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**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE JRL AUTUMN
2024 ISSUE: AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS
LEADERSHIP MODELS**
ALICIA J. GRANHOLM

Many religious communities and institutions in the U.S. assume a clergy-centric model of leadership, where clergy are religious professionals and experts, lay leaders “run the church,” and ministry is focused on what the church does. Presently, in many religious communities and institutions where this has been the predominant model, participation in weekly services by congregants has declined, financial support for congregations and judicatories has decreased, and enrollment in theological degree programs has dropped significantly. These shifts have implications for theological institutions, congregations, and religious leaders and call for exploration, understanding, and reflection.

For clergy, these changes may create an existential identity crisis. As they see declining numbers of members, worshippers, and budgets, they might wonder, “Who am I?” when what they were trained and prepared for no longer exists. For congregation members still engaged, this often means feelings of confusion, dread, anxiety, and heartache about their church dying and, with it, all the hopes and dreams of the congregation for themselves and their community. For theological institutions, faculty, and educators, where professional degree programs have been the institution’s backbone, this shift can feel destabilizing, uneasy, and challenging, to say the least.

The “how” of theological education, training, and equipping is changing, but the “why” and the call of religious leaders remains the same. Having spent the better part of two decades visiting, working with, and learning from church leaders and communities of faith around the globe, I see examples of congregations and

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institutions engaging different religious leadership models and methods for theological and leadership equipping that elicit a sense of belonging, ownership, and vibrant living faith within their communities.

How might the decrease in congregations with full-time clergy provide new opportunities for communities to reimagine religious leadership and leadership development? What implications do these changes have on theological education and leadership formation? These are some of the questions that inspired the theme of the 2024 Academy of Religious Leadership Annual Conference — “Exploring Different Religious Leadership Models” — and have informed this edition of the *Journal of Religious Leadership*.

The articles in this edition of the *JRL* propose various ways to approach religious leadership today. The following pages invite you to explore different forms of religious leadership structures, processes, and development within current realities while imagining possibilities for moving forward by exploring theological, leadership, and change theories that can inform our structures anew.

The authors consider where and how different models of religious leadership and development are practiced, the values these different structures and processes offer to individuals, institutions, and society, and the challenges they might create for theological institutions, congregations, and religious leaders.

Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi draws upon postcolonial and decolonial frameworks derived from communally based realities and philosophical arguments that negate arguments of the self-realized human being to propose an understanding of religious leaders that can only be fully realized within a community. **Clara King** engages a sociological and systemic lens to explore the durability of clericalism as the pattern of normative expectations that structure the relationships between clergy and laity, as demonstrated by clericalism being repatterned in new models of ministry. **Kara Markell** draws on Celtic tradition and practices from ecological sciences as a new framework for creating healthy and sustainable communities. **Emily A. Dykman** examines the historical shift in ecclesiology as expressed in documents from the Second Vatican

Council, emphasizing the model of the church as the people of God and the church as communion as a reimaged inclusive and shared model of religious leadership.

- If questions reveal our values, in the following pages, the authors will invite you to consider:
- How do we understand ourselves, particularly in a community? What are leaders without community? What do reciprocity and genuine collaboration mean for leaders today?
- How do we cultivate learning leadership? How does the work of leading learners shift when God is at the center, when we recognize the agency of one another, especially as we recognize that congregants are disciples, and disciples are, by definition, learners?
- If a one-size-fits-all religious leadership model no longer works, what might particularized and contextualized leadership look like? How does mutual discernment play out today? How might the muscles of communal discernment of God's activity be strengthened in our faith communities?
- What rhythms orient our communities? Are they healthy and sustainable rhythms? Are they serving us well?
- Which expectations serve our faith communities well? Which expectations do not? Where does accountability exist?
- What is the pace of sustainable cultural change in our faith communities? How do expectations, assumptions, and discernment influence culture change?

In keeping with the conference theme of exploration, I invite you to explore the different religious leadership models presented in the following pages and reflect on how they might inform your context of religious leadership practice and development today. What stands out to you? What might God be inviting you to follow up on? What questions do you have?

PULLING THE INDIVIDUALISM THREAD: EXAMINING POWER, AUTHORITY, AND DECOLONIALITY IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP¹
 KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI

Abstract

This essay pulls the thread of individualism from the fabrics of religious leadership, arguing that the notion of the religious leader as an individual, fixed self constitutes a thread in the “garment of destiny” that must be examined in light of crumbling eurodominant denominational systems. Religious leaders are understood to be interrelated, dynamic people whose roles, actions, and relationships are dependent upon—and only fully actualized within—community. An example of such community-localized, collaborative leadership is the copastorate of Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session and Rev. Dr. Kamilah Hall Sharp of The Gathering: A Womanist Church based in Dallas, Texas.

Introduction

“Exploring Different Religious Leadership Models,” the theme of the 2024 Academy of Religious Leadership Conference, provided an opportunity to question prevailing ways of leadership. Such ways include an expansive reimagining of “models” beyond the mere structure of leadership to examining the very ontologies and epistemologies that form modern colonial assumptions (or paradigms) about leadership. In the context of colonial and imperial histories within Christianity, the “model” of the sovereign as a locus of individual political or religious identity—as set apart and set above—is woven into the fabric of religious leaderships. Time and

¹ This article is adapted from “Individualism,” a chapter from my book *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), reprinted with permission.

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time again, *power over* has been wielded by individual leaders at the top with positional authority to make decisions that affect the lives of others, often with destructive and life-denying ends. While religious leaders and institutions hardly envision such harsh terms applying to their own thinking and being today, threads from the past carry forward into present praxes in subtle yet enduring ways.

Individualism in and of itself is not an inherently colonial notion, and it holds the potential for positive change when placed into modern/colonial contexts of individualism and dominant norms of practice. Here, we aim to unravel the notion of the religious leader as an individual, fixed self, and pave the way for a more community-oriented and collaborative approach to religious leadership.

Individualism and the Self

The notion of individualism has been constructed over the course of modern Western history into some key depictions. Zubin Meer outlines four important conceptions in this regard: economically, “a dynamic capitalist economic rationality—utilitarian, competitive, and profit-maximizing”; religiously, “a Protestant spirituality scornful of sensuous iconicity and communal sociability of saints, relics, pilgrimages, and traditional church hierarchy”; politically, “the modern liberal sense of politico-juridical right and entitlement”; and philosophically, “a creative rationalism, veridical empiricism, and intimate subjectivity.”² Individualism, as experienced and understood in the present, intertwines each of these definitions so that the philosophical manifests as the political, the political manifests as the religious, and the religious manifests as the economic—along with other matrices of conception—rendering foundations unrecognizable when actualized by religious

² Zubin Meer, “Introduction: Individualism Revisited,” in *Individualism: The Cultural Logic of Modernity*, ed. Zubin Meer (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

leaders.³ Suffice it to say, individualism is a complex construction so threaded with modern/colonial notions of the self as conceived in the West that alternative ontologies are not identifiable, are easily misunderstood, or are even othered as fictitious.

As such, the United States is a highly individualistic culture, made even more so in the last century. Sociologist Robert N. Bellah and others, in their seminal work *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, detail the nature and shape of this notion in US culture as both “utilitarian”—asserting that collective action is only necessary to protect self-interests—and “expressive,” which is a more romantic conception of the individual as special and, in religious terms, having a personal connection with God. They detail the pervasiveness of individualism as a foundational value in Western life and as “the first language in which Americans tend to think about their lives, valu[ing] independence and self-reliance above all else.”⁴ This is coupled with rewarding individual success earned through competition with (or over) others.

Bellah and his coauthors reveal the connections between Christianity and individualism in both biblical and theological traditions. Arguing that the Bible asserts and acknowledges the inherent dignity and value of individuals, they posit that the biblical texts maintain a social dimension to individualism that redeems it from the grasp of “radical individualism” or individuality (self-regard over and above the community). Nonetheless, they do not discount the significant impact that the Protestant work ethic as a way to prove one’s worth—and discount others as morally or spiritually unworthy (a significant component of Christian colonial actions over the centuries)—has had on present proliferations of

³ Interestingly, according to Meer, “The word individualism first occurs in 1820, in the wake of the reactionary backlash against Enlightenment principles of the French Revolution. Coined by that doyen of Continental conservatism, Joseph de Maistre, it came into the world dead-set against all the radiant promise that this totemic word now holds. Anxious to ensure the continued stability of the restored Bourbon monarchy of 1815, French Catholic conservatives imbued the word with a formidable polemical charge, at once counter-Revolutionary, authoritarian, and theocratic.” “Introduction: Individualism Revisited.”

⁴ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) viii.

individualism.⁵

This religiously infused individualism extends to the very conceptualizations of faith. One of the most well-known sections in Bellah and colleagues' book on the inextricable interweavings between individualism and religion is exemplified in the narrative of Sheila, a young nurse who describes her faith as Sheilaism. She says, "I am not a religious fanatic. ...I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."⁶ This is part of a now common trend in religious life to conceive of one's faith as private and free of institutional or religious constraints.

Bellah summarized this issue in a 1986 lecture: "Just the notion that religious belief ought to be a purely internal thing, and then you go to the church or synagogue of your choice, shows how deeply ingrained a kind of religious privatism is, which turns the church into something like the Kiwanis Club or some other kind of voluntary association that you go to or not if you feel comfortable with it—but which has no organic claim upon you."⁷

In my day-to-day work with students around vocational discernment, I encounter many who say that they don't fit in any denominational or religious "boxes" and, instead, practice an eclectic range of spiritual practices and hold worldviews from various religious traditions or no traditions at all—in other words, a kind of "[insert name here]ism." What I find fascinating in these interactions, however, is a lack of recognition of the religious institutions, communities, and traditions that *have* influenced their views and how they generally engage the world. This is in addition to the fact that such a cultivation of "[insert name here]ism" relies on modern/colonial ontologies that assure students with unexamined power and privilege that such individual, yet extractive, beliefs and practices are their *right*.

⁵ Bellah et al., ix–x.

⁶ Bellah et al., 221.

⁷ Robert N. Bellah, "Habits of the Heart: Implications for Religion," St. Mark's Catholic Church, Isla Vista, CA, February 21, 1986, http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm.

In discussing contextual education site options with students over the years, I also have encountered a few seminarians who have expressed to me something along the lines of, “I don’t want to be an intern at a religiously affiliated organization. My own spirituality is private and personal, and I don’t want it to mix with my professional work.” This is surprising not only because these students enrolled at a theological school and are obtaining professional (nonacademic) theological degrees, but also because there are deeper beliefs at play that one can wholly separate the personal/private from the vocational/public and that one’s faith is a matter relegated *only* to the individual and the private (and thus devoid of continual interweavings with religious symbols, epistemologies, theologies, communities, and so on).

Even within religious institutions, what such worldviews have led to is a practice of collectivism rather than a practice of community. Theologian Boyung Lee observes that within US white mainline Protestant congregations’ small groups function more like “group therapy” than the more communal kinds of groups found within Korean or Tongan congregations and consequently are “lacking solidarity and kinship-like relationships.”⁸ As an example, Lee found that white small groups she interviewed did not sacrifice their time, resources, or energies to help one another on a regular basis. Conversely, Korean and Tongan small groups regularly supported one another with childcare, food, and other resources as needed. She elaborates, “The notion of community in mainline small groups is more like a gathering of individuals as reciprocal relationships. These groups are made up of individuals who share similar needs and interests. However, if they find the group burdensome or unfulfilling, they frequently abandon it.”⁹

The point is clear that individualism has laid a particular kind of claim on religious life in the present age. However, it is worth repeating that this is a totalizing phenomenon pervading all of life
i

⁸ Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013) 5.

⁹ Lee, 5.

n eurowesternized North America, consistent with the aims of our modern/colonial, capitalist/consumerist society. Such pervasiveness is an attribute of colonialism itself, recognizable as the desire to invade and then shape reality to become that of the colonizer's, thus eradicating all other realities. Individualism as a tool of separation, creating distance between people and communities, has been wielded as a weapon for centuries. It shapes social connections in daily life; yet it is even more striking to notice the ways in which such elements shape religion, spirituality, and our understandings and practices of them.

The insidious nature of individualism leads us to a deeper examination of conceptions of the self that undergird this phenomenon. While biblical and ancient Greek philosophical ideas provide the basis for eurowestern understandings of the self—as well as early church fathers and theologians alike—ideas of the self (and its nature) affecting our current reality reached a pinnacle in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, otherwise known as the early modern or “Enlightenment” period of Western philosophy.

René Descartes (1596–1650) argued for the existence of our selves as thinking things; as his most famous phrase reminds us, “I think, therefore I am.”¹⁰ In other words, if individuals have the ability to reason abstractly, then this explains the certainty of our existence as selves. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) extends this notion into the realm of the transcendental, describing the self as a *noumenon* existing outside space and time. Kant elaborates on this phenomenological perspective by positing that if one believes oneself to be a single, unitary subject that takes in all experiences and has thoughts, then one must be so because one *appears* to be a self. In other words, one cannot *think* that one's experience is unified unless it truly *is* the case. According to philosopher Jay L. Garfield, “Contemporary phenomenologists often refer to this as the *for-me-ness* of experience, a kind of pre-reflective, unarticulated,

¹⁰ John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2012) AT VI 32: CSM I 127.

implicit, or primordial taking of all outer and inner awareness as *mine* that constitutes a single field of subjectivity.”¹¹

The transcendental argument also possesses religious and moral nuances, proffering that the self is distinct from both body and mind, similar to what theologians over time have argued in terms of the existence of the soul as the fixed entity that resides within, yet apart from, the self. Later on, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) broadened transcendental logic by drawing on the metaphor of the difference between the eye as self and our visual field as the world around us, which “invited us to see the self as *outside* of the world, and as existing independently of it, but as making it known.”¹² Stated plainly, the self becomes understood as a fixed entity that *creates the world itself*.

The colonial tone of these articulations is revealed through, first, the centrality of the individual eurowestern *man* as the primary interrogator and verifier (i.e., expert authority) of his own existence as a separate, yet unified entity apart from the world, solidifying a binary of inside/outside; and, second, as an entity that actually creates the world through his own perspective (i.e., line of sight/surveillance).¹³ Reality then becomes mitigated through the vision of the beholder, most often and most likely the ones who maintain privilege, power, authority, and epistemic and ontological supremacies. Colonialism has relied on and benefited from this modern understanding of the self in order to take/maintain control and bring subaltern peoples into its line of vision through destruction and forced assimilation, however overt or subtle such actions may be.

Such a pervasive ontology extends more recently into prevailing Western psychological theories that continue to elevate the independent notion of the self, thus reinforcing the self as enactor/creator/set above. As noted by Boyung Lee, several key theories

¹¹ Jay L. Garfield, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022) 53.

¹² Garfield, 29.

¹³ I recognize the ableist conceptions that arise from drawing on Wittgenstein’s metaphor. Nonetheless, it proves the point of the modern/colonial worldview’s eschewing of difference beyond the white, able-bodied male archetype.

such as psychoanalytic, object-relations, cognitive-behavioral, and ego-identity theories, among others, are grounded in eurowestern notions of individualism. She states, “Although the autonomous individualistic view of the person is a description of the person imagined solely by one particular constituency (namely, it is that of white, middle-class, college-educated males), it has become the universal understanding of the person.”¹⁴ In other words, unless one’s background and identity align with modern psychology’s understanding of the self as constructed by eurowestern measures, one has the potential to be considered inferior (and therefore abnormal) or dismissed altogether.

Above and beyond these constructions, several have proposed the development of an explicitly *imperial self* as a critical facet of the modern/colonial project. Nigel Joseph offers a postcolonial perspective in review of John Locke’s (1632–1704) construction of the “disciplined self.” Joseph makes this assertion:

Theories of selfhood, viewed from the perspective of those who have been profoundly affected by empire and its aftermath, tend to be associated with the privileges and power of empire itself. This is not to say that postcolonial subjects lack selves; however, there is a tacit assumption that the theorizing of selfhood is best left to those who belong unequivocally to associations of selves, or society, rather than to a community. Such selfhood may appear profoundly ambivalent to the *colonized*: it is simultaneously menacing (detached from community viewed as nurturing) and seductive (detached from that same community viewed as constricting). More importantly, ambivalence is generated by the uneasy sense that such selfhood has been disproportionately empowering for the *colonizer*: its solidity seems to have been secured at the cost of the victims of empire. For the colonized to embrace such selfhood may feel like betrayal.¹⁵

¹⁴ Lee, *Transforming Congregations*, 11.

¹⁵ Nigel Joseph, “Locke’s Disciplined Self: A Postcolonial Perspective,” in Meer, *Individualism*, chap. 7.

For Joseph, the very discussion of and focus on the self—with all of its modern and postmodern trappings—is itself a colonial enterprise, as subaltern peoples the world over conceive of themselves in such differing ways from that of the Western construction. He then plays on the relationship between repression and expansiveness in Locke’s expression of the “disciplined self,” which relies on social contracts that position productivity and material gain in a capitalist economy as the path to selfhood over and above an acquiescence to desire or pleasure. As such, a focus on the ethic of maintaining a “proper” social contract free from the latter temptations—which is derived from prevailing Protestant theologies of the time regarding purity and sin—serves the interests of empire and “heralds precisely the kind of psychology required of imperial society.”¹⁶

With the understanding of who we are as human beings having been dominated so exhaustively by eurowestern constructions created and perpetuated by those with enduring power and privilege, it is little wonder that no other conceptions for religious leadership and how we relate with one another within religious institutions exist in prevailing literatures in these areas, much less within broader culture. The *individual, imperial* self—as one who creates reality, who upholds colonial reality by maintaining their social contract, or who does both (the latter comprising the vast majority)—constitutes the primary ontology from which all other identities are based, cultural, religious, social, biological, and otherwise.

Unraveling Authentic Leadership and the Fixed Self

If there is one word that is ubiquitous among religious leaders today, it is *authentic*. Not only have more mainstream, public positive-psychology and spiritual figures such as Oprah Winfrey and Brené Brown popularized this term, but also the rise of positivist forms of leadership in business and nonprofit spheres, especially in the form of what is known as authentic leadership. When I hear leaders use this word or phrase, I understand them to

¹⁶ Meer, “Introduction: Individualism Revisited.”

define authenticity as something akin to what business consultant Steve Robinson describes: “At its most basic level, authenticity means being genuine—not a copy or imitation. In leadership, being genuine implies that we are embodying our *true selves* into our leadership role. Being true to ourselves calls us to draw on the very essence of our values, beliefs, principles, morals and that all of these create our ‘guiding compass’ in the job. Not somebody else’s compass—our own!”¹⁷

This definition is similar to any I might find on the internet, in books, or when asking any religious leader. What becomes apparent almost immediately in this description is a parallel between “[insert name here]ism” and the practice of authenticity, whereby one’s compass is simply oneself, emphasizing the authentic as relying on an individual construct while simultaneously—and quite ignorantly—minimizing (or, more poignantly, hiding) the contextually and relationally constructed nature of that self. Furthermore, as previously argued, that self is an imperial one that constructs reality based on its line of vision, meaning that there is much that is *not* within one’s line of vision at any given point. What does lie beyond that line of vision is usually that which has been marginalized or relegated to the edges as subaltern reality.

