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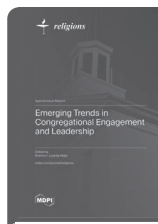
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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPRING 2026 *JRL***ROBERT K. MARTIN, EDITOR**

“There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens.”
...a time for taking on and a time for letting go,
...a time for editing and a time for ending the chapter.

It is time for me to step down as editor of the *Journal of Religious Leadership*. New adventures beckon me; new leadership is stepping up to take the mantle. It has been my great privilege and honor to serve the Academy of Religious Leadership in this role since 2018, and it will be my pleasure to continue serving on the *JRL* board for the next season. I am immensely grateful to the ARL for this opportunity to serve, and to the entire Editorial Board for their wise and tireless service. A special shout-out to our amazing management team: Michael Wilson (book editor), Elaine Garrison (copy editor), and my dear friend and production editor, Scott Simmons.

I’ve been a member of the ARL and on the *JRL* board since their respective establishments back in the early 2000s. Back then, “Religious Leadership” was an emerging focus in theological education, and Scott Cormode convened groups of scholars and practitioners to investigate and bring insight to this new field of practical theology.

At the turn of the millennium, new social, cultural, and technological forces were gaining steam—the internet, mega-churches, burgeoning plurality, spreading secularism, to name only a few. Conventional understandings of leadership were being convincingly challenged. It seemed everyone was talking about leadership, perhaps as a potential panacea for dealing with these tectonic shifts in society and culture. Institutions of church and society were crying for “heros” to step up and bring order to the growing chaos.

Well, today, things haven't settled down at all: "religion" is in even greater flux, and "leadership" is an even more contested space. Because new forms of religious community – including liberative, nationalistic, and fascist – continue to emerge and clash, and because chaos seems to be metastasizing, the need for spiritually wise, theologically incisive, and practically inventive leadership has never been greater. Thus, I believe the mission of ARL and its communicative arm, the JRL, "to enhance religious leadership education" is even more compelling.

Theme of the Spring 2026 JRL

This issue is constituted differently than is usual. It still contains book reviews, and it highlights one new, excellent article by an emerging scholar whom I am happy to introduce to our guild. But the bulk of the issue is comprised of essays that have been previously published under my tenure, as a type of thematic retrospective.

This issue of the JRL reflects how my mind has changed. Over the past eight years as editor, I've come to conclude that at this point in history, the *transition from colonial to post/decolonial frameworks and processes of constituting community hold tremendous promise for reorienting and reordering religious communities as well as society at large*. Although this transition may sound quite secular, I believe it resonates well with a robust incarnational and trinitarian practical theology. I will have more to say on this matter in the following paragraphs, but the upshot of all this is that *developing leadership* for the transition from coloniality to post/decoloniality should be, in my view, an exceedingly important priority for the Academy and its *Journal of Religious Leadership*.

While there have been many excellent JRL articles in the past eight years that I would love to republish for all kinds of reasons, the essays curated in this issue set forth the theories and practices of post/de-colonial community [and its catalyzing leadership(s)] that are foundational. If I were teaching courses in religious leadership now, I would assign these articles (helpfully bound together in this volume) as mandatory resources.

The first two articles are written by the Rev. Dr. **Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi**. The first, “Frameworks Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships,” offers an accessible and helpful explanation of colonialism, postcolonialism, and decoloniality – and their intersections – especially with regard to their bearing on how pastoral leaderships and ecclesial contexts in the United States can be reimagined beyond conventional norms to become more welcoming, diverse, and transformative. This essay sets the theoretical architecture for understanding what’s at stake in the transition from coloniality to new forms of human sociality offered by post/de-coloniality that are hybrid, variegated, and polyvocal, and in so being reflect more fully the wondrous diversity that is the Reign of God.

Lizardy-Hajbi’s second essay (part 2) explores myriad ways that “leaders and communities embrace and actualize undoing, subversion, resistance, and re-existencing ‘for the possibilities of an otherwise’.” “Processes Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships”, in effect, puts the aforementioned frameworks in motion, explaining how liberating leadership might facilitate movement to more communal forms of community: counter-hegemonic, intersubjective, polyvocal and creative communities of collective flourishing. Leadership, in this framework and process, needs to be reconceived as well, as fundamentally plural (leaderships). Lizardy-Hajbi challenges established colonial praxes of community with multiple strategies, designed to invoke “potential for envisioning alternatives beyond present existences.”

