold to liminal womb to rebirth, emerging in a new world. (9) This archetypal journey is the pathway of change with opportunity for transformation in the liminal womb-moving-to-rebirth.

Subsequent writers throughout the book focus on a variety of ways to transverse disparate liminal spaces. I offer the second essay as an examination of social and behavioral systems, where choices about freedom and certainty are at odds with each other when immersed in the arc of passage. Intention and choice about how we move forward can determine whether we remain “stuck” or turn our faces toward a transformative new world. The third piece, by Jonathan Best, speaks to the liminal “event,” when an occurrence, often unexpected, shifts us into the arc. Again, opportunity presents

itself as invitation to make meaning of sacred or profound moments during the journey. Fourth, Mary Lane Potter invites us to enact meaning through ritual, which she describes as an intentional sequence of body motions, creating a body-mind where words are not enough. Her Jewish tradition conveys ritual as a way to fuse the tension of the lived world and the imagined world—an isthmus, liminal space, that simultaneously divides and brings together two things. (47)

Tim Carson himself follows with discussion about extreme liminalities. The universal liminality, the global pandemic, thrust the world into drastic change. However, COVID-19 is not the only shock to the social and physical system of our world; anything violent and harm-causing escalates the sense of being untethered. Carson claims that liminal space is anti-structure but holding to values of the past and improvising along the journey helps make meaning amid drastic events.

Next, James Huxley introduces seven practices for a liminal age, with reference to Otto Scharmer's Theory U as one overlay of the archetypal arc. Huxley claims that we are at the bottom of the "U," where waiting and discernment occur, deliberately slowing us down. Huxley's practices for this space include facing reality, trusting amid uncertainty, holding identity lightly and fluidly (rather than being stuck in ego), changing relationship with suffering, holding on to deep values, protecting what is sacred (silence, spiritual practice, nature), and keeping the fire of vision alive.

The seventh essay, authored by Phil Allen, speaks to Blackness, notably the "Black experience," with reference to the United States. The Black body is in-between, measured against White bodies. Allen's poetry calls out living in the space between "African" and "American" (African American) as both deeply wounding, filled with lament, and at the same time, highly creative, improvisational, and innovative. He calls this inhabited space Unknowndland.

Gabrielle Malfetti analyzes education abroad, immersing in different cultures as a liminoid state (a chosen transitional moment in time), with particular attention to travel in India. Students become aware of their cultural and racial biases, are bombarded



with differences in rituals, foods, communications, and often move through the archetypal arc as a rite of passage—from little awareness of US privilege through a (literal) dislocation and disorientation, to find their feet again with the inklings of new identities and values.

J.D. Bowers, writing of the village of Kormakitis in Cyprus, a Maronite-based community that has been caught in the conflict between Greek and Turkish communities around it, speaks of unending liminality. The Green Line in Cyprus “divides south from north and separates hundreds of thousands of Greeks, Turks, Maronites, Armenians, and Latins from their ancestral villages and homes.” (119) Genocides and atrocities have led to a liminal permanency of victims and survivors; such permanency in the end precludes journey through liminality, and instead becomes a new structural, sometimes hopeless and stuck reality.

“Pathways to Healing,” coauthored by Elizabeth Coombes and Kate Weir, addresses therapeutic practices including music therapy for children and the importance of play. Music and play are not accompanied by strict rules and allow for exploratory spaces in which to grow. The importance of the “liminal container” for experimentation and either succeeding or failing *within safe space* ultimately provides children the opportunity to be and accept themselves fully.

The eleventh topic addresses radical uncertainty. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, a Sufi teacher, speaks of the dying days of our era, where we have adopted the fallacy of unending economic growth. Social collapse based on unsustainable growth and climate crisis is the very moment between death and rebirth. Vaughn-Lee encourages us to live into radical uncertainty; the patterns of change might end up being life-giving, holding in tension grief and deep, eons-old loving wisdom while waiting for the seeds of the future to sprout.

In the final essay, Júlia Coelho, Louise Fago-Ruskin, Mary Farrell, Jenny McGee, and Katie Potapoff offer perspectives on the liminality of creating art. Painting, sculpture, photography, film, and music all create “knowing” beyond cognitive analysis. In other words, artists create a new kind of understanding of space, time, object, experience — with the hope that art is indeed revelatory.

Each author describes her work and her hope for what the work brings to humanity.

Carson draws together the overarching theme of liminality in his conclusion, offering a liminal lens through which we make meaning of dangers and possibilities through difficult and enlightening transitional times. My hope is that religious organizations take note.

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