Even more striking in Robinson’s prevailing depiction, however, is his reference to the idea of a “true self,” an “essence” that contains all of one’s values, beliefs, and so on. This phrase, too, is ubiquitous in theological circles where individuals long to “discover” and “lead from” their authentic selves. Such a notion reinforces modern/colonial constructions of a *fixed* self that is also intertwined with Christianity’s historical and present references to the soul as constituting that fixed self. Whenever I hear someone articulate such longings, I imagine some sort of nougaty center to which they are referring, as if they themselves were chocolate candies with a kind of secret, untapped richness at the core.

¹⁷ Steve Robinson and Victoria O’Dea, “Authentic Leadership—To Thine Own Self Be True,” The Insights Group, 2014, <https://www.insights.com/media/1107/authentic-leadership.pdf>.

All joking aside, there are several tattered threads in need of pulling with relationship to a fixed self, as well as to authentic leadership as a worthy framework for religious leaders. The first fallacious assumption here is that there exists an authentic/true self separate from our other “selves” and that this self is always inherently good. Leadership scholars Jackie Ford and Nancy Harding detail the issues with this construction, citing both the centrality of Western philosophical thought of the self as “the ontologically fixed entity having an inner self securely bounded from the exterior world” and the morally and religiously infused concept that this singular self is either good “on the inside” or bad.

They posture, “The immoral person may try to hide their inner evil, may try to give the impression of being ‘good,’ of being moral, but will be found out by those who seek to ‘unlock the mask’ behind which ‘pseudo’ or inauthentic leaders hide.”¹⁸ As my colleague Eric C. Smith likes to query, “What if my authentic self is an asshole?”¹⁹ Assuming that authenticity in general is always rooted in dispositions devoid of bad tempers, narcissism, intolerance, and various isms—especially colonialism and its manifestations—feeds positivist ends that ignore the realities and complexities of lived religious leadership praxes.

Moreover, drawing binaries between authentic/inauthentic, good/evil, inside/outside, moral/immoral, and so on not only solidifies the fixed nature of a self but also reinforces colonial hard lines and limits the possibilities for multiplicities. Such binaries, of course, were created for the purposes of control, order, and submission to dominating forces, though they play out much more subtly in the practice of religious leadership. For example, while the fallacy of the authentic self is always under the surface, many religious leaders pontificate on the binary of the personal/professional and on maintaining separation between one’s “personal self” and “professional self,” especially clergy in congregational settings. Even as boundaries are important for anyone who works with others

¹⁸ Jackie Ford and Nancy Harding, “The Impossibility of the ‘True Self’ of Authentic Leadership,” *Leadership* 7, no. 4 (2011): 465–66.

¹⁹ Eric C. Smith, personal communication, January 7, 2021.

in community—whether within churches, nonprofits, hospitals, social service agencies, businesses, or any other organization—such references remain unhelpful in conversations regarding the self as leader, as they perpetuate binaries that cannot and will never exist in the clearly delineated forms for which some may hope.

This leads to the second fallacious assumption that authentic leadership is—and should always be—about being true *to oneself*. This means that authenticity is then always understood and practiced as personal; one cannot really be authentic *beyond* oneself. However, by definition, leadership is inherently relational and requires adaptation and responses based on varied social contexts. “Generally speaking,” asserts critical leadership scholars Mats Alvesson and Katja Einola, “adapting to social and political conventions and norms is a deviation from the genuinely personal, because such adaptation would imply playing a role rather than being oneself.”²⁰

Understood as a personal and internal dynamic, authentic leadership in this modern/colonial construction leaves no room for relationship, community, or cultivation of belonging if one is always looking inward toward a “compass.” Additionally, it reinforces the myth that one can do whatever one wants in any given leadership position when this is never the actuality, especially in religious institutions in which certain roles and functions in accountability to broader structures are required.

In relation to institutions, the third fallacious assumption is that the practice of authenticity by leaders will both be apparent and positively affect the institution at large. As a personal and individual phenomenon, “By definition, authenticity is hidden and does not lend itself to external assessment.”²¹ Furthermore, authenticity as being true to a fixed sense of self can actually create *inflexibility*, an unwillingness to make compromises to fulfill role requirements and expectations. Authenticity thus invites a disconnection with others in favor of a self-driven adherence to

²⁰ Mats Alvesson and Katja Einola, “Warning for Excessive Positivity: Authentic Leadership and Other Traps in Leadership Studies,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 30 (2019): 385.

²¹ Alvesson and Einola, 386.

one's own strict moral codes or agendas, regardless of whether they align with their organization's codes or agendas. By nearly all accounts, the practice of authentic leadership—when unraveled—looks and feels like a guide for modern/colonial leadership: An individual, true, static self who acts on the world from their own inner compass without consideration of relationships and contexts and without acknowledgment that “people evolve with experience, discovering facets of themselves they would never have unearthed through introspection alone.”²²

All of this culminates in a fourth fallacy raised by authentic leadership—namely that it is not contingent on power relations and hierarchies. “What rank one occupies in the hierarchy matters when it comes to a leader's possibility to express [their] true self at work,” contend Alvesson and Einola. There are countless examples of white, heterosexual, able-bodied men with economic privilege behaving according to their “true selves”—the most poignant example being Donald Trump—with little to no repercussions. Who is allowed to be “authentic” and what that authenticity looks like is based on one's identities and positionalities in the modern/colonial matrix. Such structural inequities determine who rises to positions of leadership in the first place and, more broadly, “influences a person's ability to take up space in this world.”²³

Within religious institutions, minoritized and marginalized leaders most often experience what sociologists refer to as role strain, the inability for a person to succeed within a role based on the cues from people in their broader social network (e.g., church, denomination, etc.) and the expectations for how they should perform that role. As part of this dynamic, “Role relations are seen as a sequence of ‘role bargains,’ and as a continuing process of selection among alternative role behaviors, in which each individual seeks to reduce [their] role strain.”²⁴ Research by sociologist Korie L. Edwards on lead clergy of interracial churches recounts how clergy of color experience role strain compared with white clergy:

²² Alvesson and Einola, 391.

²³ Alvesson and Einola, 391.

²⁴ William J. Goode, “A Theory of Role Strain,” *American Sociological Review* 25, no. 4 (August 1960): 483.

Since whiteness is afforded the greatest privilege, white interracial church head clergy will have the broadest breadth of power to challenge the expectations of congregants and those in their religious social network with less risks of suffering negative sanctions, at least severe ones. Conversely, interracial church head clergy of color...will have relatively limited capacity to negotiate their role and reduce role strain. The broader power of white head clergy poises them, then, to be more successful at developing interracial churches than head clergy of color.²⁵

As a result, clergy of color in the study were forced to downplay or stay silent with regard to aspects of their racial identities in order to remain in their positions. Such boundary conditions for who and how one can express “authenticity” exist within all institutions as social entities, yet there is little conversation on the continuing burdens of role strain for those minimized and othered in the modern/colonial matrix, much less how institutional conditions perpetuate modern/colonial ontologies more generally.

Ultimately, it seems that when most individuals speak of authenticity in religious contexts, they are relying on this word as a proxy for other concepts. Alvesson and Einola distinguish authenticity—“the extent to which one is true to the self—good, bad, or otherwise”—from honesty as “failing to break prevailing rules...living by the norms,” sincerity as “the extent to which the self is represented accurately and honestly *to others*,” and integrity as congruence between what one believes, says, and does.²⁶ I find that religious leaders rely on authenticity as a catchall for the more precise notions of *sincerity* and *integrity*, with the latter term revealing a longing for an increased, more self-aware alignment between one’s own beings (identities and positionalities) and doings/expressions (actions and affects in community). When

²⁵ Korie L. Edwards, “Role Strain Theory and Understanding the Role of Head Clergy of Racially Diverse Churches,” *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 74.

²⁶ Alvesson and Einola, “Warning for Excessive Positivity,” 385–86.

religious leaders with identities beyond the white, cisgender male, heterosexual, able, and neurotypical reference desires for living more authentically, I often offer such alternative descriptors for consideration, inviting them to delve further into what being “true to oneself” as an expression specifically entails for both their own and their community’s flourishing.

In consideration of these nuances, desires for what religious leaders understand as authentic are not ones that necessarily should be pushed to the side, nor are they unimportant in the work of religious formation for ministry. Part of the ongoing practice of seminarians, clergy, and other religious leaders alike is to cultivate a sense of increased presence, assuredness, and skill in their leadership praxis related to their own social and religious identities, positionalities, and contexts. When detailing the importance of authenticity related to postcolonial leaderships within Asian immigrant faith communities, Choi Hee An emphasizes an understanding of authenticity as antithetical to the concepts of “purity, cultural distinctiveness, or essential difference” as conceived within white Christian contexts. This colonial notion of authenticity is known as a “personal origin self. . . misinterpreted as a mono or singular identity,” such as the “unspoiled” African, Asian, Latinx, or Indigenous person conjuring “images of the *real* native . . . rather than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change.”

Instead, Choi reframes authenticity as a “sense of identity process such as who/I we were as Asians in the past, who I/we are as Asian immigrants in the present, and who I/we want to be in the future in relation to individual others and communal others.”²⁷ Such an understanding of identity is rooted in relationship with space, place, tradition, culture, and people with an openness to the similarities and differences that arise.

This understanding can be applied more broadly to all people of color—as well as other marginalized, oppressed, and subaltern peoples. Additionally, I would argue, this should be the kind of

²⁷ Choi Hee An, *A Postcolonial Leadership: Asian Immigrant Christian Leadership and Its Challenges* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020) 200.

authenticity that all religious leaders might strive toward, even as those with significant socially constructed power in relationship to their identities and positions must begin to conceive of themselves in relation to their own communities (past, present, and future) as well as—and *with prioritization of*—subaltern realities.

Also evoked in Choi's description is authenticity as a relational *process* rather than a fixed state of being. The conception of process reorients authenticity as a continuing, fluid, and pluriversal encounter across time and space that is contingent on—and affected by—the universe beyond a fixed self. It is “a social phenomenon where people are struggling with a variety of ideals and pressures, making authenticity a contested terrain and a ‘cultural minefield’ calling for insightfulness, negotiations, pragmatism, and work with organizational culture.”²⁸ Rather than a static or outcome-based phenomenon, authenticity in this context relies on the potential for change created from the *in-between* of engagement rather than from a boundaried inside to outside.

Reweaving Selves/People as Relationships

With this reconceptualization of authenticity arises the imperative to imagine beyond the notion of a true or fixed self. There are two nonbinary paths that this might take toward more expansive ontologies: conceiving of leaders as multiplicitous selves and altogether reconceiving of leaders as *individuals* rather than selves. To the first point, intersectional theology offers imaginative possibilities.

Theologians Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw characterize intersectionality as “the recognition of a simultaneity of multiple social identities within interlocking systems of oppression—people experience *always and at once* their gender, race, sexual identity, ability, age, social class, nation, and religion, and those intertwined identities locate them in relation to structures of power and domination.”²⁹ In essence, we as human beings are multiple selves

²⁸ Alvesson and Einola, “Warning for Excessive Positivity,” 384.

²⁹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018) xi.

already, given the various identities we recognize and hold as we interact with the peoples, plants, animals, earth, sky, air, and waters around us. We are different selves in our various relationships—familial, religious, professional, social, and otherwise; yet these selves do not remain boundaried. They are inextricably interwoven, thus negating wholly separate binaries such as professional/personal. Moreover, every single one of these selves is *authentic* (i.e., real) because they emanate from our respective body with its uniquely assembled collection of muscles, tissues, veins, organs, neurons, synapses, and so on. The actions of these selves are not anyone else's but our own, so to say they are inauthentic (not real) is to say they originate from beyond our faculties, which is nonsensical.

Many of us from noneurowestern cultures and backgrounds know ourselves as deeply multiplicitous. For example, Boyung Lee articulates that in Korean communal linguistics, “The most acceptable way to introduce one’s spouse is by saying, ‘This is OUR husband,’ or ‘This is OUR wife.’ Although ‘my husband’ is grammatically correct, using ‘I’ language is culturally awkward.”³⁰ In communal cultures across the globe, including many African, Indigenous, Latinx, and other East Asian worldviews, the person is viewed as part of a larger community.

As a Puerto Rican/Italian, I was raised with a profound sense of family as central to my own identity and place in the world. Without family, I could not *be*; so I understand myself in relation to my family, regardless of whether we share DNA. Juana Bordas emphasizes this expanded idea of *familia* for Latinxs as “groups with a special affinity who provide assistance and support” that are “elastic” and grow to include *padrinos* or *madrinos* or *tías* or *tíos*. She continues, “Latinos cherish belonging, group benefit, mutuality, and reciprocity. Interdependency, cooperation, and mutual assistance are the norm.” The “I” is not in opposition to the “we” in most Latin cultures; they are oriented within a both/and,

³⁰ Lee, *Transforming Congregations*, 3.

and do not exist as a polarity. Yet, as Bordas notes, “Personal gain is not achieved at the expense of the common good.”³¹

Regarding the second nonbinary path toward expanding ontologies, it may not be beneficial to understand ourselves as *selves* at all. Drawing on Buddhist and Christian wisdom from Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650 CE) and David Hume (1711–1776), respectively, Jay L. Garfield invites leaders to consider themselves as individuals, not selves. Making quite a complex but compelling philosophical case, Garfield asserts that “the world we inhabit—just like the worlds of dogs, birds, and bees—is not a world we *encounter*, but a world in which we participate and which we *co-construct*.”³² Both Candrakīrti and David Hume negated their contemporaries who spent vast volumes explaining the existence of the *ātman* (self or soul) in Buddhism and the psyche (or soul) in Christianity. (Hume went so far as to describe the discussion of the self as an exercise in talking utter nonsense!) Garfield summarizes their arguments:

People instinctively regard themselves as selves in a very specific sense: they take themselves to persist through time as numerically identical subjects and agents, distinct from their minds, bodies, experiences, and traits. They do so even though they acknowledge that these minds, bodies, experiences, and traits are constantly changing, and that they are only contingently connected to their selves. This is to say that people reflexively locate their identity not in their psychophysical characteristics, but in this hypostasized self. That is the serpent in the wall. ...Each [of their arguments] addresses our *mode of existence*.³³

In other words, the self as an underlying core construct (or inner nougaty center) exists only because we imagine it, as we are not able to observe ourselves beyond perception and psychophysical processes. This leads us to “a false duality of subject and object...

³¹ Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2012) 53, 55.

³² Garfield, *Losing Ourselves*, 32.

³³ Garfield, 27–28.

and the illusion that we are free, uncaused agents of our actions, acting on the world, but causally unconstrained by it.”³⁴

An alternative ontology beyond modern/colonial trappings of ego and a preoccupation with being separate, singular, transcendent, and independent beings moves realities toward the *person* as “constructed, dependent on the psychosocial and social network in which it is realized, complex, embodied, and embedded.”³⁵ Garfield argues that this envisioning of ourselves as the roles we inhabit and not actors/agents has profound ethical implications for how we exist and engage within the world. Focusing on being a friend, sibling, parent, team member, coworker, or some other relational role helps us to diminish our self-illusions.

In this manner, we begin to regard ourselves as interrelated beings with a more mutual understanding of agency and not as lone actors with unlimited agency. This invites a self-reflexivity about our own attitudes and behaviors and a deeper awareness of others’ behaviors as well. Such a conception of personhood resonates with Choi’s concept of authenticity as an identity process in relation to others in the past, present, and future, as well as to nonwestern communal worldviews of the individual as a part of a whole—and, more importantly—shaped by and with the whole. Decolonial theologian Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes poignantly, “One could say that the self is not a continent or a separate island, but, rather, a border, a point of encounter, an intersection, or even an archipelago, understood as a point of relation with other selves.”³⁶

Might religious leaders—and, more importantly, humans as individuals subsisting within a networked, interconnected reality of existence—conceive of ourselves as *relationships*? If the sum of our existence can be reimagined in view of our relationships (human and beyond human alike), the impact for how we carry forth our beings and doings creates unexamined possibilities for

³⁴ Garfield, 33.

³⁵ Garfield, 42.

³⁶ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Epistemology, Ethics, and the Time/Space of Decolonization: Perspectives from the Caribbean and the Latina/o America,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) 198.

what leaderships feel and look like. Rather than touting leaders as autonomous, enacting, singular, fixed entities who simply interact with other like beings—but instead whose actions, products, accomplishments, struggles, and failures are not siloed apart from the whole, and materialize in relationship *with*—institutions might become places and spaces within which connected *encounter* toward greater trust, accountability, and *humaneness* is actualized.

In reality, what are leaders without community? The very definition of leadership necessitates some proximity to those who are considered followers. However, such a binary of leader/follower is disrupted in consideration of people as relationships within an interwoven textile that relies on and honors the unique intersecting identities, positionalities, knowledge, and gifts of all. In this regard, any movements by leaders within the fabric itself take place only as a result of the threads working together to create the garment. Leaders are threads like anyone else; they may hold positional titles or particular roles in the fabric but can only actualize their purposes *within* the fabric (and not as singular threads). This vision is an embodiment of *ubuntu*, the Nguni Bantu concept of personhood translated as “I am because you/we are.”³⁷

Patrick Reyes reflects on the impacts of individualism within communities of color by asking the question, “What if we stopped focusing on these ‘stars’ [individual exceptional leaders] and instead thought about us all as belonging to constellations in the universe?” Reyes argues that selecting “promising” young people from marginalized communities and extracting them from their places and spaces of belonging for greater resourcing and education harms not only the present generation but also future generations who would have relied on these young leaders to serve as mentors and guides for the future flourishing of the community. “Creating a constellation is what changes the conditions for future generations,” Reyes articulates; but maintaining the pipeline for stars to be the “exceptional” representations of their cultures and

³⁷ Michael Onyebuchi Eze, “I Am Because You Are,” *The UNESCO Courier* (October–December 2011), <https://en.unesco.org/courier/octobre-decembre-2011/i-am-because-you-are>.

communities within religious institutions keeps modern/colonial hegemonies firmly in place.³⁸

Formation for religious leadership—from beginning to end—is primarily an individual endeavor. Outcomes for most programs of formation, even if situated within and authorized by communities and institutions, are guided by the abilities of a person to properly perform modern/colonially informed leadership tasks such as guiding groups toward a unifying vision, oratorical prowess for instruction through preaching or other communications, exhibiting and applying particular kinds of knowledge such as textual and theological interpretation, and “strategically creating the future of God’s church” (the last expectation of which exists for all authorized clergy within my own tradition).³⁹

In the context of theological education, most students enter professional degree programs and engage with questions of vocation and call from the individual frame of me/I/mine. While this is expected and encouraged in terms of cultivating critical self-reflexivity, there is much work that needs to be done to refocus, reconnect, and sometimes connect (for the first time) persons to the communities with which they identify and/or are embedded to embody such calls. Contextual educational experiences as part of program requirements are often treated as an afterthought when they in fact function as the integrative thread for the cultivation of religious leaderships as the woven fabric of knowledge, wisdom, experience, and practice within community, akin to Choi’s articulation of authenticity. Many students quickly become enamored by new knowledge regarding Christian theology, history, and Bible; but how might this new knowledge be connected with their beings and doings in the world—that is, how they show up, express presence, and engage as *relationship*—as religious leaders?