Lizardy-Hajbi’s frameworks and processes set the stage for a vivid example of a post/decolonial approach to Christian community and the type of leadership that will best facilitate its emergence. We find such an approach in “Liderazgo Mestizo/Mestizo Leadership: Relational Cross-Cultural Leadership for the Borderlands” by **Martin Rodriguez**. He proposes a model of cross-cultural leadership that cultivates shared life together within a profoundly pluralistic context. In at least indirect agreement with a post/decolonial approach, Rodriguez’ aim is to uncover the operative leadership in Latinx pastors that disrupts cultural homogenization and hegemonic (colonial) approaches to leadership. As an example

Rodriguez lifts up the corporate (collective) practice of *testimonios* by which persons are invited to tell their stories in both informal and ritualized settings, all for the sake of generating living discourse and webs of meaning that cultivate pluralistic *and yet* continuous self-understanding(s). With disciplined intentionality, the congregation reconstructs its identity by weaving together multiple stories of its people.

Despite our best intentions to disrupt and replace colonialistic structures, they remain stubbornly persistent. **Clara King's** essay, "Clericalism as a Configuration of Normative Expectations: A Practical Theology Investigation of Leadership for a Postclerical Future," helpfully explains how this dynamic operates between clergy and laity in Christian institutions. According to a definition offered by Charles Taylor, clericalism is the "reduction of the laity to passive bystanders where they should be active participants" (cited in King's introductory section). Although King does not explicitly characterize clericalism as a colonialistic artifact, nevertheless, I'm characterizing clericalism as an form of institutional colonialization by which clergy gain authority and resources and laity are disempowered and marginalized. King's analysis lifts up three leadership activities necessary to move beyond clericalism, all having to do with changing the normative expectations within communities and institutions.

In their own ways, both Rodriguez and King show us how resistance and revolution are possible by means of systematic, strategic, persistent, and coordinated action within communities. Of course, these are only two approaches; there are certainly many more from which we might learn. But the reality is, if we are to engage colonialistic frameworks and processes within our spheres of influence productively and transformatively, then we must learn a new and different way of being together.

If our intention is a more *communal* way of being, then we must learn from each other *through* our differences. This is the subject of the final article in our retrospective: "How Can We Learn Across Difference? A Conversation about Ethical Research and Writing vis-à-vis Identity and Positionality." Co-authored by **Robert Martin** and **Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi**, this article emerged from a

panel discussion at the 2022 annual conference of the Academy of Religious Leadership. I am including it with the others because of how it functions within the ARL guild, as a critical self-reflective exercise interrogating a) how we as researchers and practitioners learn across significant cultural differences, b) how we might do so more responsibly and ethically, and c) how we might *learn how to learn better and grow with one another*.

Our last article comes from an emerging scholar/practitioner, **Rene (Chengyuan) Guo**. In “How Under-Resourced Seminaries Become Missionally Indispensable,” Guo argues that struggling theological schools must, to survive, strategically renew their civic mission. From a trinitarian, Asian diasporic, postcolonial perspective, the essay critiques colonial and neoliberal scarcity cycles, proposing *Missio Dei as a liberating leadership framework to shift from institutional maintenance to theologically oriented public engagement*. Guo writes persuasively that such purposeful public engagement is the most viable and faithful strategy for differentiation, community support, and sustainable relevance.

FRAMEWORKS TOWARD POST/DECOLONIAL PASTORAL LEADERSHIPS

KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI

“We have seen that colonization materially kills the colonized. It must be added that colonization kills [us] spiritually. Colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts [humans], both colonizers and colonized.”¹

Abstract

The current state of Protestant Christianity within the U.S. context calls for prophetic pastoral leaders who resist and disrupt empire and colonial being-thinking-acting, creating space for re-envisioning and re-existencing within faith communities. Presented here is the first in a two-part series introducing post/decolonial pastoral leaderships, with this article focusing on grounding definitions and frameworks that challenge constructed westernized notions of leadership and church. The second article in the series, to be published in the following issue, will highlight various processes for engaging and embodying post/decolonial pastoral leaderships.