³⁸ Patrick B. Reyes, *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021) 85, 88.

³⁹ United Church of Christ, “The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers,” in *Manual on Ministry: A Guide to Authorizing Ministry in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: Local Church Ministries, 2018) 12, <https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ManualonMinistry-2018.pdf>.

Orientation, pastoral care, and field education courses can only do so much within an individualized system where those who display eurowestern qualities of assertiveness, confidence, and individual skill in commanding an audience are rewarded.

Additionally, in most religious institutional systems, leaders are hired to perform a specific role, one that involves guiding the institution and the people within it. In the best of these systems, many will have some input into the process of selecting the singular figurehead who will lead them but with the final decision coming down to a smaller committee for vetting and selection. In other systems, leaders are appointed by bodies beyond the immediate community, such as is the case of the United Methodist clergy appointment system in which leaders of congregations and regions are selected by bishops (though clergy and congregations have some limited agency).⁴⁰ This is similar to the common practice of boards of directors of organizations hiring executives whom they trust but who have no connection with the people within those organizations.

While such processes are not intended to be merely transactional, they do indeed reflect a modern/colonial understanding of leaders as selectively set apart and set above rather than existing within a deep fabric of connectionality and belonging, while at the same time often bypassing the shared wisdom of those within the institution to discern and select their own leaders. How does one designated as leader *become* a relationship in such a system? Of course, relationships are formed within such fabrics; but perhaps the fabric itself needs further unraveling from its individualist assumptions of who and how leaders—and all who participate within religious institutions—might *become* relationships.

One example of an entity and its leaders negating the colonial strongholds of individualism within systems is the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza describes the organization as “leader-full,” whereby there is no

⁴⁰ As an aside, while I understand that the intent of an appointment system is to ensure justice and equity for clergy in many respects, experiences shared with me by current and former students reveal that this system often produces the opposite of this intention because of its groundings within modern/colonial eurochristianity.

single figurehead or figureheads. “Instead of a pyramid of different departments topped by a leader, there is coordination and a set of shared values spread across a decentralized structure that prizes local connections and fast mobilization.”⁴¹ According to Garza, such a model creates “a different practice of power, where many people rather than a small few determine the direction,” recognizing that “hierarchy can help with efficiency—making decisions and getting things done—but of course it is also racialized, gendered, and classed, and it often reflects existing power dynamics. ... Black people are often on the losing end of hierarchies.”⁴² With chapters across the country that have their own leaderships and that cultivate leaders from within, each cluster also helps to make decisions about the collective actions and statements of the larger network, challenging the idea that only one leader, or a group of leaders, can make decisions on behalf of the whole.

There is caution in such a model, especially for those who prize the modern/colonial values of production and efficiency: “Having many leaders, or rejecting the notion of leadership altogether, means that more process is necessary to get things done. Difficult decision-making practices are not inherent in decentralized models—but a lack of skill and practice in using decentralized methods can lead to a circular process that doesn’t get anything done.”⁴³ In this system, coordination must be frequent and continual. Organizer Maurice Mitchell says, “There’s no way that you could have these many actions with the same demand if there wasn’t a high level of coordination.”⁴⁴

In this regard, leaders within Black Lives Matter understand themselves *as relationships*, working in connection with one another so that none is functioning as a singular enactor set apart or set above. This requires an understanding of the self as

⁴¹ Laura Barrón-López, “Why the Black Lives Matter Movement Doesn’t Want a Singular Leader,” *Politico*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/22/black-lives-matter-movement-leader-377369>.

⁴² Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart* (New York: One World, 2020) 162.

⁴³ Garza, 164.

⁴⁴ Barrón-López, “Why the Black Lives Matter Movement.”

neither individual nor static but instead relies on one's connections with others to continue to shape individuals dynamically as new experiences, contexts, and events arise. More importantly, such a model lies in direct subversion of the colonially fabricated myth that to be transformative, an institution must have an individual figurehead.

In the end, religious leaderships that disrupt modern/colonial ideas and practices of individualism—as well as a fixed, imperial self-ness—create possibilities for expanded ontologies by reframing leaders as multiplicitous and intersectional selves or, more definitively, as people in dynamic relationships. More than that, leaders *as the totality of these dynamic relationships* negates our very being as simply bounded, primordial, untethered selves. By this acknowledgment, our focus shifts from preoccupations with for-me-ness—aided by modern ontologies within an authentic leadership framework—toward an interwovenness that materializes only within the threads of community.

Collaborative Leadership in Community

While decoloniality itself resists one-size-fits-all models that often minimize the nuances of context related to race and culture, for example, including the differing worldviews and variances of habitus that inform praxis, there is value in highlighting leaders and faith communities that are seeking to be and do differently.

One such community is The Gathering: A Womanist Church based in Dallas, Texas, and embodied as a hybrid (online and in-person) congregation.⁴⁵ Currently co-pastored by Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session and Rev. Dr. Kamilah Hall Sharp, their model of leadership is one designed as “an egalitarian organizational structure.”⁴⁶ Based on womanist principles that center the experiences of Black women and a commitment to social justice, both paid staff (co-pastors and others) and participants (called “ministry partners,” not members) are fully co-leaders, “designating their participation together to

⁴⁵ The Gathering: A Womanist Church, <http://www.thegatheringexperience.com/>.

⁴⁶ Irie Lynne Session, Kamilah Hall Sharp, and Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *The Gathering: A Womanist Church—Origins, Stories, Sermons, and Litanies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 7.

fulfill the prophetic mission of the church.” In a book describing their ways of ministry, *The Gathering: A Womanist Church—Origins, Stories, Sermons, and Litanies*, Session, Hall Sharp, and ministry partner Rev. Dr. Jann Aldredge-Clanton articulate that “A womanist church embodies a collaborative leadership structure. . . . Partnership in ministry gives people a deeper sense of belonging and connection in the faith community.”⁴⁷

When first forming *The Gathering*, Session, Hall Sharp, and a third person embodied collaboration in all aspects of the community’s life, as “each of them would have equal input and an equal vote on everything, and they would call themselves ‘co-leaders.’”⁴⁸ This did not mean that everyone did all the work; tasks were assigned among the leadership. However, the way that decisions were made, and the work was done, was in close collaboration. As the community grew, inviting participants into coleadership as ministry partners maintained the shared value of collaboration. In an interview with the Rev. Dr. Kamilah Hall Sharp, she shared the following:

The number of things that we’ve done and been able to do in six years is amazing, and that’s because of the people. We have some amazing ministry partners who are creative. We have some smart people. And I love working with Irie Sessions; it’s like we share the same brain, so it’s very easy. It’s very organic to be able to do the work [together]. It makes it an easier lift, this model of copastoring. We don’t believe anybody should try to do this work alone. It’s more sustainable. More creativity comes out of it, and it’s healthier. *The Gathering* should never have one pastor. There should always be at least two pastors, and there’s never a senior pastor because it’s nonhierarchical. All of these things are joys.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Session, Hall Sharp, and Aldredge-Clanton, 29.

⁴⁸ Session, Hall Sharp, and Aldredge-Clanton, 13.

⁴⁹ Kamilah Hall Sharp, interview, December 6, 2023.

Hall Sharp's words negate the supremacy of the singular leadership model that arises out of broader individualistic cultural models (or even collectivist models, as articulated by Boyung Lee). Granted, the copastor model is nothing new, and neither are lay-led models of ministry, particularly within traditions possessing a more egalitarian polity. However, a serious reconsideration of such models also invites a reorientation to how religious leaders and communities might unravel prevailing paradigms of existence beyond individual, fixed selves. Because dominating knowledge about the self formed through the optic of the Enlightenment and carried forward in a singularly eurowestern epistemology, perspectives of the self that lie beyond such notions have been minimized. Womanism offers one important paradigm that subverts these dominances; yet there are many others that invite possibilities for understanding religious leaders as interrelated, dynamic people whose full beingness can only be realized in the midst of community.

It bears repeating that individualism and the idea of a singular, fixed self are not inherently colonial notions; but they have become twisted with the threads of modern colonialism in configurations that require pulling apart that which has become damaging to the overall garment of destiny. Some might argue for the enduring value of individualism—especially for the rights of individuals for the maintenance of a democratic society—and this is necessary and good. At the same time, hyperindividualistic paradigms have led to great societal and ecclesial challenges in threading together the fabric of community life. The ongoing task remains for religious leaders and communities alike to recognize the torn and frayed threads of our existences and to reweave our beings and doing as interdependent people, simultaneously interrogating not only individualism but other modern colonial impulses toward order, control, possession, binary options, and simplistic solutions.

**CLERICALISM AS A CONFIGURATION OF NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS:
A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY INVESTIGATION OF LEADERSHIP FOR A
POSTCLERICAL FUTURE**
CLARA KING

Abstract

This article seeks to understand the persistence of clericalism despite efforts by clergy and congregations to overcome it. Drawing on the literature on social norms, clericalism is explored as a pattern of normative expectations that structure the relationships between clergy and laity. Leading beyond clericalism involves (1) contesting those normative expectations, (2) strengthening existing beneficial normative expectations, and (3) innovating new postclerical expectations. Adaptive leadership is offered as a leadership resource, as are practices from the literature on social norms. In the final analysis, discernment is revealed as an essential leadership activity, individually and for the whole church.

Introduction

In 1960, Charles Taylor defined clericalism as the “reduction of the laity to passive bystanders where they should be active participants.”¹ Sixty years on, driven by factors articulated by Alicia Granholm in her presidential address in this issue, there is increasing interest in postclerical models of ministry.² Clergy and congregations, as well as dioceses, judicatories, and seminaries, are actively seeking models of church where all Christians are active in

¹ Charles Taylor, “Clericalism,” *Downside review* 78, no. 252 (1960): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001258066007825201>.

² Alicia Granholm, “Presidential Address: An Invitation to Explore Different Religious Leadership Models,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 23, no. 2 (2024).

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exercising their faith, and where clergy and laity alike are active in mission and ministry in the world.

Yet even with the best postclerical models of ministry to hand, moving beyond clericalism is not without difficulty. I have been advocating for and empowering lay-led models of ministry in my diocese in the Anglican Church of Canada since 2005, and I have colleagues in the Episcopal Church who have been doing similar work since the 1970s. Practical experience over these long timeframes teaches that clericalism is difficult to overcome, even with the best intentions of clergy and laity. As we aspire for new models of ministry that move us beyond clericalism, it is important to consider the barriers that such models will face, and what leadership approaches might work to overcome them. It is not the intention of this article to solve the challenge of clericalism in the church, but rather, to suggest resources for leaders, be they clergy or lay leaders, who aspire to meet the challenge of clericalism effectively.

This article offers a practical-theological investigation of the challenge of moving beyond clericalism. Practical theology is characterized by a “practice-to-theory-to-practice” approach that affirms the complex interplay between concrete human experience and theory.³ In accordance with practical-theological method, this article centers the lived experience of clergy and congregations who have encountered barriers to new models of ministry. These narratives are explored for why pre-existing theories are insufficient (abductive reasoning), and the prerequisites for a successful leadership response (retroductive reasoning).⁴

³ Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

⁴ “...abduction involves analysing data that fall outside of an initial theoretical frame or premise. Retroduction is a method of conceptualising that requires the researcher to identify the circumstances without which something (the concept) cannot exist. Used in conjunction, these forms of inference can lead to the formation of a new conceptual framework or theory.” Samantha B. Meyer and Belinda Lunnay, “The Application of Abductive and Retroductive Inference for the Design and Analysis of Theory-Driven Sociological Research,” *Sociological Research Online* 18, no. 1 (2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2819>.

Section 1 sets the scene with narratives of clergy and laity struggling with the persistence of clericalism, despite their best intentions. **Section 2** draws on the literature on social norms to argue that clericalism persists because it is a configuration of normative expectations that structures the relationships between laity and clergy. Given this theoretical framework, **Section 3** then cycles back to the practical question: What leadership activities are necessary to help congregations move beyond clericalism? Three complementary leadership activities emerge:

- 1) contesting the normative expectations that structure clericalism
- 2) strengthening the beneficial normative expectations already present in the community, and
- 3) introducing new beneficial normative expectations.

Sections 4 and 5 explore concrete leadership practices that can support the church to move beyond clericalism. In Section 4, adaptive leadership is offered to help leaders contest normative clerical expectations, and in Section 5 we explore leadership practices to strengthen and introduce new beneficial normative expectations. Throughout, discernment emerges as an essential leadership activity. We conclude in **Section 6** with an invitation to expand the understanding of discernment from a practice of individual leaders to a collective practice required of the whole body of Christ.

Throughout the article, the first-person plural is used intentionally. This article does not speak of a problem that “they” have, or that “you” have. Clericalism is shared by all of “us” in clerical church structures, including myself. The third-person plural is here used confessionally, as an acknowledgment I too participate in clericalism, and it is used to invite leaders into self-reflection. Only by understanding our own role in perpetuating clericalism can we become agents in breaking its hold on the church.

Section 1

Narratives of the Struggle Against Clericalism

In the 1980s, many rural congregations and their clergy in my own diocese were inspired by initiatives in the Episcopal Church to experiment with lay-led models of leadership, and they were vibrant times. But thirty years later, there were almost no signs of it left. As I went around in the early Twenty-tens, promoting lay leadership as if it was a brand-new thing, I heard stories of territorial clergy who felt threatened by strong, empowered laity. Fights over territory generated terrible conflicts and, in some instances, those painful histories still influence the relationships between congregations, clergy, and the diocese today.

But then I meet with clergy who have served those same congregations. We sit together at meals during clergy conferences, and I get to hear the other side of the story. As the clergy tell it, when they try to empower the laity, the question arises, “but what are we paying *you* for anyway? If we’re just going to do all your work for you, why are we paying you?” Clergy feel afraid about inviting the laity to do too much, because it is painful to have to defend their role and their purpose, as well as their financial burden to a congregation. Stories such as these illustrate that there are consequences for both clergy and laity when the clerical model is challenged.

At the same time, however, there are also rewards for abiding by clericalism. In many faith communities, laity tacitly (if not explicitly) prefer when a clergy person will take all the responsibilities off their shoulders. Laity are busy, and lay leadership is demanding. All too often, lay-led congregations are relieved when a clergy person shows up. This sense of relief is gratifying for clergy, who feel validated, like our ministry really matters, like people are glad to have us around.

So, although clericalism heightens clergy burnout, disempowers people in their faith, and leads to declining congregations and

declining donations⁵, it *feels* good. Clericalism makes clergy feel validated and valued, causes laity to feel supported and cared for, and makes everyone feel “safe.” These positive, interlocking feelings give clericalism its staying power.

In 2014, I met the best lay-led congregation of my career: a nearly perfect model of what lay leadership can look and feel like. Although the first few years were challenging, lay leadership had been great for this little church. The benefits of moving beyond clericalism were clearly apparent to them, and they were articulate about what these were. For instance, since they became a lay-led congregation, they had grown significantly in vibrancy and discipleship.⁶ They discovered gifts in their midst they never knew about before.

Now that they didn't pay a clergy salary, they were richer than ever, to the point that their financial abundance had become a stewardship issue. As a result, they became the major donor for the youth program at their town's huge evangelical church on the understanding that, since all the young people went to that church anyway, they could help make it the best youth program it could be. Meanwhile, the town was taking notice—people were joining the church, and donations were going up every year. They were articulate about how excellent lay leadership was for them. They all agreed that they wouldn't want to go back to the former way of doing things.

Two years later, however, this growth and revitalization had been so successful that they had the money to hire a priest once again, which they did. For them, it felt like a sign of success: They had rebuilt their little congregation to this point, and they were proud of their achievement. Yet this sign of success came with consequences. They hired a priest with a strong track record of territoriality and over-functioning, and they handed over their

⁵ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Fredrica Harris Thompsett, *Born of Water, Born of Spirit: Supporting the Ministry of the Baptized in Small Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

⁶ New vibrancy and discipleship are common outcomes when a congregation intentionally shifts to a lay-led model of leadership; cf. Kujawa-Holbrook and Thompsett, *Born of Water, Born of Spirit*.

vibrancy to her. Within months, they regressed back into clerical passivity, feeling delighted to have succeeded to the point that a professional could take it all over, once again.

This is not unique to one small congregation. Equating clericalism with success is rampant in the church universal. The best news for a church plant is when they can afford their clergy – or even better—can hire more clergy! Additionally, the best news for an aspiring priest fresh out of seminary is to be hired at a huge church, into a magnificent staff team, who will do all the work for the congregation. For many expressions of the church, clericalism equates with success.

How can we understand this positive valence when clericalism is harmful to faith communities,⁷ and the benefits of postclerical models of ministry are well established?⁸

Section 2

Clericalism as a Configuration of Normative Expectations

The literature on social norms offers a possible answer. Clericalism can be understood as an interlocking network of unstated, even *unstatable*, expectations that structure community life in the church: clergy expecting things of laity, laity expecting things of clergy. It feels good when those expectations align,⁹ and when they are predictably fulfilled.¹⁰ To understand this claim, it is important to begin by disambiguating “expectations.” This article draws on well-established concepts from the literature on social

⁷ For instance, Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church : How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2020); Taylor, “Clericalism.”; Dwight J. Zscheile, Michael Binder, and Tessa Pinkstaff, *Leading Faithful Innovation : Following God Into a Hopeful Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023).

⁸ These benefits were validated over the course of an 8-year Lilly-funded study on the effects of lay leadership: “individuals and whole congregations are revitalized and renewed in the process from passive consumers of ministry to communities where the gifts of all are valued and recognized.” Kujawa-Holbrook and Thompsett, *Born of Water, Born of Spirit*, 23.

⁹ Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society: the Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

norms, which is here represented by two key texts. The first is *The Grammar of Society* (2006) by Cristina Bicchieri, a preeminent scholar in the field, who consults internationally on how to change social norms so as to promote development and human rights in countries of the Global South. The second is *Explaining Norms* by Brennan et. al., a celebrated and sophisticated introduction to the field intended to support interdisciplinary use of social science regarding social norms. Together, these texts offer a broad overview of the literature in the field. This section explores ideas that represent a broad consensus or major schools of thought, and not the more contested ideas presently being advanced by a single scholar.

The literature on social norms understands expectations through a sociological and intersubjective lens.¹¹ Scholars of social norms generally differentiate between three different kinds of expectations that are active in every social setting:¹²

- *Type 1: Expectations of Self:* Each person has expectations about their own personal behaviour into a setting: these are their values and aspirations about how they themselves should act, formed over their lifetime by the communities, cultures, and key people who have influenced them.

¹¹ This sociological understanding of expectations contrasts with psychological, individualistic understandings of expectations common in North American culture. In the North American understanding, it is commonly understood that an individual can negotiate their (individual, interior) expectations, independently of others. An prime example is David Robson's *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Change Your World* (New York: Holt, 2022). Robson focuses on expectations as a person's mindset in regard to any given setting. He argues that a person can change their future by changing their "expectations" of what is possible. Every individual can control this process, he argues, and create practically any future they desire for themselves. This first-person and individualistic understanding of expectations is very different from the sociological, intersubjective understanding of expectations that grounds the arguments in this paper, in which expectations are socially and contextually produced, and can only be negotiated in dynamic interplay with others.

¹² Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

- *Type 2: Empirical Expectations:* Each person has expectations of how other people will behave: these are the person's anticipations, based on how they have observed people to act in similar situations in the past.
- *Type 3: Normative Expectations:* Each person holds expectations about how *other people* will expect them to behave in this particular situation. Normative expectations are most relevant to clericalism.

These three types of expectations are in continual activity, influencing our behaviour and our perception of the social world around us.¹³ For instance, I recently attended a conference that I had not been to before to present a paper. All three expectations were operative as I prepared my presentation. I had Type 1 expectations of my own conduct and performance. I had Type 2 expectations based on observing people's behaviour at other conferences, although I did not yet know how people would behave at this *particular* conference. Would they be fiercely critical, or constructive? Competitive or collaborative? I also had Type 3 expectations based upon what other people might expect of me as a presenter, an academic, an "expert," or as a contributor to the field. However, imagine if three weeks beforehand, I were to hear that presenters at this conference are all expected to sing a song as part of their presentation. "Oh no," I would think, "now they'll expect me to sing a song too!" Type 3 normative expectations have significant power to shape human behaviour, regardless as to whether the expectation is correct or not. Simply believing that a song was expected of me would have reshaped my preparation, my feelings, and all my interactions at the conference.

While all three types of expectations intersect in every social setting, the narratives previously presented indicate that clericalism is a configuration of Type 3 normative expectations. This framework

¹³ "Every time we enter a room, open our mouths to speak, walk down the street, conduct a meeting, play a game of cards, write an email, or wage a war, norms are in play," communicated by expectations amongst the parties to each of these interactions. Geoffrey Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

of normative expectations makes sense of both how clericalism works in congregations and why it persists, despite clergy and laity's best intentions to overcome it. A short exercise of retroductive reasoning helps us to understand this phenomenon. Retroduction is a form of inquiry that considers what is necessary for a problem to exist, the *sine qua non* (without which not) of the issue.¹⁴ Consider: if clericalism were an issue caused by Type 1 expectations, that is, if it were a problem of clergy persons' own first-person values or aspirations about how they should behave as leaders, clericalism could be overcome with excellent missional theology on leadership. In fact, since there is considerable research on this topic, clericalism may already have been overcome. Alternatively, if clericalism were caused by Type 2 empirical expectations, if it were caused by how clergy leadership has been modeled in the past, it could be changed by re-modelling and platforming excellent examples of postclerical leadership. Since there has been considerable effort put behind this approach, no doubt it could have succeeded by now. If those approaches worked, the previous story of the lay-led congregation would have ended differently.

Unfortunately, the church faces a more difficult challenge: an interlocking network of Type 3 normative expectations that exists in the relationships between clergy and laity, by which each party's behaviour is formed by their expectations of what others expect of them. The long history of clericalism has worn these mutual expectations deep into the culture of many of our churches. For Type 3 normative expectations, it is irrelevant whether one's expectations are correct—what matters is one's *perception* of what others expect. These perceptions arise from subtle cues: not just what people say, but from their body language, tone, inflection, pauses, and eye contact.¹⁵ Perhaps clergy and laity no longer expect one another behave in clerical ways (perhaps due to the excellent work on Type 1 and Type 2 expectations). Yet with these subtle cues, we trigger one another's expectations without realizing we are

¹⁴ Meyer and Lunnay, "The Application of Abductive and Retroductive Inference."

¹⁵ Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*; Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*.

doing so, making it easy and habitual to behave in clerical ways, and making it socially awkward, difficult, or even impolite to behave otherwise. It is precisely these interlocking normative expectations that are repatterning clericalism in our faith communities.

Section 3

Three Leadership Activities to Move Beyond Clericalism

What does this mean for leaders who aspire to introduce new models of ministry in their congregations, or start new expressions of church? If clericalism is a durable pattern of normative expectations, then a community can hire a new leader, change the stated expectations of the leader's role, change the place where they meet, or their organizational structure without actually moving beyond clericalism in any meaningful way.

Heifetz and Linsky write, "Without the willingness to challenge peoples' expectations of you, there is no way you can escape being dominated by the social system and its inherent limits."¹⁶ The interplay of our normative clerical expectations is functioning as the limitations of our social systems. Until we are willing to contest these expectations, and until we are able to do so in real time, clericalism will persist in our churches despite our best intentions.

A short story helps illustrate this point. A few years ago, a mature friend of mine was elected as the bishop in a small diocese with a lot of small, poor, struggling rural congregations. The diocese had domineering bishops in the past, and they were ready for a new style of leadership, as well as new models of ministry. My friend was a good choice for them, being a deeply collaborative leader with a track record of empowering people. A few months in, however, the bishop knew that something wasn't right. It took her an hour over coffee, recounting odd moments and seemingly disconnected events, to realize that she was wrestling with the expectations of her people. She found herself being influenced by remarkably subtle cues in ways she wasn't aware of at the time: their hopeful faces that implicitly asked

¹⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 20.

her to make the decision or resolve the dispute; their frustration at what felt to them like a refusal to take responsibility on her part. They were angry when she tried to empower them, and she felt their relief and satisfaction when she “stepped up to lead” the way a bishop “should” lead. This was despite their expressed desire for a new kind of episcopal leadership, which was reaffirmed throughout this period. The power of their latent expectations, functioning below everyone’s conscious awareness and against their best intentions, was winning out. A few months in, she found herself being formed into exactly the kind of leader she did not want to be (and that they did not want again).

Yet, there is another half to this the story. Normative expectations are reciprocal, and they gain strength by being fulfilled.¹⁷ The more she behaved in accordance with her people’s expectations, the more she triggered her people to behave as if she were a domineering bishop. One microscopic social interaction at a time, clergy and laity together were repatterning for themselves a domineering form of clericalism, against their best intentions.¹⁸

This story is not presented here as a failure of leadership on the bishop’s part, nor as an example of hypocrisy on the part of her people. Rather, it demonstrates how powerful normative expectations are, and how subtly they function to shape our behaviours, even against our best intentions and regardless of our conscious awareness. Clericalism cannot be overcome by leadership approaches that deny the formative power of normative expectations, such as those that would see the bishop’s amenability to the expectations of her people as a sign of weakness or failure. Such approaches are founded on the Western (or Global Northern) idea that we humans are, or should aim to be, independent, autonomous individuals. Approaches that underestimate or deny the power of expectations to shape human behaviour will not allow the church to move beyond clericalism

The leadership approaches that can succeed against clericalism begin with the recognition that humans are *porous* to others’

¹⁷ Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*.

¹⁸ Huron, *Sweet Anticipation*.

expectations. There is no human social space in which normative expectations are not operative.¹⁹ In Lave and Wenger's landmark 1991 study, *Situated Learning*, they conclude that becoming part of a community, and belonging to community are processes of being influenced and formed by the community's normative expectations.²⁰ The bishop's vulnerability to being formed by the expectations of her people is not, therefore, a weakness. It is a constituent part of human social life.²¹

Normative expectations make *social life itself* possible in the first place, and many are socially beneficial.²² Just as there are pernicious normative expectations that repattern clericalism which must be resisted,²³ there are also beneficial normative expectations, which have power to change all our lives for the better.²⁴ Beneficial expectations can draw us into habits we will not and cannot sustain on our own. They can shape our perceptions of the world, opening our imagination for what is possible, and make possible what would be impossible for us as individuals.

When we dream of faithful communities that form us in the most beautiful way as disciples and faithful followers of Christ, as for instance in the vision cast by James K. A. Smith, or that of other authors in this journal, we are dreaming of communities with *outstanding* normative expectations.²⁵ It is for this reason that moving beyond clericalism requires not only contesting clerical normative expectations, but also drawing on the power of beneficial normative expectations, some of which are already present, and some of which need to be innovated.

¹⁹ Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

²⁰ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning : Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Learning in doing: social, cognitive, and computational perspectives, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²¹ Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*.

²² Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*; Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

²³ Cf. Stephen E. Fowl, *Idolatry* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019).

²⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom : Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009); Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*; Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

²⁵ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

Moving beyond clericalism therefore involves three leadership activities:

- 1) contesting the pernicious normative expectations that repattern clericalism,
- 2) strengthening the beneficial normative expectations that are already present in the life of the community, and
- 3) innovating new beneficial normative expectations that will take the place of the clerical expectations being contested.

By working in tandem, not in sequence, these three activities together make possible a postclerical future for the church. In Section 4, we focus on the first of these leadership activities, turning to adaptive leadership as our key resource. However, we will see that adaptive leadership is insufficient on its own. In Section 5, we will focus on approaches that emerge from the literature on social norms that speak to leadership activities No. 2 and No. 3.

Section 4

Contesting Clerical Expectations with Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is a potent resource for combating clericalism. Developed by Ron Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard, adaptive leadership defines itself as an approach that helps leaders contest the expectations that limit the scope of possibility in their organizations: “Adaptive leadership is not about meeting or exceeding your [community’s] expectations; it is about *challenging* some of those expectations,”²⁶ and adaptive leadership seeks to provide concrete strategies for leaders to accomplish that task. As we review the principles of adaptive leadership in this section, we will see that it offers strong resources for contesting clerical normative expectations (leadership activity No. 1). We begin with applying the principles of adaptive leadership to the challenge of contesting clerical normative expectations.

²⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 26, italics in the original.

The six principles of adaptive leadership are:

1. Get on the balcony
2. Identify the adaptive challenge
3. Regulate distress
4. Maintain disciplined attention (or “hold steady”)
5. Give the work back to the people
6. Protect the voices of leadership from below²⁷

In many ways, the fifth and six principles of adaptive leadership are part of the definition of what it means to move beyond clericalism: to shift the locus of work from the clergy or the single authority figure into shared responsibility shouldered by the people (“give the work back to the people”), and to empower and engage voices of leadership from multiple locations within the community (“protect the voices of leadership from below”). While these are often understood as procedural first steps in moving beyond clericalism, here they are understood as later developmental stages: outcomes of good work done in the first four principles. How do the first four principles, then, apply to the task of challenging clericalism as a configuration of normative expectations?

First Principle: Get on the Balcony

In adaptive leadership parlance, getting on the balcony refers to the need for us to come awake to our own actions and reactions in real time.²⁸ My friend the bishop suffered weeks or months of growing disquiet, during which time she perceived her people’s expectations viscerally but not consciously. The first practice of adaptive leadership is to narrow that time lag, becoming awake to these dynamics, consciously, *in real time*. This is a practice that takes time to develop. The bishop can learn to bring her experience to consciousness more swiftly. Once she is conscious in real time, she has a wider range of choices as to how to respond to the prompts of her people, and this in turn opens the possibility that she cease triggering the laity’s clerical expectations in return, thus making a

²⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review* 79, no. 11 (2001): 4.

²⁸ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*.

new range of behaviours possible for them also. Simply by coming awake in real time, a whole new suite of possibilities arrives on the horizon for this diocese.

Second Principle: Identify the Adaptive Challenge

In the context of clericalism, identifying the adaptive challenge involves discerning precisely which expectations are related to clericalism in this moment and should be failed. For example, when I first arrived in my previous congregation, they welcomed me with enthusiastic hospitality—so enthusiastic in fact, that it seemed wrong somehow. It emerged that they had had emotionally abusive clergy in their past, and their welcome to me was an utterly sincere effort to make me happy as soon as possible, so I would not punish them. In other words, their welcome arose from their pattern of normative expectations about how they were expected to treat me as their priest. It was a sign of a significant adaptive challenge, that we worked together to overcome in the next several years.

Although that congregation's overly warm welcome was a sign of clericalism, it would, of course, be incorrect (and bad advice) to say that the same is true of every congregation! Discernment is essential to the work of faithful adaptive leadership, if we aim to move beyond clericalism. It requires detailed attention to a specific community in all its particularity and situatedness. Which expectations, for *this specific community*, are repatterning clericalism and should be resisted?

Third Principle: Regulate Distress

We have seen that the work of adaptive leadership involves failing people's expectations, and this raises the anxiety of the community.²⁹ Humans cannot tolerate extended periods of high anxiety,³⁰ so a major consideration of adaptive leadership is how to pace the work of failing people's expectations to within the limits of tolerance of a given community.³¹

²⁹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*.

³⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*.

³¹ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

For instance, the bishop could lessen the surprise of the first few failures by beginning with small (even tiny) deviations from status quo: refusing to respond to pregnant pauses, or eye contact that begs her to speak up, or jokes to which everyone else laughs. Starting small, she gives herself a chance to practice in low-stakes moments, but she also begins to signal to her people, even if subconsciously, that the status quo is not as stable as they thought. This prepares them for more change to come, lessening their surprise later on, and the likelihood of shock or bad behaviour.³²

Fourth Principle: Maintain Disciplined Attention

An expectation is not changed through a single intentional failure. The first failure is only the opening gesture in a long drama to come. A leadership effort must be sustained over time, and through cycles of resistance.³³ The pressure to conform persists, as does the temptation to regress into old patterns of behaviour, for both laity and clergy. Within this long drama, there are phases of higher intensity, when the temptation to regress becomes harder to resist. Soon after my friend became bishop, there was a large fire in her diocese, and the pressure on her to be decisive and show strong leadership increased sharply. If she could help them find their way through this crisis without defaulting to the old patterns, it would be a major moment to celebrate! Resisting the temptation to regress is part of the work of leadership that only begins with the first act of intentional failure.

In summary, adaptive leadership is a potent resource for contesting the normative expectations that repattern clericalism (leadership activity No. 1), yet alone it is not sufficient. Adaptive leadership pays only lip service to the idea of socially beneficial expectations,³⁴ and it is under-theorized about what replaces a set of expectations once they have been successfully contested. To meet

³² Huron, *Sweet Anticipation*.

³³ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, chapter 7.

³⁴ For instance, Heifetz and Laurie write, “a leader helps the organization maintain those norms that must endure and challenge those that need to change,” yet characteristically, there is no discussion of constructive norms, either before or after this line. Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” 6.

the challenge of clericalism, the church needs more than adaptive leadership working alone.

In the next section we will turn our focus to leadership activities No. 2 and No. 3. In doing so, we move beyond fighting clericalism, toward allowing a postclerical future to begin emerging in our midst.

Section 5

Strengthening Beneficial Expectations and Innovating New Ones

In what follows, we consider the power of beneficial normative expectations to help the church move beyond clericalism. We explore the leader's role in strengthening the power of beneficial expectations that are already present in the community (leadership activity No. 2), and ways a leader can replace pernicious expectations with beneficial ones (leadership activity No. 3). In doing so, we move into work that is creative, provisional, and experimental. While we previously considered a leadership approach that has been well established over four decades, in this section we draw upon ideas from the literature on social norms that are nascent, not mature.³⁵

Strengthening Beneficial Normative Expectations

Twenty years of personal experience testifies that there are deeply good normative expectations in every congregation, however concealed they are beneath layers of pernicious expectations that should be contested. Many of us in the church have experienced faith communities that shape our lives for the better. We find they help us be our best selves, kind and generous, quick to generosity and compassion. In these communities, Scripture seems more transparent, we can see God more readily, and pray with greater

³⁵ While there is more developed work on changing social norms in the literature, this work is largely focused on international development concerns, that is, changing norms to promote development in the Global South. For instance, Bicchieri offers a fully developed approach for changing a community's norms in *Norms in the Wild* (2017) yet this approach is fraught with power dynamics that deserve serious decolonial and epistemological critique. Interpreting and critiquing these leadership theories to make them useable for the church lies outside the scope of this article.

sincerity. This isn't necessarily the work of specific individuals, but rather the effect of the whole community's way of being, which is the power of constructive normative expectations to exert a formative influence in our lives and on our ways of being and behaving in the world. This may be one of the highest theological ideals about what church should be: that life in community transforms and shapes us as disciples in ways that we could not achieve on our own.³⁶

Yet in many communities, this life-changing potential is partially concealed beneath the surface, active almost by accident, obscured by habits and patterns that are not so healthy. Part of the work of Christian leadership is discerning between the pernicious and the beneficial normative expectations that are present in the community *and then acting on both at the same time*: intentionally failing some, while intentionally fulfilling others. This is the second leadership activity necessary to help the church move beyond clericalism. While asking, "which clerical expectations should be failed here, and why?" the leader must ask simultaneously, "and which beneficial expectations are already present that we should follow *more intentionally*, and how will following them transform our life together?"

These beneficial normative expectations do not exist passively, and they should not be taken for granted. They are malleable – and therefore vulnerable – just like clericalism. Routinely failing these beneficial expectations weakens them over time, just as they can be strengthened by being intentionally and consistently fulfilled.³⁷ The literature teaches us that leaders within any community have a central role to play in strengthening beneficial normative expectations by honouring them with a high degree of fidelity, not only outwardly but also inwardly. Therefore, it is an essential leadership activity for the leader to join the community in being shaped by these beneficial norms.³⁸

In the second principle of adaptive leadership, we discussed that discernment is essential to the work of moving beyond

³⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom : How Worship Works (Cultural Liturgies)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013).

³⁷ Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*.

³⁸ Cf. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; Fowl, *Idolatry*.

clericalism, requiring detailed attention to a specific community in all its particularity and situatedness. Here, we see the need for discernment arise again: Which are the best normative expectations already present in *this specific community* – expectations that will lead to life, and faith, and Christian virtue? Leaders can then ask themselves: What is my part in abiding by them, so that I allow them, or even invite them, to shape my behaviour and way of being in the world? What part do I play in strengthening them by faithful practice so that they endure, and are traditioned to new generations?

Innovating New Beneficial Expectations

While every congregation possesses beneficial normative expectations that can be strengthened, however nascent these may be, the third leadership activity involves introducing new normative expectations that are not currently present. The Christian tradition is a storehouse of beneficial expectations by which a church community can shape the lives of all the individuals involved.³⁹ Yet unless these are proactively lived behaviours, they remain only as great ideas. Beneficial expectations only have power to change our communities once we find a way to become accountable to them, as the Anglican prayerbook says, “not only with our lips, *but in our lives*,”⁴⁰ and not only in our lives as individuals, but our life together in community. This process of taking ideas and making them lived behaviours in community life is a process of learning new normative expectations that will guide our common life. It is the third leadership activity, therefore, that truly opens the path to a postclerical future for the church.