Introduction

Postcolonial and decolonial theories and theologies, though acknowledged widely and engaged across various disciplines, have remained largely within the realms of academia due in part to their philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. In this moment of time, however, these frameworks contain critical relevance as

¹ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, expanded ed. (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1991), 151.

Rev. Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Leadership and Formation and Director of the Office of Professional Formation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.

events and circumstances have exposed not only the deeply racist systems of policing in the United States, but also the short- and long-term effects of racialized access to health care, mortality rates, and employment security in the context of a global pandemic, among other dynamics.

Pastoral leaders have not been immune to witnessing and experiencing these impacts, most immediately within their own congregations and communities. As pastors grapple with re-envisioning church in a COVID-19 world and congregations continue to discern what an antiracist faith might mean for their lives together, questions must be raised about the foundations that have created and nurtured these oppressive dynamics, allowing them to flourish in the U.S. context. Beyond questions, however, prophetic religious leaders and churches are needed that can resist and dismantle the systems that have allowed injustices and violences (racial and otherwise) to flourish for centuries. As this paper will argue, these collective systems and dynamics are part of the larger construction of the United States as a modern colonial empire; therefore, post/decolonial leadership frameworks that seek justice, transformation, and the re-existence of marginalized peoples and ways of being-thinking-acting are necessary for the collective liberation of all people of faith.²

That being said, what is offered here are liminal, inviting possibilities for transformation on the eschatological thresholds between the worlds that exist and the worlds we desire. To these ends, the article provides a general overview of colonialism, postcolonialism, and decoloniality as scholarly fields, as well as a

² Some definitional caveats: I choose to signify this work as “post/decolonial” in order to acknowledge the separate contextual and theoretical streams from which challenges to coloniality have arisen in the literature, as well as to highlight their common foundational aims as critiques to colonial being-thinking-acting. I use the term pastoral leadership as a reference to individuals functioning within and among the broad spectrum of Christian traditions and faith communities, with the hope that what is articulated in this article might be applicable, at least in part, to leaders and congregations beyond Christianity. Within the article, however, I speak most directly to my own religious context of mainline Protestantism as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and faculty member at a seminary that is connected with the United Methodist Church.

rationale for the use of post/decolonial approaches rather than an isolated use of related frameworks. I then offer a broad survey of the scholarship to date on postcolonialisms and decolonialisms, addressing the practice of ministry and leadership, highlighting key contributions that frame some characteristics of post/decolonial pastoral leaderships. Finally, I articulate a case for the use of *leaderships* as subversion of an assumed singular model of pastoral leadership.

Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Decoloniality

It would be folly to attempt a thorough summation of the scholarship on colonialism, postcolonialism, and decoloniality; within each of these areas lie differing constructions, critiques, and analyses about the concepts and their applications to varying contexts. Nonetheless, generally accepted definitions and key contributions in each of these areas are necessary in order to obtain basic understandings of the dynamics that might inform pastoral leadership praxes.

Colonialism as “the conquest and control of other people’s lands and goods” is part of many known histories (the Inca, Byzantine, Roman, Mongol, Aztec, and Ottoman empires to name a few examples), but *modern* european colonialism “ushered in new and different kinds of colonial practices which altered the whole globe in a way that previous colonialisms did not.”³ Though not the only distinguishing feature, modern colonialism was established alongside, and became inextricably bound with, western european capitalism, which led to the complete economic restructuring of colonies, “drawing them into a complex relationship with their own [economies] so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries.”⁴ By the 1930s, western colonial empires occupied roughly 84.6 percent of the earth’s surface.⁵

³ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 20–21.

⁴ Loomba, 21

⁵ Loomba, 36.