The third leadership activity acts like a course of vitamins, supplementing the congregation with the beneficial expectations (i.e., mutually lived behaviors) that it presently lacks. What would such an approach to leadership look like in practice?

³⁹ See for instance, Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*; Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 129.

In *The Grammar of Society*, Bicchieri identifies the process by which a pattern of behaviour becomes a normative expectation.⁴¹ First, a person or people begins behaving differently quite intentionally. As others begin observing them, these observers start to expect that *they themselves* will be expected to behave differently too. Over time, these expectations about what is expected of everyone begin to interlock: person A begins to believe that person B is *expecting* them to behave in the new way, and person B believes that person A is *expecting* them to behave in the new way in return.⁴² Once these expectations interlock, the new behaviour self-regulates and self-perpetuates. It becomes the culture of the place to behave in the new way.⁴³ This process is initiated when a person of status begins behaving in the new way, with a high degree of fidelity.⁴⁴ This person is known in the literature as the *first mover*, the *norm entrepreneur*, or the *norm innovator*.⁴⁵ To innovate a new norm requires the norm innovator to model the desired behaviour with a high degree of fidelity, before anyone actually knows to expect it of them. The first person's *voluntary acquiescence* to the discipline of the new expectations is the starting point.

Brennan et. al. argue that normative expectations produce mutual accountability. Each person learns to count on the behaviour of others and learns that other people are counting on their own behaviour in turn.⁴⁶ The leader acts as the norm innovator by *voluntarily offering* to be accountable for the new behaviour. The leader's own faithful accountability to the new normative expectations invites other people to have expectations of the leader's behaviour, and to build their own patterns of behaviour from that

⁴¹ Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

⁴² Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

⁴³ Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*.

⁴⁴ Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴⁵ Clergy in particular are well positioned to function as the norm entrepreneur in a congregation. However, this approach is not limited to clergy: lay members of the congregation, particularly those with high social status, can become norm entrepreneurs also. Cf. Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*.

⁴⁶ Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*.

foundation.⁴⁷ In other words, one person's faithful accountability to a beneficial new way of being can catalyze a change in normative expectations.

In clerical models of church, the minister performs faithful adherence to the Christian norms on behalf of everyone else. Because of the minister's actions, the laity's performance or lack of performance becomes irrelevant. Notice how different this is from the understanding of the leader as a norm innovator, in light of what we have seen above, that normative expectations are interlocking between clergy and laity in the church. In a postclerical understanding, the leader (not necessarily the minister; any person of influence in the community) commits themselves to a concrete new way of behaving, and to being accountable to others in the community for behaving in the new way. For instance, a clergy friend of mine committed himself to engaging the people of his community in missional decision-making. But since he was prone to making the decisions himself, and his congregation found this convenient, he had to learn to conduct himself differently in the meetings where decisions were made. He acknowledged his temptations, decided on his new behaviours, told his people, and invited them to hold him accountable for it. His new behaviour meant that everyone else felt expected to act differently in response. When they defaulted to old habits and asked him (often simply by look or gesture) to make the decision, he handed the work back to them (see above, adaptive leadership principle No. 5). When he forgot, *they* started learning to remind him, with much awkward laughter and embarrassed grace in the beginning. Over time, everyone struggled their way into a new way of being. By devoting himself to a new pattern of behaviour, and submitting himself to being accountable to it, he catalyzed new habits of accountability in his congregation. He innovated new normative expectations that interlocked the expectations of clergy and laity in new ways.

In the congregation I served where there had been emotionally abusive clergy, it was a different set of expectations that needed to

⁴⁷ Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*.

be innovated. Because of their painful history, they had ideals but not beneficial expectations or behaviours about creative risk-taking and making mistakes together. Failures were dangerous, according to their past experience, and vulnerability was an invitation to get hurt. This congregation didn't have the capacities for awkward laughter and embarrassed grace, like my friend's congregation above did. Although these expectations were very different, the process was the same: I as their leader innovated new expectations by behaving differently and making myself accountable to the people for the new way of behaving. Over time, people started to feel gently *expected* to act differently themselves. Together, we discovered a new understanding of grace, and the transformation that comes from repentance. From this we can see that detailed discernment is once again part of the work of leadership. What beneficial normative expectations are absent in *this particular community*, and which could be of particular benefit to it? Building on the asset-based mindset of leadership activity No. 2: What additional beneficial expectations can supplement what is already deeply good here? Leaders can ask themselves, "What new practice am I called to be accountable to, that would lead us all into new life?"

Section 6

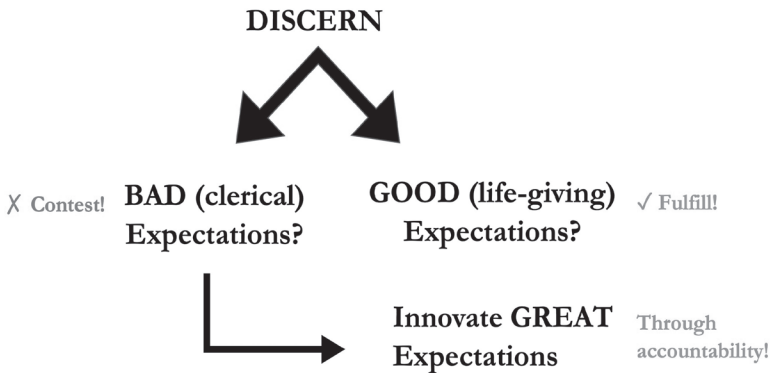
Conclusion and Recommendations: The Leadership that Leads Beyond Clericalism

We have seen that moving beyond clericalism requires the interplay of three leadership activities that must work in tandem, rather than in sequence. Leaders contest the normative expectations that repattern clericalism (leadership activity No. 1), and for this task adaptive leadership is a powerful resource. Leaders also have a role in strengthening the beneficial normative expectations that are already present in the community (leadership activity No. 2), which they do by joining the community in being deeply formed

by them. Finally, leaders innovate beneficial normative expectations (leadership activity No. 3), which they do by volunteering to be held accountable to the new way of being. Importantly, none of these three leadership activities is sufficient on its own to help the church move beyond clericalism. Focusing on leadership activity No. 1 alone, as does adaptive leadership, does not strengthen or support beneficial norms or the innovation of new ones. Focusing on leadership activity No. 2 alone puts leaders at the mercy of deeply-ingrained clerical habits that are strongly rewarded. Leadership activity No. 3, undertaken in isolation, risks seeing a community for all it is lacking, while leaving the leader ignorant of the formative power of all the normative expectations currently present, both pernicious and beneficial. To make a postclerical future possible for the church, all three leadership activities are required *in tandem*.

This emerging leadership approach may be visualized in figure 1.1
Figure 1.1

Adaptive Leadership + New Expectations



This leadership approach differs markedly from the Western ideal of the leader as a rational, independent individual who should have maximal freedom to make decisions. That ideal produces a certain restlessness among leaders vis-à-vis expectations and accountabilities that might hold them in check, or which might hold them back. In contrast, this investigation provides a glimpse

of a different vision of leadership, rooted in loving accountability to a community, and pursuing the best normative expectations that lead a community (and all members of it) to new life.

Loving, faithful, attentive discernment emerges from this study as a core practice for every leader who wants to move beyond clericalism. Leaders must discern, with nuance and specificity, what normative expectations are at play in a particular community. In this community, which expectations are pernicious, and which are beneficial? And, among a wide range of options from the storehouse of the Christian tradition, what beneficial normative expectations are missing here that would be *particularly* beneficial to this community at this time?

In addition to the individual dimension of discernment, there is also an important collective dimension. Each leader discerning these alone in the privacy of their own thoughts is necessary *but not sufficient* for the life of the church, for two reasons. First, good-hearted, faithful, well-meaning leaders like the bishop need supports to sustain them in the hard work of leadership. Without these they will burn out or surrender to the familiar embrace of clericalism. Second, bullies, abusers, and narcissists are a reality in Christian congregations, in our pulpits and in our pews. These antagonists are skilled at discerning ways to evade accountability and to rewrite the normative expectations of a community to serve their own proclivities. The church must develop capacities for collective discernment both to support leaders with the best of intentions, as well as to contest the power of antagonists. Discernment must be practiced broadly, in local congregations, clergy collegial networks, regional church structures, and seminaries. These are the relational networks in which we must become accountable to one another in answering the questions, “which expectations are being contested in this particular community, and why?” and “which expectations are being abided by, or innovated in this particular community, and why?” How these capacities for mutual discernment can or should be developed, and what mutual accountability looks like when combined with deep sensitivity to the particularities of each faith community, are important topics for further investigation.

An epidemic of clericalism continues in the church. Clericalism persists because it feels good to clergy and laity alike—it looks and feels like success. Yet this is not what the church is for in the world. God calls the church to be a place of transformation, both for all the individuals involved in faith communities, as well as for the world in which our faith communities are situated. To live into this calling, and for the sake of the world which God so loves, the church needs leaders to fight the good fight against clericalism.

Based in the real-life experience of clergy and lay leaders already engaged in this struggle, we have looked at clericalism as an interlocking configuration of normative expectations. We cannot move beyond clericalism by hiring new leaders, changing our organizational structure, or moving worship into a movie theatre. The task we face as the church is much more difficult, and much more accessible: We can begin moving beyond clericalism, starting in any ministry, with any organizational form, beginning with almost any social interaction on any given day, by transforming the normative expectations that structure our common life. In other words, the opportunity to begin moving beyond clericalism is available to every faith community, starting exactly where they are right now, and requires no additional financial resources. In this lies our hope.

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REWILDING RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP: ENGAGING THE “BIG BOOK OF REVELATION” FOR THE FUTURE

KARA MARKELL

Abstract

Religious communities have traditionally embodied a clergy-centric leadership model, shaped by imperial religion, modern business, and capitalist patriarchal models. These have not provided the wisdom needed to shift a decades-long decline in standard markers of sustainability and success. In recent years, faith community leaders have found this model of leadership debilitating, lonely, and unsustainable. The ancient and perennial wisdom of nature, also called the Big Book of Revelation, offers insights which have been largely untapped in modern times. Celtic Christianity's embrace of creation as a source of wisdom, combined with the practice of biomimicry and rewilding, gives leaders a fresh perspective on leading the Church as a living organism.

For decades, religious communities have embodied a clergy-centric model, with roots in Roman imperial religious practice, for leadership within the community. More recently, leaders have relied on insights from the business world and organizational leadership development rooted in a capitalist and patriarchal framework, little of which has positively affected the decline in participation and sustainability. The COVID-19 lock-down amplified this model's weaknesses. Many pastors and spiritual leaders found this form of leadership debilitating, resulting in loneliness, over-functioning and overwork, which led to burn out and the great resignation. Models for religious community and religious leadership with these roots no longer have the capacity to meet the adaptive changes necessary

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for this moment. Turning toward life-giving, nature-based models provides a way forward.

An especially helpful source of creation-centered wisdom, the Celtic Christian tradition embodied a deep connection with the Earth and a spirituality in which the natural world was the primary source of divine wisdom. Developed in the British Isles from the sixth to eleventh centuries outside the influence of Roman imperial religion, Celtic Christianity is characterized by several distinctive attributes, including a contemplative monasticism shaped by familial and tribal models with a strongly communitarian ethos and commitment to diversity. Spiritual and religious practice in this tradition celebrates the revelatory nature found within the ordinary patterns of life. The natural world is known in this tradition as the Big Book of revelation, a companion to the Little Book, which is the Bible. The Big Book, the original scripture, is alive with the wisdom of the sacred, offering spiritual and practical insights as we rewild ourselves. The stories and poetry of the Little Book often point to this reality, directing our attention to the smallest seed and to cosmic mysteries beyond our knowing, revealing a world alive with sacred presence.

Rewilding is a modern concept that connects people to the sacredness of the Earth's wisdom in a process of restoration. The term 'rewilding' was coined by David Foreman, an ecological scientist, to describe the process of restoring the natural world to sustainable biodiversity and ecosystem health. Over the past three decades, the term has been embraced across disciplines. Rewilding as a spiritual construct is a process of returning to our essential nature by embracing the earth and its wisdom. It is accomplished through intimate contact and connection with land, seasons, and the more-than-human intelligence at work in the world.

A rewilded approach to religious leadership shaped by the Celtic Christian tradition invites contemporary leaders and communities to seek out the wisdom of the natural world and the functioning of living systems found there as they develop new leadership models. Modern science, especially the field of biomimicry, has expanded our understanding of the innovative genius and deep wisdom of the more-than-human world. Using these lenses, this article will

offer an exploration of the wisdom of trees—a significant archetypal symbol in the Little Book and the Big Book—as one model for rewilded religious leadership and community influenced by biomimicry and reflecting the spirituality of the Celtic Christian tradition.

Celtic Christian Tradition

The Celtic Christian tradition flourished from 400–1000 CE in the British Isles, among those “least touched by the Roman occupation, the Irish, Welsh and highland Scots.”¹ The Celts are descended from the people described as Gaels by the Romans and Keltoi by the Greeks. They spanned the European continent, and over time emigrated and were driven to the furthest edges of Europe, settling in the British Isles, as we know them today. Esther de Waal writes that it was a faith forged on the fringes by people who knew little of Rome.²

As a predominantly oral tradition, Celtic Christianity had a “fluidity that allowed confluence with pre-Christian wisdom.”³ Early Christian missionaries, like Patrick and Columba, adapted their methods to the social and cultural mores of the people they encountered and enculturated Christianity with existing pagan religions. This made for a relatively smooth transition from pagan religion to Christian beliefs, as the new religion was grafted onto the old with little persecution.

Before exploring the characteristics of the Celtic expression of Christianity, we should note a word of caution that the history of the Celtic Christian Church is shrouded enough that one might be tempted to have an overly romanticized view of its history. However, no original writings of the founding saints exist—Patrick, Brigid, Columba—making it difficult to determine original

¹ Bradley, Ian. *The Celtic Way, 2nd Edition*. (London: London, Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd. 2003), xiii.

² De Waal, Esther. *Every Earthly Blessing: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition*. (Harrisburg, Morehouse Publishing, 1991), xvii.

³ Newell, John Philip. *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul: Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to What Our Souls Know and Healing the World*. (New York, Harper Collins, 2021), 6.

theological claims outside of the extant oral tradition and accounts that were written much later. Contemporary Celtic Christianity is a modern phenomenon, some of which is rooted in ancient practice, and some is modern invention and enculturation. Those who practice and embrace Celtic Christianity today live in a world that is vastly different from the one in the centuries in which this religious tradition flourished.

Nonetheless, the Celtic Christian tradition is an important reservoir of theological and practical wisdom for the Church today. Many Celtic Spiritual and Celtic Christian scholars and theologians and communities remain vibrantly active. With a deep understanding and appreciation of the presence of the divine and the goodness of God in all things, the Celtic worldview is fundamentally incarnational; some might say panentheistic. From its founding, it was generally non-hierarchical and gender inclusive in leadership, and they preferred tribal structures and clan ties over diocesan hierarchies. Celtic Christianity spread and developed through federated, relatively egalitarian monastic communities. Because of the influence of pagan religions, it included a very positive view of the natural world including human nature as well as an appreciation particularly for feminine deities.

The Celts have a deep sense of the sacredness of place, particularly forests, natural springs and wells. Everywhere you turn, even now in Celtic lands there is a sacred well dedicated to some saint. Celtic religious leaders often led an austere life in the woods, making homes in caves or creating small huts, like the famous beehive huts of Skellig Michael. The Isle of Iona in Scotland—a community founded in the sixth century by St. Columba—became the heart of Celtic Christianity and remains that today, although there are many strong ties to Ireland and beyond.

In addition to monastic leaders, there is a significant tradition of wandering teachers like John Scotus Eriugena, a sort of hybrid bard and preacher. Over the course of many centuries, the Celtic church was overrun by Vikings, and overcome and overruled by the Normans and the Anglican church.

The early Celts didn't invest in ornate edifices—the forest was their cathedral. As mentioned above, their deep belief in the

sacredness of all things was expressed in the belief that there are two books of Revelation: the Little Book, the Bible, the written word; and the Big Book, the natural world, the full utterance of God. In a fourth century Celtic Christian catechism, St. Ninian of Whithorn wrote “the fruit of all study is to perceive the eternal word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal and every man and woman.”⁴ St. Columbanus echoed this sentiment in the sixth century, “...understand the creation if you would wish to know the Creator...for those who wish to know the great deep must first review the natural world.”⁵

For Celtic Christians the whole world was a theophany. The great tradition of the high cross flows from this belief. They marked the place of outdoor worship and told the story of the Little Book in pictures, on the cruciform, as well as proclaiming the sacredness of the cosmos in the circle around the center—the story of divine love deeply embedded in the world. This belief was later affirmed in the seventeenth century by Alexander John Scott who wrote, “... sun, moon and stars, of earth and sea, of trees and flowers, of the bodies of men and women...It is through these that the divine is made known to us.”⁶

Leaders in the modern church are well trained in interpreting the so-called Little Book, organizational administration, and other necessary fields of study for the thriving of congregations. In agreement, Celtic theologian John Scotus Eriugena affirms the necessity of such skills when he writes, “Learn the words of scripture and understand their meaning in your soul; there you will discover the Word.” But he also encourages spiritual people to “know the forms and beauty of sensible things by your physical sense and see there the Word of God.”⁷ The Celts believe it was equally important to connect with this sense of the wildness of God and ourselves, the wild wisdom and

⁴ Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 59.

⁵ Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 59.

⁶ Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, 130.

⁷ John Scotus Eriugena, quoted in Mary C. Earle. *Celtic Christian Spirituality: Essential Writings — Annotated & Explained* (Nashville: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2011), 75.

revelation offered through deep relationship with the more-than-human world. Rewilding offers a framework to do just that.

Rewilding

Most people today live predominantly separated from much of the natural world. Humans are not as aware of their dependence on Earth's wisdom as they once were. The climate crisis has called some people of faith back to an awareness of our deep interconnection with the web of creation. But many have forgotten what it means to be in mutual relation to everything else—creatures, plants, forests, oceans, even one another. David Foreman, an ecological advocate and conservationist, coined the term “rewilding” in 1990 to describe the process of ecological restoration and wilderness recovery.⁸ To “rewild” is first to remember what it is to be truly interconnected, that humanity is not separate from nature; but rather essentially part of it.

This remembering then leads to deepening relationship with wildness in the world and in oneself. Victoria Loorz suggests rewilding refers to “the natural, innate way the world was created; not controlled or tamed or domesticated. Reclaiming wild is reclaiming who you are meant to be, who the world is meant to be.”⁹ Seen through the lens of spirituality, rewilding is a kind of coming home to one's roots, a recognition of the sacredness of the cosmos and all its members. It is then that the Big Book of creation can be appreciated as a wisdom tradition.