Colonialism has taken, and continues to take, numerous forms around the globe. Administrative colonialism, for example, minimizes the movement of people from the colonizing country and functions largely through local power structures and existing administrations. Settler colonialism, on the other hand, often involves the movement of large numbers of people from the colonizing country to the colony, imposing the colonizers' military, economic, and administrative patterns on the colony. Settler colonialism also might take the form of territorial annexation, as in the case of Puerto Rico and other territories (as well as states like Louisiana, Hawaii, and Texas), plantation colonialism involving importing slaves or indentured groups from other parts of the world to the colony for crop cultivation and profit, or decimation/ghettoization in which settlers do not mix with native populations and they are systematically displaced or eliminated. Neo-colonialism (indirect control through economic means), the establishment of puppet regimes, and other controlling acts that are considered colonial and quasi-colonial continue in various parts of the world as part of modern western colonial projects.⁶

Situating the United States within these definitions—recognizing their permeability, confluence, and contestedness—it is clear that this country constitutes one of the leading colonial and imperialistic forces on the planet today.⁷ From the enduring legacy of settler colonialism beginning in 1492 to the decimation and ghettoization of indigenous peoples through present times, the capture and forced labor of Africans on this “new” stolen land for colonial economic gain, the continuing territorial annexation of smaller indigenous nation-states, and corporate and governmental

⁶ Loomba, 23–25.

⁷ Due to economic commonalities, colonialism and imperialism are commonly interchanged in current discourses, depending on context and historical processes. Often, colonialism is named as pre-capitalistic and imperialism is signified as capitalistic colonialism, though colonialism does not need to be in effect for imperialism to exist and vice versa. Ania Loomba offers this distinction in terms of spatiality, not temporality, as imperialism “originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control. Its result, or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination is colonialism or neo-colonialism” (28).

neo-colonialistic practices the world over (in Central and South America, Africa, and the Middle East most recently), the United States of America is a colonial empire like few others. The ways in which western Christian theologies, biblical interpretations, and practices have justified and furthered colonialistic endeavors are intertwined with historical and present lived realities of people within and beyond the country's borders.

In this sense, the actions of resistance, subversion, and reclamation by those harmed and abused by colonialism constitute the beginnings of postcolonial and decolonial practice. This is a generalization in many respects but, nevertheless, critical to understanding the foundations from which postcolonialism developed. On the surface, the term *postcolonial* might be misunderstood as meaning simply “after” colonialism. While some situate postcolonialism within this historically focused framework, postcolonialism can be articulated more broadly as “the contestation of colonial dominion and the legacies of colonialism.”⁸ Scholarship regarding which continuing legacies and situations should be considered postcolonial, and by what criteria, have created various discourses that shape postcolonialism's contributions to the particularities of historical contexts and larger similarities across contexts.

Theologian R.S. Sugirtharajah highlights inter- and intra-historical contextual discourses as part of the postcolonial project; however, he asserts that the discipline can be “stretched” toward other occurrences of intolerance and oppression, as well as function as “the political and ideological stance of an interpreter engaged in anticolonial and anti-globalizing” thought and action.⁹ In this manner, it could be argued that any work bringing to the fore conflicting or suppressed voices, texts, narratives, and practices within religious settings—with the expressed purpose of challenging “vicious aspects of modernity” politically, epistemologically, ontologically, and theologically—has the possibility of being considered postcolonial. This aligns with post-structuralist

⁸ Loomba, 32.

⁹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2003), 4.

arguments within postcolonialism that question objectivity and investigate *a priori* sources of meaning.

The figure recognized most widely as the founder of postcolonial theory and criticism is Edward Said, who, in his groundbreaking 1978 work *Orientalism*, framed the field of Oriental studies as a western discourse that functioned as a “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient.”¹⁰ This construction thus enabled the west “to manage...the Orient politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively.”¹¹ Said issued an interdisciplinary and exhaustively cutting analysis of the ways in which understandings of the Middle East and Islam were European constructions that created an othered dichotomy between “the Orient” and “the Occident,” opening possibilities for others to offer criticisms relevant to their particular postcolonial contexts.¹²

As important as Said’s contributions are to the development of postcolonialism, several of his contemporaries in other parts of the world provided critical analyses of colonialism that continue to shape discourses today, most notably Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Octave Mannoni, and Albert Memmi. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ashis Nandy’s work on the psychology of colonialism; Homi Bhabha’s development of the concepts of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity; and Gayatri Spivak’s postcolonial feminism and subalternity, contributed in important ways to a burgeoning field. Today, postcolonialism is found in nearly every discipline from the sciences to business and the humanities.¹³

Decoloniality as a field related to, yet distinctive from, postcolonialism situates its origins in the Americas (in what is considered South, Central, and North America) through scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Walter D. Mignolo,

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

¹¹ Said, 3.

¹² Said, 2.

¹³ For a thorough accounting of postcolonial scholarship across disciplines, as well as a concise yet exhaustive overview of colonialism and postcolonialism, see Anshuman Prasad’s introductory chapter in Anshuman Prasad, ed., *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

and Catherine Walsh, among many others. Temporally, while postcolonialism is concerned primarily with european colonial activities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, decoloniality tracks european colonial expansion in the Americas beginning in the fifteenth century.¹⁴ Deemed more philosophical in nature by scholars (while still remaining rooted within the lived colonial context of the Americas), decoloniality, as articulated by Aníbal Quijano, ties together explicitly the projects of modernity and coloniality, arguing that modernity constructed knowledge as a rational, individualized endeavor by which the european self became differentiated from the “other” and denied “the idea of the social totality.”¹⁵ Thus, modernity and coloniality are inextricably linked within the european self-narrative. María Lugones further argued that modernity/coloniality bonds enforced constructions of race, gender, and sexuality that “rearticulated particular european understandings of gender and sex from a bifurcation between male and female to a racialized understanding of the same embedded within a logic of colonial difference.”¹⁶

As emphasized by Mignolo and Walsh, decoloniality—like postcolonialism—does not offer new universal constructs or narratives that simply replace colonial narratives. Rather, decoloniality is expressed and engaged relationally within particular local communities and contexts, creating *pluriversal decoloniality* and *decolonial pluriversity*, with the explicit aim of continuing “to advance the undoing of eurocentrism’s totalizing claim and frame, including the eurocentric legacies incarnated in U.S.-centrism and perpetuated in Western geopolitics of knowledge.”¹⁷ Rather than resistance “against the colonial matrix of power,” decoloniality seeks re-existence “for the

¹⁴ Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues,” *Postcolonial Studies* 17(2), 2014.

¹⁵ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21(2), 2007: 173.

¹⁶ Bhambra, 118.

¹⁷ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2018), 2.

possibilities of an otherwise.”¹⁸ In the construction of post/decolonial pastoral leaderships, an emphasis on re-existence is critical for faith communities to center marginalized voices, experiences, and ways of being-thinking-acting (without appropriating, fetishizing, and replicating colonial dynamics). As a result, in disruption of the binary rational construction of theory versus praxis, decoloniality prioritizes “theory-and-as-praxis and praxis-and-as-theory...the interdependence and continuous flow of movement of both.”¹⁹

Both in theory and in praxis, postcolonialism and decoloniality offer new possibilities for prophetic pastoral leaderships by examining and critiquing “church” and “leadership” as products and continuing carriers of modern western colonialism as they have been understood and practiced, particularly within mainline Protestantism. Reflecting on ways that structures and processes of church mirror eurocentric secular entities in their governance (i.e., the centering of hierarchical models of pastoral leadership, boards of directors, Robert’s Rules of Order for decision making, and so on) and organizational life (e.g., designated and separate ministries of education by age group or life stage, worship, missions, and so on) in light of the calls of postcolonialism and decoloniality to “expos[e] dominance and challeng[e] notions of authority—political, epistemological, and other kinds” is a critical move in this current national climate.²⁰ Authority, as it relates to the concept of leadership, possesses a particular historied (not herstoried) narrative within the United States. Under the lenses of postcolonialism and decoloniality, eurocentric images, symbols, bodies, qualities, characteristics, skills, practices, and ideas of leaders and leadership provide little, if any, allowance for post/decolonial pluriversality and “an otherwise.” Even the best of these frameworks on the practice

¹⁸ Mignolo and Walsh, 3, 17.

¹⁹ Mignolo and Walsh, 7.