Rewilding as a spiritual practice is an active engagement with the fullness of Earth, the cosmos, and our place in it. This engagement renews an understanding and experience of the generative forces and wisdom at the heart of the more-than-human world. To nurture our wild soul, to ‘rewild,’ is to have experiences in nature that help to shape who we are and how we live. And specifically, as a spiritual practice, for vocational discernment, and for a communal ethos.

⁸ “What is Rewilding?” The Rewilding Institute, accessed: November 29, 2023, <https://rewilding.org/what-is-rewilding>.

⁹ Loorz, Victoria. *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us Into the Sacred*. (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 6.

A recent surge in the Wild Church (Forest Church) Movement, is a testament to the growing interest in rewilding as a spiritual practice. The Wild Church Network describes itself as an emerging movement. “Wild Church communities are responding to a call from deep within to change the way we relate to the natural world.”¹⁰ Wild churches are sometimes sponsored by existing congregations or synods and regional ecclesial bodies. Sometimes, they are independent or inter-spiritual, drawing wisdom from multiple wisdom traditions. These communities are committed to expanding the beloved community to the more-than-human world. “Forest Church,” writes Bruce Stanley, “isn’t just normal church happening outside; instead, it attempts to participate with creation.”¹¹

Several new training communities—Seminary of the Wild, Center for Wild Spirituality, Center for Spirituality in Nature—are meeting the academic, formation, and training needs of leaders for this kind of spiritual and religious engagement. Beyond preparing individuals to lead wild churches, they also offer practices for restoring connection with the sacred earth and a new kind of leadership in an age that calls for “equity, regeneration, and reciprocity.”¹² Rewilding is not exclusive to those who desire to lead in an Earth-based religious context. It impacts individuals and their leadership in any field. Rewilding meets a hunger that exists in many to connect with the earth and “...with a more manifest and creative God than the patriarchal distant figure often presented by established Western religion.”¹³

Rewilding leadership is a dynamic, multifaceted process within a “communion of subjects.”¹⁴ A rewilded leader is deeply connected

¹⁰ The Wild Church Network, accessed: June 19, 2024, <https://www.wild-churchnetwork.com/>.

¹¹ Stanley, Bruce. *Forest Church: A Field Guide to a Spiritual Connection with Nature*. (New York: Anamchara Books, 2014), 14.

¹² Center for Wild Spirituality, accessed: June 19, 2024, <https://www.wildspirituality.earth/>.

¹³ Stanely, *Forest Church*, 27.

¹⁴ Berry, Thomas, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2006), 17.

with their own unique wildness, their true self and vocation, their unique meant-for-ness, as well as the earth wisdom that can meet the needs of their unique context. Rewilding practice nurtures a recovery of a sense of wonder, sense of interconnection, and a sense of the numinous at one's fingertips. If religious leaders were encouraged to explore their sense of vocation within the context of creation and find their "most wild essence"¹⁵ in relation to the sacred world, new vitality and creative energy would flow through their leadering, as they began to embody the wisdom gleaned from the Big Book.

Biomimicry

One way leaders can begin to emulate the wisdom of the Big Book is through the spiritual practice of biomimicry. This is a new field of scientific study. Biomimicry is "...the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems."¹⁶ At the core of biomimicry is commitment to three truths: nature as a model, nature as a measure and nature as a mentor. Janine Benyus defines biomimicry as "the conscious emulation of life's genius."¹⁷ This posture toward the natural world opens the leader to the wisdom of the Big Book in practical ways.

Experiential knowledge of individual organisms and mature ecosystems leads to the understanding that they function the way religious leaders desire for their communities. "They self-organize into a diverse and integrated community of organisms with a common purpose—to maintain their presence, make the most of what is available, and endure over the long haul."¹⁸ Biomimicry as a leadership model invites leaders to explore and then take inspiration from or imitate nature's designs and processes to create more natural

¹⁵ Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 121.

¹⁶ Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 23.

¹⁷ Benyus, Janine M. *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), 2.

¹⁸ Benyus, *Biomimicry*, 248.

human models.

The Biomimicry Institute identifies ten unifying patterns in nature worthy of human study and imitation.¹⁹

Nature:

- ...uses only the energy it needs and relies on freely available energy.
- ...recycles all materials.
- ...is resilient to disturbances.
- ...tends to optimize rather than maximize.
- ...provides mutual benefits.
- ...runs on information.
- ...uses chemistry and materials that are safe for living beings.
- ...builds using abundant resources, incorporating rare resources only sparingly.
- ...is locally attuned and responsive.
- ...uses shape to determine functionality.

Leaders interested in exploring biomimicry in their context can attune to these characteristics in the world around them. Some will be more useful to their specific situation than others. The practice of biomimicry has potential to create deep connection with the web of life, which will then become a source of wisdom and insight into one's own experience of the world and leadership.

Rewilded Leadership in Action

With the framework in place (see image 1), we turn to the Big Book to explore a few examples from the wisdom of the more-than-human world – the forest superorganism – and imagine how it can enlighten religious leadership for a healthy and sustainable future. A superorganism, of which the forest is only one example, is an integrated whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Meg Wheatly introduced the concept into the field of organizational

¹⁹ "Nature's Unifying Patterns," Biomimicry Institute, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://toolbox.biomimicry.org/core-concepts/natures-unifying-patterns/>.



Image 1: Components of a rewilded leadership model

change decades ago in her work with living systems theory.²⁰ Native and naturalized trees are present in almost every ecosystem, except the extreme desert. Trees are rich with religious symbolism and many religious traditions as well, particularly in the Celtic Christian tradition where trees are regarded as sources of ancient wisdom. The forest is also a dynamic and highly adaptive landscape, and so serves as a fertile example here. The health of a forest superorganism can be measured by many characteristics.²¹ The forest contains significant biodiversity and develops innumerable cooperative relationships within the system. Through those connections a massive amount of information is exchanged. The forest inhabitants live long, complex life cycles which leads to system stability. Forests optimize rather than maximize, producing quality over quantity. Forests conserve their energy by recycling dead organic material for their health, resulting in low entropy (energy loss). Because of these factors, a healthy forest is highly adaptable even as each participant in the ecosystem lives in balance

²⁰ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1999).

²¹ Benyus, *Biomimicry*, 252-3.

with the whole. The biomimetic unifying patterns of nature (mentioned above) are alive and at work in a healthy forest.

Trees offer wisdom into the passage of time and seasons, and the wise leaders learn from them to ask, “what is it the season for?” Trees have an innate sense of time and temperature. Their internal systems respond accordingly. Freezing temperatures lead to restorative sleep/dormancy in winter. If they don’t get this rest, they will die. Warming temperatures and lengthening days lead to sap rising, flowering and leafing, and fruiting for some. Trees release their seeds at the right time, and their leaves eventually, too, which provide hummus for the next cycle.

There is an abundance of wisdom in this cycle. And it is a cycle to which many leaders and communities are not attuned. Human communities often ignore nature’s rhythms, keeping the lights on all year, producing year-round without significant seasons of rest and fallowness. They attempt to perpetually seed and harvest. A first step toward an embodiment of this wisdom is to simply become aware of the rhythms and seasons of a particular community. Bring attention to energy levels throughout the year. A leader can then discern if the rhythms that exist are healthy and sustainable. All organisms in the natural world live by some rhythm. The Celtic tradition embraces the “wheel of the year” and attunes its festivals accordingly as a basic spiritual practice. The dark half of the year and the light half of the year rooted in the solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter festivals, which mark the unfolding of nature’s seasons and human connection to this powerful Earth wisdom.

Any community or organization can examine their own rhythms and the wisdom (or lack of wisdom) that guides it. There may be a rhythm already at work, like the liturgical calendar or academic year. A rewilded leader discerns and finds ways to embody sustainable patterns within the organization/organism or ecosystem in which they lead and to co-create sustainable rhythms that lead to flourishing.

A forest only thrives through cooperative diversity. No single organism can do everything to sustain life. Members of the ecosystem fundamentally depend on one another to survive—that is how the forest is greater than the sum of its parts. Trees are—

like humans—innately social beings who thrive only in community. All the forest's beings rely on one another, including multiple tree species, fungi, and animals. At the heart of this interconnected system is mycorrhizal fungi. Suzanne Simard calls this system of mycorrhizal and root connections the Wood Wide Web.²²

A forest superorganism has virtually no hierarchy or top-down management, and no one tells anyone what to do. Information and resources flow among and between them, and teams grow from the edges out, in self-managed units that form and dissolve around opportunity and risk when and where it occurs. The forest community is highly fluid and therefore highly adaptable.

Information is shared across the mycorrhizal network. It is a unifying network. “They weave a web of reciprocity, of giving and taking. In this way, the trees all function as one because the fungi have connected them. Through unity, survival. All flourishing is mutual. Soil, fungus, tree, squirrel, boy—all are the beneficiaries of reciprocity.”²³

While this network is available to humans just below the surface of any gathering of trees, there are some remarkable examples in the world. One is a fungal network in Eastern Oregon's Malheur National Forest²⁴ that is more than three square miles, all underground. It is one of the oldest organisms in the world. Another, called Pando,²⁵ is in Utah. This single aspen root system occupies over 160 acres and is believed to have first grown after the last ice age. Surely, this kind of ancient wisdom can be useful for religious communities. The forest invites leaders to consider the health and diversity of their networks. A leader can reflect on their engagement:

²² Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf., 2021), 300.

²³ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 2013), 20.

²⁴ “Strange but True: The Largest Organism on Earth Is a Fungus,” Scientific American, accessed: June 19, 2024, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/strange-but-true-largest-organism-is-fungus/>

²⁵ “Pando – (I Spread)”, USDA Forest Service, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/fishlake/home/?cid=STELPRDB5393641>

- Is any single person doing too much?
- Is this community networked with diverse leaders and organizations for the mutual benefit of all?
- Is one person doing too much?

Perhaps there are ways to support enhanced commitment to unique roles within the Church and patterns of engagement and information sharing across the network. The cooperative diversity of a forest makes it sustainable. Trees "...are in a web of interdependence, linked by a system of underground channels, where they perceive and connect and relate with an ancient intricacy and wisdom that can no longer be denied."²⁶ The rewilded leader can imitate the forest by nurturing a similar life-giving network.

Forests are also places of nurture in both life and death. Mother trees—the oldest trees in the forest—are the “hubs at the center of forest communication” who pass their wisdom along to the next generation.²⁷ Highly intricate maps of the communication pathways across the forest floor have been identified and studied. Through this study, mother trees (also called ‘node’ trees; indicated by the largest, darkest circles in image 2) are known to share tree knowledge with vast networks of trees from seedlings to old growth.

Mother trees also populate the forest, by regularly generating hundreds of seeds that are dispersed widely by various pollinating processes. Given this abundance of seeds it is important to also note that “statistically speaking each tree raises exactly one adult offspring to take its place.”²⁸ The forest will optimize rather than maximize, and it is careful not to draw down its resources, thus conserving energy. Given the importance of mother trees to the health of the forest, one might assume that the loss of any mother tree would be potentially disastrous for the entire system.

²⁶ Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees*. (London, William Collins. 2017), 4.

²⁷ Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*, 29.

²⁸ Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*, 29.

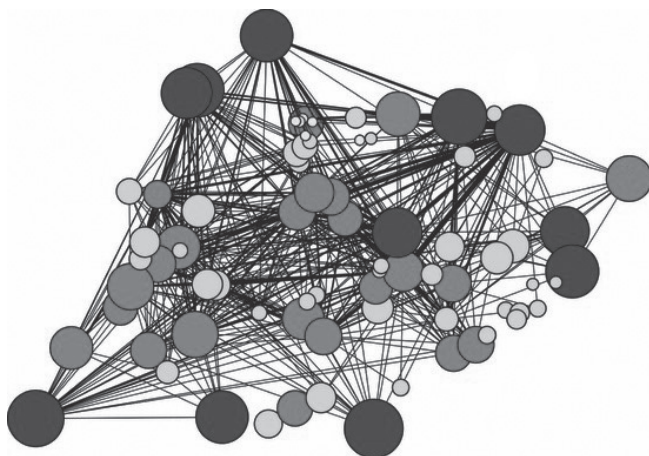


Image 2: A diagram of a fungal network that links a group of trees, showing the presence of highly connected “mother trees.”²⁹

But the loss of any single mother tree does not unravel the whole network. The connections those trees created in life enable the rest of the trees to cope with stress and adaptation because of the wisdom passed down to them from the mother tree. In death, mother trees become nurse logs, who nourish the next generation of trees and plants, while also feeding other creatures in the ecosystem. Up to one-fifth of the forest’s inhabitants are fed by decomposing trees. Their death also makes way for the next generation, supporting seedlings until they can support themselves.

Again, there is significant wisdom for the rewilded leader concerning leader development and flourishing. How could existing leaders embody a mother tree approach to engagement in the Church? There are implications for eldering and formation in all age groups and structures where learning and leadership training occur.

Nurse log wisdom seems particularly important for communities at the end of their life cycle. Rather than resist the idea that all organisms die, leaders can embrace the nurturing posture of the

²⁹ “Exploring How and Why Trees ‘Talk’ to Each Other,” Yale Environment 360, accessed June 19, 2024, https://e360.yale.edu/features/exploring_how_and_why_trees_talk_to_each_other

nurse log that leads to more life. Imitating the nurse log leads to a radical gifting of resources and feeding not only new church starts, but the entire ecosystem, including organizations and people who don't identify as congregation members. The nurse log does not share her resources exclusively with their own offspring, but with a diversity of organisms, all of which contribute to the life of the interconnected ecosystem.

These are just three examples from one kind of superorganism. There is a massive volume of Big Book wisdom to explore. The rewilded leader embodies a posture of deep listening and mutuality with the more-than-human world. They regard the Big Book as divine revelation, worthy of study and emulation.

A word of caution to the leader who sees an opportunity to expand their leadership framework through rewilding and biomimicry. Celtic teacher John Philip Newell offers this wisdom rooted in the teachings John Scotus Eriugena. "We need to read both books...the sacred text of scripture and the sacred text of the universe. If we read only the Little Book, we will miss the vastness and wildness of the utterance, everything vibrating with the sound of the divine. If we read only the Big Book, we are in danger of missing the intimacy of the voice, for the book of scripture calls us to faithfulness in relationship, including faithfulness to strangers, refugees, widows, and the poorest among us."³⁰ The two books complement one another. Celtic theologian Ken McIntosh claims "I don't believe nature unassisted can provide all the elements of a healthy, well-balanced spiritual life."³¹ So religious leaders must also engage the Big Book with tools used in study of the Little Book. Both require and deserve careful reading, study, and discerning application to lived experience. Patience and regular practice—engagement with the natural world—will lead to deeper understanding and meaningful application of its wisdom in the life of the Church.

In this time of change and uncertainty in the world and the Church, leaders facing significant challenges in their organization

³⁰ Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, 88.

³¹ Stanely, *Forest Church*, 11.

can turn to a relatively untapped source of leadership insight, the ancient wisdom of the earth. In the natural world and in superorganisms like forests, one finds life's genius and the revelatory presence of the sacred power of life. Mutual relationship with the more-than-human world in a posture of humility and openness, opens the way to receiving ancient wisdom. When leaders rewild, a whole new landscape for understanding leadership emerges. Combined with human creativity and ingenuity, leaders can mimic biological patterns and processes to find new, dynamic models of leadership which will not only forge a sustainable future, but one in which all can thrive.

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SYNODALITY AND THE MOVE TOWARD A COLLABORATIVE ECCLESIAL FUTURE

EMILY DYKMAN

Abstract

Synodality is an ecclesial definition that re-emerged during the papacy of Pope Francis in the Roman Catholic Church. Synodality defines church in a way that requires the entire Church body's presence and voice. This definitional shift is potentially complicated by assumptions from church regarding their authority and capacity to name correctly their understanding of the faith. This article will discuss the historical nature of synodality in the Roman Catholic Church and the potential of its recent clarification to draw forward a more participatory hierarchical ecclesiology. Concerns will be noted about the lack of preparation for this process and the possible difficulties that could have been avoided.

Before the church can consider any new leadership form, it must first attend to its culture and the necessary change required for a foundation to be laid that is receptive to a new way of leading.¹ As a Roman Catholic laywoman, I have been convinced for most of my adult life that the vision of the Second Vatican Council could only be fully realized when my role within the church holds value just

¹ The use of “church” and “Church” throughout this article is potentially confusing to the reader. When the term is capitalized, I intend to discuss specifically the Roman Catholic Church as a unique ecclesiology. In those places in which church is mentioned in a lower case it references the entire Body of Christ, all Christian churches that are facing change.

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as much as the role of the clergy.² The recent Synod on Synodality has the potential to give the church a glimpse of that realization; however, it is only a blink of the potential that lay ahead.³ In what follows, I offer what I believe is relatable across ecclesial traditions regarding exploring different religious leadership models. The models themselves are only sustainable with careful preparation and understanding of the needed cultural change that will allow these models to be more than a flash in the pan, or dependent on a particular leader.

The practices inherent in synodal ecclesiology were demonstrated in the New Testament and early church. The ecclesiology suggested in both *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Lumen Gentium*, constitutions promulgated during the Second Vatican Council, restores and updates the practice while also establishing it as a way of gathering the bishops of the church on a regular basis.⁴ Pope Francis began his papacy by establishing synodality as the ecclesiology that would frame his practice of leadership. In particular, Massimo Faggioli, professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova, notes that Pope Francis's encouragement of those who were gathered in the square when he was newly elected to pray over him, acknowledges a key component of synodality, the *sensus fidei fidelium* (the sense of the faith that deeply rooted in the people of God who receive that

² In particular, the Second Vatican Council called for the “full, conscious, and active participation” of the entire church in real and meaningful ways. In addition to engagement within the work of the church, the constitutions also highlighted the importance of unity over particularity, which has been interpreted by many to be a focus on the importance and value of the laity being comparable to that which has historically been applied primarily to the clergy.

³ Pope Francis opened this three-year process in October 2021 by asking for a listening and dialogue process to happen first at the individual diocese/church with each year moving into progressively more global discussions. The culmination of the process occurred in October 2023 with discussion taking place at the Vatican with laity (young and old) gathered at tables with vowed religious and clergy (at all levels of ordination) to discuss and listen to one another about the challenges faced by the church.

⁴ Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996).

faith).⁵ Pope Francis's vision from the very beginning of his papacy was that synodality would refer to "not some of the bishops some of the time but all of the church all of the time."⁶ The theological affirmation of *sensus fidei* is an affirmation that divine revelation is not limited to only some of the Church, but the whole body of the faithful is the recipient of divine revelation.

The synodal process is not new to Roman Catholic ecclesiology but has become uncommon in practice. Fr. John O'Malley, a Jesuit historian, claims that while the common reference for a synod is the Synod of Bishops established by Pope Paul VI as the Second Vatican Council was ending, the term refers to a collegial mode of governance which has been typical throughout the history of the church.⁷ "Syn-hodos" translated from its Greek root means "on the road together." Hannah Vaughan-Spruce cites Fr. James Mallon, founder of Divine Renovation Ministry, as linking syn-hodos to ex-hodos (exodus, or "leaving to go)."⁸ It is a process that requires leaving something behind to walk forward together as church. At the heart of this shift is the act of listening and communal discernment.