²⁰ Stephen Burns, “Introduction,” *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016), 3.

of pastoral leadership cannot escape the centering of modern colonial models of excellence.²¹ Therefore, these theories and praxes of leadership must be examined, interrogated, and dismantled as they offer increasing irrelevance to the challenges present within churches and the United States as a whole.

Locating the Scholar

In attempting to explicate post/decolonial approaches to pastoral leaderships, acknowledgement of, and critical reflection upon, one's own identities and contexts is part of the practice of unmasking given realities and interrupting norms that minimize multiple worldviews. I, Kristina, am a U.S.-born, biracial Latina (Puerto Rican and Italian) who has been steeped within evangelical and mainline Protestant traditions (largely within Mexican American Roman Catholic geographic and cultural contexts) throughout my life. While I have spent some time in Central America and traveled to other parts of the globe, my worldview, scholarship, and ministry practice have been shaped by U.S. western higher educational and religious institutions. Even as a biracial Latina whose race, gender, sexual identity, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds are "othered" and minimized/negated within this country, I acknowledge that as a citizen, I participate and am complicit in the colonial modern empire that is the United States. Whether I like it or not, I am a settler/trespasser on Indigenous land as a home/

²¹ I offer two illustrations to this point. Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007) is a favored text on self-differentiated leadership and navigating emotional systems; yet Friedman devotes significant portions of the book to lauding the leadership and actions of Christopher Columbus in the discovery of the "New World." Doug Pagitt's *Church in the Inventive Age* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2014) offers a framework for understanding various pastoral leadership roles in particular "ages" of the church throughout U.S. history, but only does so based on the settler history of the country and, therefore, from a solely European colonial perspective of church.

landowner and resident of this country (as are all nonindigenous peoples in the United States), regardless of being a person of color.²²

At the same time, however, being part *boriqua* comes with its own complexities that lay bare the U.S. colonial relationship with Puerto Rico and historical and present struggles for freedom and political and economic autonomy. As a product of Spanish colonization and U.S. colonialism of the island, I carry within my bones the pain of subjugation, conquest, and struggle that my ancestors lived and that I continue to shoulder.²³ In essence, I embody colonizer and colonized, able to bear witness and feel most profoundly the racisms, sexism, and heterosexisms enacted structurally and individually by the church and its people, yet also attuned to the ways in which I benefit from and perpetuate colonialism through my participation in the flourishing of the mainline Protestant church as an ordained minister and a seminary faculty member, and thereby a coconspirator in the modern colonial milieu. In these ways and more, I resonate with Gloria Anzaldúa's identification as a bridge that "span[s] liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds...this in-between space lacking clear boundaries."²⁴ Always residing in this liminal space in which one never feels quite at "home," my abilities to be both an insider and an outsider, benefactor and castaway, have heightened my awarenesses of the coloniality of the U.S. church and its/our structures, practices, and powers.

²² See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1) (2012): 5. Tuck and Yang assert, "Settler colonialism is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a home-making that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain... This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation."

²³ For more on this subject, see Teresa Delgado, *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophesy Freedom* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, "(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces," *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

Locating the Church

Drawing upon the definitional frameworks of colonialism, postcolonialism, and decoloniality, it can now be argued more conclusively that the modern colonial U.S. context is one in which human lives have been brutalized and othered in the name of supremacy, incarcerated and monetized for capitalistic gain, and ignored and expended through individualized economies. American Christianity, situated within this context, can therefore be understood as an entity inextricably bound together with modern colonialism. As such, the task of decolonizing American Christianity itself is always beyond reach because of its/our historical and continuing interconnections and complicities with empire, theft and claim of indigenous land, missionization efforts eradicating languages and ways of being of nonwhite others, and theologies of Manifest Destiny and white european supremacy resulting in slavery, genocides, and environmental destruction.²⁵

On a smaller scale, churches in the United States today, while serving the public good,²⁶ also engage consciously and unconsciously in upholding and furthering colonialism through liturgies, rituals, curricula (explicit, implicit, and null), governance, and leadership preparation and credentialing, to name a few areas. Concurrently, these dynamics are actualized within models of church and ministry that replicate modern colonial structures of pastors serving as CEOs and churches being managed as businesses with laity as consumers of resources and goods, rendering faith itself as the primary good or product.²⁷ As a result, colonial ethics and praxes are inescapable for

²⁵ See George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); and Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, and Company, Inc., 1984).