Historically, a shift toward ultramontanist in the late 1800s, particularly following the First Vatican Council, led to a disproportionate authority dogmatically aligned with the papacy through both juridical supremacy and infallibility. However, a direct and concerted effort among conciliarist bishops who sought a return to episcopal collegiality, the baptismal priesthood of the laity, the *sensus fidelium*, an ecclesial reception, led a shift in ecclesiology during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

⁵ Massimo Faggioli, "From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis's 'Listening Primacy'." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): 352-369.

⁶ Ormond Rush, "Dei Verbum and the Roots of Synodality." *Theological Studies* 84 (2023): 570-591.

⁷ John W. O'Malley, "The History of Synodality: It's Older Than You Think." *America*, February 17, 2022: sec. 3, para. 3. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/02/17/synodality-history-john-omalley-242081>

⁸ Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, "Should We be Skeptical About Synodality?" *Church Life Journal*, March 9, 2023: sec. 2, para. 2. <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/should-we-be-skeptical-about-synodality/>.

The documents of the Council do not discard papal authority but, instead reestablishes the importance of the people of God and their rightful both consultation and reception of church teaching. A result of the Second Vatican Council was the renewal of regular synods of Bishops to be held annually. In regard to etymology, *synod*, a Greek term meaning a small and less authoritative gathering was used repeatedly in the documents of the Council, the Latin term that typically denoted a general or ecumenical council. The terms have a tendency throughout the history of the church to be used almost interchangeably. This is mentioned primarily to offset the common concern that synodality is a neologism, rather than a long-standing tradition of the church.

Synod on Synodality

The call by Pope Francis for the Roman Catholic Church to engage in a three-year synodal process engaging local, diocesan, and global perspectives enacted a mediation between the papal authority of Vatican I and the tradition of communion that was enacted in the Second Vatican Council. This mediation mimics what Stephen Pope, Professor of Theology at Boston College, in his collection of essays entitled *Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* names participatory hierarchy.⁹ The focal point of post-Vatican II ecclesiology, rooted in *Lumen Gentium*, is unity. Based solely on the ordering of chapters in the dogmatic constitution on the Church it is clear that the Church becomes regarded as a trinitarian, relational, entity which is first mystery, second the people of God, and only after establishing that unity does the document address the church as hierarchical. This unity emerges not only related to consultation but also reception of doctrine. Shaun Blanchard, Assistant Professor of Theology at Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University in Baton Rouge, cites the French Church historian Jacques Gres-Gayer in explaining the patristic model of synodal ecclesiology as a “participant model”

⁹ Stephen Pope, *Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 113.

in which unity among the different local churches is present and a “common faith...belonged to the entire body and therefore needed not only to be expressed but ‘verified’.”¹⁰ “Witnesses” who served as representatives of those local churches gave voice to the particularity of their local church “with the purpose of exposing, under the assistance of the Spirit, the faith of the Church Catholic.”¹¹ For decisions to be authenticated it was necessary for acceptance to be “along a reverse path” from the council to the local communities.¹²

When the synodal process began, Pope Francis instructed bishops across the world to hold opportunities within local churches for dialogue around key theological ideas and to hear directly from the laity about their experience of being church. Most of the laity did not know how to engage in a process of both listening and speaking these ideas; nor did all of the clergy know how to facilitate this process. In some places, the lack of intentional preparation for the process led to a missed opportunity to include every necessary voice. In some instances, the process brought forward many interesting insights about being church, but the information gathered was then summarized by one individual, or a small group who may or may not have fully understood (or heard) what had been said.

The Roman Catholic tradition is often accused of being averse to change. A common analogy used is that of steering a large ship when thinking about change in the Roman Catholic Church. Nothing can move quickly and so it is small incremental change. The synodal ecclesiology that Pope Francis has engaged from the moment he was named to that position will take time to fully implement. It is a slow and intentional process that cannot be rushed if real cultural change is to take place. Cultural change is the only way that the value of reform can be fully appreciated.

¹⁰ Shaun Blanchard, “Synodality & Catholic Amnesia: The Conciliarist Tradition Gets a New Name.” *Commonweal* 150(9) (2023): sec. 3, para. 13. Accessed 8/3/2024. <https://www2.viterbo.edu:2278/login.aspx?direct=true&Auth-Type=ip,cpid&custid=s6222504&db=aph&AN=172374332&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹¹ Blanchard, sec. 3, para. 13.

¹² Blanchard, sec. 3, para. 13.

Nathalie Becquart, who currently serves as the under-secretary to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, asserts that “one cannot develop synodality in the Church without training in discernment.”¹³ Others, like Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, national coordinator of Divine Renovation UK, refer to this as developing one’s ‘synodal muscle’ in order to sustain the movement beyond a singular event.¹⁴

Much has been developed regarding individual or solitary discernment, but what is needed is the development of practices that lead toward communal discernment. To move the Church in any direction will require communal discernment of God’s activity in guiding this movement. Susan Beaumont, congregational consultant, coach, and spiritual director, in her book “How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season,” defines discernment as “a quality of attentiveness to God that, over time, develops our sense of God’s heart and purpose in the moment.”¹⁵ While the church has a long tradition of communal discernment, the shift toward mindfulness has relegated it for many to an individualized practice for vocational awareness. At the communal level, discernment replaces decision-making. It is less about problem-solving and more about listening and grounding. And at the heart of the matter, discernment requires time, patience, and formation. Hannah Vaughan-Spruce considers this to be building “synodal muscle” which is needed for the practices of listening to become embedded.¹⁶ She also mentioned the importance of the framing of all the baptized being agents of evangelization. She writes “It is not enough to have a leadership team: a culture of healthy leadership can be embedded throughout the parish where every single individual has an understanding of their own leadership, of the power of the Holy Spirit that dwells

¹³ Nathalie Becquart, “Synodality: A Path of Personal and Communal Conversion.” *The Way* 61, no. 3 (2022), 69.

¹⁴ Vaughan-Spruce, sec. 5, para. 6.

¹⁵ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 68.

¹⁶ Vaughan-Spruce, sec. 5, para. 6.

within them.”¹⁷ My doctoral research studied what might occur if a small group of leaders intentionally discerned together. The research revealed a number of challenges to initiating and sustaining change that have implications for the call by Pope Francis for the Roman Catholic Church to become more synodal in its ecclesiology.

Cultural Considerations and Sustained Change

Any shift in ecclesiology requires a shift in practice and culture. Change, intentional change, without preparation is unsustainable. Deeply embedded cultural assumptions will quickly derail attempts for change. The Roman Catholic Church, specifically, but true of most churches, holds strong cultural assumptions about the role of clergy and laity; power and authority; the valuing of some voices over others. It is a mutual holding of assumptions that need to be carefully and intentionally reformed. In this discussion, I consider cultural norms to be primarily specific to a congregational setting. Even when, on the systemic level, change is initiated, it will be approached in a particular manner at the local level. It is at this local level that I consider the need for a consideration of change theory as a structure that might guide attention to culture.

In my doctoral research, I proposed a cultural change involving a lessening of reliance on clergy leadership within a parish. My intent was to develop a practice in which the parish council spent about a half hour prior to their monthly meeting engaged in the practice of Dwelling in the Word.¹⁸ The parish council is an elected body of nine each serving three-year terms. The sample involved in the intervention included three members who were in the last of the three-year term, three who were in their second year, and three just beginning their service on the council. In addition to these nine elected representatives, the council included three appointed trustees and liaisons from the parish school board and women’s council. The parish priest was also present for the interventions but

¹⁷ Vaughan-Spruce, sec. 5, para. 4.

¹⁸ “Dwelling in the Word” is a *lectio divina* that was developed by Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick Kiefert of Church Innovations. For more information see Ellison, Pat Taylor and Patrick Kiefert, “Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook.” St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations Institute, 2011.

chose not to participate in hopes of removing himself as a potential variable in the research.¹⁹ My goal was to see how this shift in practice might impact the kinds of conversations that took place within the parish council meetings.

Prior to the introduction of this practice, the council was spending a similar amount of time in Eucharistic adoration.²⁰ The resulting meetings prior to the introduction of Dwelling in the Word had been primarily the committee reports of what had already taken place and the priest talking about his ideas for new opportunities. I was told by one council member during an interview that when the Dwelling in the Word practice was introduced it was the first time in three years on the council that she had actually talked to someone during the meeting. This information was surprising to me, but what was even more surprising was the incredible resistance among the council, those elected by the congregation to be their leaders, to offer personal insights about a reading from the gospel and to view themselves as leaders. Only one person on the council spoke directly in his interview about the ways he saw himself as a leader in the church like how he was a leader in his job. He stated, “I typically move into leadership roles ... I serve in that kind of capacity at work and so I feel like I can contribute the most, typically, in some sort of leadership role.”²¹ The unexpected for me in this intervention was the resistance to talking about scripture.

To better understand what took place during the interventions, I recorded and took notes during the Dwelling in the Word session each month and remained present at the parish council meetings as an observer to note the language used as well as the prevalence of lay voices in the meetings. Using the transcripts of the interventions

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that some of those interviewed shared concern for the priest's lack of participation in the discussion, especially when questions arose around interpretation of the passage. Because the priest understood the nature of the research project and the question that guided it, he knew his voice would potentially undermine the process.

²⁰ Eucharist Adoration is an important practice in the Catholic church, particularly during this year of the National Eucharistic Congress in the United States. However, one of its limits is that it is primarily silent and individualized and doesn't engage people with one another in dialogue and listening.

²¹ Dykman, 152.

and the meeting that followed them, I was able to work toward two key theoretical codes that are particularly related to the shift toward synodality that has been occurring in the church. The first code was framed as “relationality as the core of mission” that can be seen in emerging language about the relationship among being sent, the attitude needed for those who are sent, and relationship as a component of evangelization.²² The second code was framed as “concerns about interpretation of scripture” and focused on statements that showed concern about diversity of ideas and variety of interpretation.²³ In many of the comments made by participants, an assumption that uniformity of interpretation was necessary emerged. One participant noted “... we can’t even within our little group agree on anything reading the same passage, everything being identical; even in a small group [the comments are] always different and changing.”²⁴ It was interesting to see how behaviors developed over the ten-months in which the process took place. In particular, comfort began to develop in sharing ideas from one’s life in connection to the scripture passage used for the intervention.

The theoretical codes from the interventions also integrated with the codes that emerged in the baseline and endline interviews conducted with some of the participants in the intervention. Of the twelve people who were serving on the parish council, seven participated in the baseline interview and five participated in the endline interviews. Although the sample size was small, these interviews helped to unearth attitudes that were the foundation of the observations during the interventions. The theoretical codes that eventually emerged from the baseline interviews included the following two ideas. First, the “importance of faith formation beyond confirmation” was a code that framed concerns about “passing on faith,” “service or leadership,” “authority,” and “expertise of lack of training.”²⁵ The second code, “importance of fellowship and belonging” focused on expressions of either “belonging or disenfranchisement” and the “need for fellowship” in the congregation.²⁶

²² Dykman, 143.

²³ Dykman, 143.

²⁴ Dykman, 162.

²⁵ Dykman, 153.

²⁶ Dykman, 153.

The first code, “importance of faith formation beyond confirmation” noted concerns or fear about the perceived failure to adequately pass on the faith to the next generation as evidenced in the limited participation in parish life. It was difficult to ascertain from the interviews who the respondents recognized as responsible for passing on the faith, but it was clear that the majority of learning about faith and engagement with scripture took place within the celebration of the Mass.²⁷ Few of the interviewees noted specific practices of reading and reflecting on scripture. Most noted confusion or a lack of conscious use throughout their day. One noted that the Roman Catholic tradition is not one to carry a Bible around. The interviewee noted “We’ve been Catholics all our lives and we don’t study the Bible.”²⁸

In consideration of framing participation as either service or leadership, all but one interviewee considered their participation on parish council to be service. The discussion often moved toward language indicating that their role of was to put into action the ideas and vision of the priest. Some of this was a carry-over of the previous concern about passing on the faith. For many this requires a certain level of expertise and knowledge that the typical parishioner did not feel they carried. It was also a product of uncertainty about the role they played as a member of the parish council. Unclear boundaries led to misunderstanding about authority and decision-making. This was the third axial code which is important to note. For some interviewees, an absence of preparation or training for their role was noted and that became the source of their uncertainty. Due to this lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, many considered themselves to be the ones who put ideas into action.

The confusion and concern about authority and preparation can be tied to a lack of on-going faith formation for the typical

²⁷ The project was mixed methods and included a survey of the entire parish about engagement and belonging, among other themes. In that survey, it is important to note that the highest number of respondents noted their engagement with scripture was primarily during the Mass when reflected on by the clergy in the homily.

²⁸ Dykman, 149.

Roman Catholic parishioner. Standard practice is for one to be confirmed in the Church as a high school student around the age of 15 or 16. For many, this is the end of their formal faith formation, and little is considered necessary beyond one's own interest in study. The themes that emerged in my research began to develop a hunch that this limited or stalled engagement in faith formation among this particular group of individuals (and the larger church as well) led to assumptions about their authority and function. The Roman Catholic Church, as a hierarchical system, located the primary decision-making authority in the parish in the position of the priest. That reality seems to lead those in elected leadership positions to assume a helper position; one whose role is to do the footwork for the decisions made by the priest. The role assumed no function in advising or offering vision to the priest on behalf of the parish community. However, the role of a Parish Council is to be one of advising the priest in making decision in the best interest on the parish community. The uncertainty expressed by a number of interviewees about the church's structure and the council's purpose seemed to unearth uncertainty regarding the fundamentals of the faith. Confusion or concern about the right interpretation or feeling confident about passing on the faith appropriately to the next generation was regularly mentioned. At times this confusion seemed to be caused by faith formation that was stalled after confirmation, at other times the concern emerged from a sense that the laity lacks the authority to offer interpretation of scripture.

Research Findings

In the endline interviews, three theoretical codes emerged. First, "clarifying the system of authority" noted a shift in understanding toward a growing recognition and claiming of lay authority (a small shift, but the beginning of an openness to something much bigger in time) and an understanding that scripture is both engaging and challenging. Second, "the complexity of building community" framed themes of the importance of conversation and the need to balance fellowship with financial needs of the community. Third,

“developing a comfort with change or the new” framed new ways of talking about change and balancing diversity and consistency.²⁹

As mentioned earlier, the priest engaged in every intervention, but intentionally did not engage in moments in which an explanation was requested. These teaching moments included questions posed by participants about the interpretation of the passage. The absence of this teaching authority was a source of frustration for some participants who had come to expect answers from the priest when confusion arose. Their reliance on his voice was quickly apparent. This led participants to better realize that scripture is complex and may lead to a variety of observations and understandings. Also, over the course of multiple interventions, the participants became increasingly more comfortable with the process and took the risk to speak on their own behalf. This particular component of my study has deep implications for the synodal process that was initiated by Pope Francis. The working document for the diocesan-level discussions required individuals to talk about their experience of being Roman Catholic, their concerns about the Church, and how they understood key facets of their faith. These questions came with very little preparation or process to help participants develop to level of trust in their own voice.

The third code also is particularly relevant to this discussion. This theme emerged from a deeper analysis of statements made about change or lack of change among participants. It appeared that all change is not viewed in the same manner. Those that embraced the diversity of reflection within the interventions seemed more open to the possibility of the practice benefiting the church as regards fellowship and faith sharing. Change, or difference, was described in some instances as being the work of the Holy Spirit while others saw it as a detriment to the community. Consistency and like-minded thinking were viewed by some as important, while others were willing to accept various interpretations of scripture.

This theoretical code recognizes the cultural discomfort with change, but the recognition within the council that change is needed or necessary. This theme shows the opportunities and boundaries

²⁹ Dykman, 167.

that are present in the community for movement from the present clergy-reliant culture that exists in the parish community. This code also draws the other two codes together as the development of a stronger sense of community and the clarification of the authority structures of the parish community will ultimately require change. The change that is necessary is one which develops the culture into one that understands the way in which authority and power is used in the system but is also open to the sharing of that power and authority. This shift is necessary in the church if the synodal process is to become embedded in its ecclesiology.

Framing Synodality with Change Theories

In reflection on this experience, I had entered the process knowing the encouragement of the Second Vatican Council for active participation of the laity as well as the insistence of *Dei Verbum* that the laity regularly reflect on scripture as a part of their prayer and faith life. I had not anticipated a core group of individuals who were either unaware or did not trust themselves in this process. The reality is that the Roman Catholic Church is now sixty years past the promulgation of the constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, but much of the change has not become embedded.

In his research on culture in organizations, Edgar Schein notes that while culture tends to include things like artifacts, beliefs and assumptions, it is behavior that becomes a strong indication of the beliefs within a system.³⁰ While a shift in the larger system of the Roman Catholic Church occurred following the Second Vatican Council, that shift did not become embedded in the behaviors of the local congregations on a consistent basis. Instead, the long-held idea that the laity did not have the capacity to read and reflect upon scripture remained within the community and challenged the very process that was hoped to have led to a larger shift in claiming of authority within the lay leadership.

The realization that there was a barrier for the cultural change predicted led me to seek out theories of change that would assist

³⁰ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 27.

in the shift I was hoping to initiate. Two theories grounded the work that moved forward. First, Kurt Lewin suggests a three-step change theory that is rooted in common sense, but gave language to what I knew needed to take place.³¹ Lewin's theory begins with the "unfreezing" of the system.³² This step requires an unbalancing of two forces, "driving forces" and "restraining forces."³³ It was clear that the practice of Dwelling in the Word was acting as a driving force within the council as it challenges the group to behavior differently than they had been expected to behave in the past. As the practice continued over nine months, using the same passage from the Gospel of Luke, I was able to note slow shift in the manner of discussion both in the Dwelling in the Word process and the meeting that took place after the process concluded. This is a slow and incremental change similar to the shift from top-down hierarchy to participatory hierarchy. It is nonsensical to assume that this shift can happen quickly. The eventual shift is the second step in the theory. Finally, Lewin notes a need for "refreezing" or establishing a new norm.³⁴ In most systems, when a new practice is introduced, this may be the most difficult step. To establish a new norm is to shift thinking of the community to recognize that this is not a one-time experience, but a new way of being. Pope Francis has made this clear in his insistence that the church, its ecclesiology, is shifting toward synodality.

A second theory of change is offered by Prochaska and DiClemente regarding the readiness of a system for the process of change to begin.³⁵ The theory considers change as a cyclical, rather than linear, model. What is unique about this particular theory is its starting point. The first step noted in the theory is one of "precontemplation" or a lack of recognizing a need for change.³⁶ I would argue that this is the stage that the Roman Catholic Church found itself prior to Pope Francis announcing the synod, maybe

³¹ Kritsonis, "Comparison of Change Theories," 2.