²⁶ See Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁷ See Mona West, "Metropolitan Community Church as a Messy Space for Revisioning the Other Side of Pastoral Ministry," *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016), 54–55.

pastoral leaders and anyone else who claims status as an American Christian, especially since we are American *and* Christian.²⁸

Precisely because of these intertwining realities, movements toward post/decolonial approaches for prophetic pastoral leadership must be attempted, knowing that this will never be a completed endeavor, nor one in which errors will elude us. This work is not to be undertaken as an act of self-preservation for a declining mainline Protestant enterprise due to a U.S. euroamerican aging population and decreasing birth rates.²⁹ Rather, this is an act of necessity arising from ontological, epistemological, and moral foundations from a faith fully conscientized to the contextual realities and theological imperatives of communities. With the words and actions of Jesus, and the urgings of myriad ancient and contemporary prophets, Christians have been called to negate colonialism in how we lead and participate in *ekkklesia*.³⁰ As sociologist R. Stephen Warner articulates, “Christianity is not for European Americans to define, speak for, or even disown.”³¹ Instead, faith is to be defined and redefined from a multiplicity of contexts, peoples, cultures, practices, and lived experiences in negation of, and transcending, the modern colonial construction that is the United States.

Differentiating Approaches

In the process of articulating post/decolonial leadership praxes, frameworks that contain aligning values or commitments must be considered. While numerous approaches abound, two frameworks

²⁸ See Julie Todd, “Confessions of a Christian Supremacist,” *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* 16(1) 2010: 140–146.

²⁹ The decline in U.S. birth rates among whites mirrors declines in reported child baptisms and membership changes within mainline Protestant denominations, as demonstrated by John P. Marcum, “W(h)ither the Mainline? Trends and Prospects,” *Review of Religious Research* 59(2) (2017): 119–134.

³⁰ This is a direct reference to feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp’s description of *ekkklesia* as counter-public sphere of justice and as a community of friends engaging in a praxis of connectedness, as outlined in her book *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 62–69.

³¹ R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 261.

commonly drawn upon within U.S. mainline Protestantism—anti-racism and diversity and inclusion—are explored in view of post/decolonial commitments. These particular approaches, while presented as separate frameworks, are interrelated in theory and practice. Moreover, it is important to note that these frameworks constitute important approaches to pastoral leadership, as both theological commitments and lived praxes within churches and other religious organizations, and are actualized in myriad contexts with equally varied outcomes. As such, references to mainline Protestant contexts may be generalized, but only as illustrations toward comparing approaches.

Anti-Racist Approaches

With the election of the first black U.S. president in 2008, the rise of Black Lives Matter as a response to police killings, increased border security and separation and detainment of asylum-seeking children and families, and the growing voice and threat of domestic terrorism in the form of white supremacist individuals and groups, among other issues, a growing number of pastoral leaders and churches have gained greater awareness of racism and the impacts of white privilege. Denominations, including my own United Church of Christ, have created resources for churches to learn about and openly discuss issues of race in the United States.³² Some pastoral leaders and churches have engaged in training on anti-racism and white privilege in their areas and have developed partnerships with local organizing groups or communities of color in solidarity and action.³³ These efforts are necessary and critical for pastoral leaders and churches in living out their faith and commitments to justice

³² United Church of Christ, “Sacred Conversations Planning Resources,” Sacred Conversations on Race, https://www.ucc.org/sacred-conversation_sacred-conversation-resources.

³³ See: Adelle M. Banks, “Churches Examine White Privilege,” *Religion News Service* (April 19, 2016), <https://religionnews.com/2016/04/19/churches-hold-classes-about-white-privilege/>; Jesse James Deconto, “The Church Camps That Aim to Bridge Race Relations,” *The Atlantic* (July 10, 2016), <https://www.the-atlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/churches-discuss-race-relations/490535/>; and James Dearie, “National Council of Churches Gears up to Combat U.S. Racism,” *National Catholic Reporter* (March 26, 2018), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/national-council-churches-gears-combat-us-racism>.

and the common good, even as some of these endeavors might not fully constitute anti-racist approaches.