³² Kritsonis, 2.

³³ Kritsonis, 2.

³⁴ Kritsonis, 2.

³⁵ Kritsonis, 3.

³⁶ Kritsonis, 3.

even the very announcement of his papacy. A systemic awareness of a need for change was not present. Pope Francis became, in many ways, the catalyst for the second stage of “contemplation.”³⁷ Much of the church was uncertain of what the problem or issue at hand was in some consistent or concrete way, a sense that something had changed or was changing began to emerge. It is a stage of consciousness. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, Pope Francis, from the beginning of his papacy, demonstrated the practice of synodality. Over the years that followed, he began to prepare the church for the change that was going to be taking place. This third stage, I believe, is where the local congregation was too distant to fully recognize what was taking place.

The laying of a foundation of practice that insisted on listening and participatory hierarchy was being demonstrated in some parts of the church but was not being universally modelled. Because of this lack of preparation, when Pope Francis announced the Synod on Synodality, much of the church was uncertain about how to engage in the process. The fourth stage, “action,” was difficult in many places due to a lack of preparation for the expected participation.³⁸ This had led to a difficulty in active engagement throughout every part of the system.

The final two stages of the theory are “maintenance” and “relapse.”³⁹ At this point in the process, the Church has not yet reached a stage of maintenance and is still very much engaged in steps of action. The synod will gather again in October 2024 and the recently published agenda shows that process will be similar to the last gathering. The content of the agenda has many concerned that the high priority issues that were raised in the previous synod (women’s ordination, LGBTQ+ outreach, etc.) will be left out, but I would argue that the Church is still trying to develop the process that will allow the discussion of these very contentious topics to be fruitful. Change in the norms of the church requires the development and regular practice of disciplines of listening.

³⁷ Kritsonis, 3.

³⁸ Kritsonis, 4.

³⁹ Kritsonis, 4.

The Potential of Synodality to Yield a More Collaborative, Shared Leadership

In conclusion, I suggest that the synodal process that has been intentionally engaged by Pope Francis has incredible potential to build a collaborative, shared leadership within the Roman Catholic Church (and likely other denominations) that acknowledges the reality of a hierarchical structure but also demonstrates the value of participation across the Body of Christ. This potential is at risk, however, without a simultaneously intentional process of formation within the church focused on practices of communal discernment.

It is not enough to suggest to the community that their role is important and valued without some form of intentional leadership formation taking place. Many separate their expertise in their career from the use of that expertise within the church. The research reveals comfort with discussing the role of the parish council as serving the church, but not necessarily being leaders in the church. Instead, this role is taken by those who have been ordained and trained theologically for that role. My research indicates that a focus on forming parish leaders through a practice as simple as Dwelling in the Word has the potential to lead people toward a stronger recognition of their important role in the church. It seems that the hesitancy to be identified as leader is rooted primarily in a lack of comfort with one's understanding or knowledge of church teaching. It is rooted in some level of fear of not being correct in their knowledge. I assert that continued engagement in practices like Dwelling in the Word throughout the body of the church will develop the endurance of the church to hear diverse voices with excitement rather than dread or concern. The synodal process asked for personal expression of the experience of the people of the Church, which is inevitably diverse. Concern about correctness may lead some voices to remain silent when theirs was singular in its statements.

The concerns noted above were also revealed within the synodal process that led to the Synod on Synodality in October 2023. The *Instrumentum Laboris* or working document of the Synod described

the synodal church as a “listening church.”⁴⁰ Merging this language with my research findings is troubling. My research results note an overarching assumption that unity required uniformity. At the local level, divergent voices may have been seen as problematic or conflicting with Church teaching. In reality, many of the diocesan reports from the first stages of the synodal process revealed expressed concerns about the role of women in the Church and Church’s response to LGBTQ+ members however it appears, from the reports following the synodal gathering in October 2023, that these themes were not the focal point. While many wrote about this shift away from controversial topics as a failure of the synodal, I would argue that it was necessary in order to develop the Church’s capacity to hear these themes openly. These topics require the Church to discuss the breadth of the Church’s theological tradition, which is a strong example of unity in diversity, not uniformity. The teaching of Roman Catholic Church can be understood as a broad tent that has well-defined boundaries but includes seemingly conflicting theological truths. This broadness of theological language and definition is complicated by the assumption that there is one correct interpretation. In the Dwelling in the Word process one stated concern was being in error in how one stated an interpretation of what they had heard or understood. I believe that it is this hesitancy that delays the Church in embracing its synodal nature.

While synodality is not a new ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church, it is one that has not been active present for long periods of its history. In the Second Vatican Council, the insistence on the participation of the laity was an intentional shift back to this synodal ecclesiology and was strengthened in the papacy of Pope Francis. This is a significant shift in culture within Catholicism that, if by-passed, is likely to result in repeated undermining of the authentic voices of the church at-large. We are offered a model of discernment in Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabas arrive at the Council of Jerusalem. In the passage, we read that “When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, as well as

⁴⁰ *Instrumentum Laboris*, 11.

by the apostles and the presbyters, and they reported what God had done in them.”⁴¹ As the church models this interaction, the basis of valuing the “report” today is rooted in the dignity derived from Baptism. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are poured into the baptized regardless of where they engage in order of ministry. The practice of hearing how God is present, or seemingly absent, in the lived experience of the entire church body is of value to the church. A synodal church is a church that is walking together engaged with one another and the world for the work of the Kingdom.

⁴¹ Acts 15:4 (NAB)

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BOOK REVIEW***CALLING IN CONTEXT: SOCIAL LOCATION AND VOCATIONAL FORMATION***

BY: SUSAN L. MAROS

Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2022

230 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-5140-0144-8

Many other books on the topic of vocation offer a template of practices that seem universally applicable. *Calling in Context* is a distinctively valuable tool that helps readers better understand how context affects questions of vocation and calling.

Dr. Maros begins with the assumption that “God is dynamically engaged in the universe God created, constantly forming, shaping, healing, and transforming lives” (1). Within this ultimate cosmic and divine context, she focuses on primary areas of social location that influence identity and calling: racial-ethnic-cultural identity, socioeconomic status or class, and gender. She explores ways that these areas of social location—depending upon the cultural context—can both help and hinder the pursuit of a calling for which one might be well-suited. The book concludes with an insightful consideration of intercultural and intersectional dynamics involved in vocational formation.

Maros brings her extensive experience in forming religious leadership to this book on vocational discernment. While much has been written on discernment, this book excels in how she attends to specific contexts in the discernment of vocation. Using stories from students with whom she has worked, she explores how they experienced limits or barriers to vocation discernment.

Because of its use of narrative, *Calling in Context* would be appropriate for a broad range of audiences. The narratives help to assist the reader in understanding the deep theoretical and theological frameworks to which Maros is attending. At the same time, the stories reveal a level of experience and insightful reflection

that may be overwhelming to an undergraduate with very little practical experience in religious leadership. Each chapter ends with a series of reflection/discussion questions useful in applying concepts within particular contexts. Biblical narratives ground each chapter's discussion.

As a professor at a small liberal arts university that values theology in the core curriculum, vocational discernment surfaces in most of my courses. Maros not only helps my students consider their own vocational calling, but she has also reminded me of my social location and privilege in the classroom.

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BOOK REVIEW***HEALTHY LEADERSHIP FOR THRIVING ORGANIZATIONS: CREATING CONTEXTS WHERE PEOPLE FLOURISH***

BY: JUSTIN A. IRVING

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2023

256 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-540-96480-9

Healthy Leadership for Thriving Organizations focuses on human flourishing in thriving organizations, and the ways that leadership can best contribute to it. As a professor of leadership at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Irving wields extensive insight and research experience in organizational leadership with a Christian perspective. Drawing from relevant leadership theories and current research, he shares wisdom and information based on his qualitative study of over two hundred executive-level leaders, offering a practical perspective for organizational leaders. His grounding assertion is that “true wisdom is found in God” (23). While many books on leadership focus on practical aspects of leading and influencing people, Irving addresses organizational-level leaders who lead at “the thirty-thousand-foot level” (3). It includes insights from Irving’s research, including executive leaders serving in businesses, churches, educational settings, and nonprofit organizations, which informs the audience well. Irving also provides other relevant information in this book, incorporating perspectives from diverse sources, significantly enhancing the book’s overall value for executive leaders.

Healthy Leadership is a comprehensive guide to creating settings where people and organizations thrive. Its central message is that healthy organizational leaders foster those environments, leading to flourishing individuals and organizations. His approach provides a theological framework for wise executive-level leadership practices rooted in biblical truth and current research data. The book is

structured into four parts over ten chapters, each part promoting an understanding of the leader's role in creating circumstances that develop an environment where people flourish.

The book's four parts start with part one explaining wisdom and providing background information about organizational leadership and flourishing/thriving. Part two deals with the executive leader's character and commitment. Parts three and four of the book address the importance of people within an organization and the leadership priorities for their executives, respectively. The book's second half adopts a practical approach, covering applied topics for organizational leaders. It emphasizes valuing people and delves into critical practices for "faithful and effective" leadership (132).

Irving emphasizes the ideal of thriving, which includes ethical values-based leadership in the working environments. Irving suggests that as an organization increases, the leadership behaviors associated with servant leadership and transformational leadership theories become more significant. In other words, Irving shows how organizational leaders should faithfully steward the organization toward mission accomplishment by nurturing environments or workplaces where people are inspired, empowered, and motivated.

Irving also emphasizes the delegated nature of a leader's responsibility to steward well. Organizational leaders should be responsible and accountable for the things entrusted to them. They should aspire to reflect "the image of God in us." A leader's "dignity" must be wedded to humility because the stewardship responsibility given to leaders is a delegated authority (27).

Irving's exploration of ethical considerations, and the need for trust in thriving organizations are significant aspects of the book. Irving establishes a pathway filled with research-based and theologically sound wisdom toward fostering the necessary environments where leaders inspire, trust, and develop authentic relationships, empowering people and motivating them to accomplish more. Irving uses direct quotations from his qualitative interviews with executive leaders to illustrate relevant themes and findings. Irving's book also includes biblical and theological perspectives on God's sovereignty, humanity's fallen nature, and Christ's redemptive work. Irving presents biblical and theological principles that are

foundational to organizational leadership. He also stresses God's grace in leadership practices, which includes values such as justice, mercy, humility, and courage. The identified principles should resonate with anyone who values trust and integrity because, as Irving suggests, these principles "build trust within organizations" (36).

The book's strength lies in Irving's multifaceted blending of research, theory, and practice with organizational and human flourishing concepts. These ideas should resonate with leaders who desire to create surroundings that contribute to healthy, effective organizations and are consistent with biblical truth. Irving asserts that organizational leadership should provide a setting where people "develop in a manner consistent with their design as those created in God's image" (23).

I highly recommend this book to those engaged in executive-level religious leadership, including senior and executive pastors, and those serving in nonprofit settings, such as presidents, chief executive officers, executive directors, and their board members. Irving's work is a must-read for anyone aspiring to executive-level leadership or is a student of organizational leadership studies. Although Irving's research did not include government or public sector executive leaders, this book would likely benefit those current and aspiring government leaders who serve in executive-level leadership roles, such as military and public sector chaplaincy executives.

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BOOK REVIEW***CHURCHES, CULTURES & LEADERSHIP: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF CONGREGATIONS AND ETHNICITIES, SECOND EDITION***

BY: MARK LAU BRANSON, JUAN F. MARTÍNEZ
Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2023
282 pp. paperback
ISBN 978-1-514-00287-2

In this practical theology of intercultural congregational life, Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez set out “to help men and women in our churches to see differently and to gain the skills and competencies needed for discerning God’s initiatives and embodying the gospel in multicultural contexts” (3). They use Branson’s five-step practical theology cycle both as the theoretical framework for their own presentation and as an example for researchers and leaders. They encourage leaders “to create environments that make God’s reconciling initiatives apparent in church life and in our missional engagement with neighborhoods and cities” (3).

Compared with the first edition, this second version sharpens clarity, better integrates and increases engagement with Scripture, and provides new content in chapter 3. The sharpened clarity shows up in theoretical and practical ways (added definitions, explanations, connections, and examples). These clarifications assist those in the classroom and congregations with understanding the topics at hand more precisely and imagining the implications of those for the church. Much of the clarification points to the connection between big concepts such as practical theology or missional ecclesiology and the importance of discerning and participating in the Holy Spirit’s activities in local contexts.

From my perspective as a Pentecostal/charismatic leader, I welcome Branson’s encouragement of the academic and ecclesial community to more fully engage with and integrate Scripture, as a more faithful development of step three in their practical theology

methodology. Furthermore, new content in chapter 3 provides an increased focus on racism and the ways the church has contributed to “societal wounds and inequities,” particularly in the face of the nation’s recent intensified polarization (22).

Since the original edition of the book has been reviewed previously, I will focus here on the new structure, arguments, authors, and theories in chapter 3, “Sociocultural Structures, Ethnicity, and Churches.” To their already-existing study of ethnicities and sociocultural resources, Branson and Martinez discuss three additional frameworks: colonization, caste, and race. They examine the ways “cultures (and ethnicities) shape barriers to the kind of congregational and community life that we believe the gospel envisions” (89). They begin with William Jennings’s argument that the history of colonization, with its segregation of identities and geographies, has produced in Western Christianity a misappropriation of authority and a theology of domination, coloring all ways of perceiving, thinking, acting, and relating to others.

The authors rely on Isabel Wilkerson’s historical and cultural research (although that work is not described in the book) to point out that race is a social construct used in the United States as a caste system to keep certain groups in their place. The authors praise Jemar Tisby’s work for the painful stories it tells, which the church needs to hear, about the ways the church has perpetuated the link between racism and caste. They also note that the practices he recommends are a positive way toward inclusion. These practices are based on a three-part framework—awareness, relationships, and commitment—which correspond with Branson’s leadership triad involving interpretive, relational, and implemental leadership.

Finally, Branson and Martínez employ Korie Edwards’ research to assert that White normativity tends to stay in place even when churches include components of other cultures and increase visibility of nonwhite members in their gatherings. She calls for the church to first and foremost mourn with those who mourn to overcome a superficial diversity that hurts more than it helps.

I recommend this book for use in research, teaching, and congregational leadership. While I have not yet had the opportunity

to utilize the new concepts in the second edition of Branson and Martínez's work, I have employed and benefitted greatly from several features of the book in many capacities—as a student to engage in critical thinking, as a researcher to shape my doctoral dissertation, as a professor to teach master's-level students how to engage in practical theology, and as a pastor for leading a congregation to own and engage the adaptive work it needed to face. The five-step practical theology cycle, along with the thoughtful theories and practical, relevant tools, offers a concrete, accessible, and thoughtful way to conduct critical thinking and theological reflection and to facilitate learning environments that encourage active engagement and transformation of students, congregants, and leaders.

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BOOK REVIEW***WHEN PROPHETS PREACH: LEADERSHIP AND THE POLITICS OF THE PULPIT***

BY: JONATHAN C. AUGUSTINE

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2023

152 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-5064-7918-7

In a cultural milieu where those of us teaching leadership and shaping ecclesial leaders seek to help pastors navigate high levels of political polarization in congregations, Jonathan Augustine offers help in thinking about preaching and leadership. Augustine is senior pastor of the St. Joseph African Methodist Episcopal Church in Durham, North Carolina. He brings decades of experience in the pulpit and a legal background to a book about prophetic preaching and church leadership.

Augustine defines prophetic preaching as “a ministry led by divine revelation and in response to specific social circumstances that often speak in opposition to the dominant culture” (3). He wants preachers to help hearers look at broad norms and not just personal life. They are to be “about promulgating God’s word from a liberative perspective that focuses on justice and equality within both the church and society at large and promotes human empowerment in response to social marginalization” (4). Augustine grounds this type of preaching in the three-fold office of Christ (prophet, priest, king). Augustine notes that prophetic preaching can challenge both majority-white and majority-Black denominations/congregations. (He doesn’t deal with other racial identities, as he focuses primarily on the history of Black and brown racism in America.) He knows that this style of preaching can be unpopular, especially as it involves lament/confession or acknowledging pain—which can be challenging when people are struggling with their own lives and would like comfort.

Augustine’s book is divided into five chapters and includes the

history of and argument for the Black church's decision to become involved in politics. He believes that this can be a road map for more mainline denominations. He addresses Christian nationalism and talks about reconciliation in America in three parts—salvific, social, and civil. Using Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. as examples of prophetic preaching and leadership, he issues a call to action and offers strategies for being prophetic preachers.

Chapter 1 showcases King as an example of preaching that points to the vertical and horizontal (sacred and secular) parts of life, noting that this is not always well received. Augustine makes a case that “Christianity compels political engagement in responding to oppressive social conditions” (20). He advocates for engagement that is political but not partisan. He defines Christian Nationalism as a “cultural and political framework that seeks to preserve a power often associated with America's original Anglo-Saxon hierarchy” (25).

In Chapter 2, Augustine gives a brief history of race in America and makes the theological case at the heart of this book. He calls for reconciliation in three parts—salvific, social, and civil. Salvific reconciliation is the healing of humanity's relationship with God through Jesus. Social reconciliation “deals with group dynamics in how classes of people interplay with one another” (56). It involves equal treatment, forgiveness, repentance, and repair. Civil reconciliation occurs “when prophetic leaders seek to institutionalize that concept of social reconciliation (equality *because* of Jesus) within secular systems of justice by demanding civil change” (61). All three parts are necessary for genuine reconciliation, and prophetic preaching will lift all three dimensions.

As the book proceeds, Augustine offers Bonhoeffer and King as examples of this type of prophetic preaching. (Chapter 3) Each came from a different perspective and faced different issues (Nazism and American segregation/Jim Crow). Then Augustine turns to immigration as a contemporary issue for prophetic preaching. (Chapter 4) He calls for civil disobedience and the offer of sanctuary. Finally, in chapter 5, Augustine gives strategies for prophetic preaching, including ways to connect the congregation's

past practices and inviting outside speakers and organizations to highlight sacred/secular connections.

I would recommend this book to a student or early preacher who wants to learn more about prophetic preaching and leadership. It offers a helpful introduction to the issues and a useful theological framework (reconciliation) for engaging political topics. I would like to see more examination of what, exactly, is prophetic leadership and preaching. Often, in America, it means social and political commentary. However, in the Old Testament, it also involves naming God's actions and presence. While these two are not separate, one of the dangers I see in some prophetic preaching is that it becomes poorly informed political advice from the preacher in the face of enormously complex issues.

Augustine opens the doors to conversations about this, and I'm grateful. Another issue for further consideration has to do with Ronald Heifetz's distinction between leadership with and without authority. When preachers (as leaders with authority) start to preach about issues where parishioners may disagree with them, they run risks of stirring up resistance and criticism. Often I see preachers act surprised and hurt when they preach "prophetically." Jay Augustine helps us start these conversations, perhaps between preachers and congregations, which seem critical in these tumultuous times.

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