On this point, the meanings and practices associated with anti-racism are nuanced and varied. Alastair Bonnett offers a general definition of anti-racism as referring “to those forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism.” He continues:

Of course, different forms of anti-racism often operate with different definitions of what racism is. For example, some construe racism as an articulate, explicit faith in racial superiority, while others view racism as a system of racial discrimination, seeing its key site of operation not within individual consciousness, but in social processes that lead to racial inequality.³⁴

Bonnett outlines various types of anti-racist practice, not as a comprehensive typology but as an illustration of intersecting—and often simultaneously practiced—forms of social participation and engagement, including everyday anti-racism, multicultural anti-racism, psychological anti-racism, and radical anti-racism, each of which might or might not include post/decolonial elements and practices.³⁵ Similarly, in his work *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi proposes intersectional definitions for varying anti-racisms, including biological, ethnic, bodily, cultural, behavioral, color, space, anti-capitalist, gender, and queer anti-racisms. Kendi identifies an anti-racist as “one who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity” and juxtaposes this description with assimilationist and segregationist definitions and actions.³⁶

³⁴ Alastair Bonnett, *Anti-Racism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3–4.

³⁵ Bonnett, 88.

³⁶ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 24.

In the practice of post/decolonial leaderships within congregations as well as the broader public sphere, anti-racist approaches and actions must be included. Given the construction of race as a determining rationale for the colonizing project, thus cementing the modern colonial categories by which all nonwhite others have been defined, challenging and working toward disruption and dismantling of racism individually, intrapersonally, communally, systemically, and globally becomes part of the praxis necessary for post/decolonial pastoral leaderships.

That being said, anti-racist approaches *alone* might not constitute post/decolonial leaderships in their entirety. Given its very definition, anti-racism work is focused primarily on one aspect of socially constructed identity (albeit an incredibly salient one in relationship to post/decolonialism). While some in religious circles within the United States have embraced intersectional anti-racist approaches that take seriously gender, socioeconomics/class, sexuality, ability, citizenship, and other relevant identities (as Kendi and Bonnett have nuanced), the primacy of combating racist ideologies, experiences, and systemic actualizations remains the central concern of leaders committed to anti-racism work. Often, these same anti-racist religious leaders are unaware of the ways in which they perpetuate sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, xenophobia, and so on through their practice of leadership,³⁷ not to mention the perpetuation of coloniality/modernity through homogeneity, hierarchical power centralization, control over (economic, governing, and so on), and overt and covert minimization and negation of nonwestern peoples, values,

³⁷ A poignant description and critique of this phenomenon is offered in the essay "Love as the Practice of Freedom" by bell hooks in her book *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 243–250.

knowledges, and praxes.³⁸ In essence, ideas and actions might be anti-racist (whereby empire remains intact), but not necessarily post/decolonial (which assumes an inherent critique of empire/coloniality). Pastoral leaders who seek to engage and embody post/decolonial praxes must commit to the work of anti-racism, as well as challenge the very systems, epistemologies, powers, and histories that have created the constructions of race resulting in the various racisms present today.

Diversity and Inclusion Approaches

Diversity and inclusion are two separate, yet often paired, concepts in organizational life (and are sometimes offered with a third concept: equity). Diversity, in its simplest meaning, is the assumed expression of differences present in and throughout the cosmos—not only biologically, chemically, and physically, but also sociologically, anthropologically, psychologically, religiously, and so on. Diversity is. However, in a western colonial context, homogeneity as a pathway to order and control has taken root as the unconscientized norm for leadership and institutional excellence. Pastoral leaders and churches have struggled during the last several decades over an intentional organizational push for diversity not only to define the socially constructed categories included in this notion, but also to follow through with diversifying the memberships of said entities. In mainline Protestantism, for example, the vast majority of pastors and churches remain euroamerican racially and ethnically, despite decades-long calls for diversity and some recruitment

³⁸ In addition, it is important to note here that ideas and practices considered to be anti-racist may in and of themselves perpetuate racism, particularly white racism and white privilege. Shannon Sullivan's work *Good White People: The Problem With Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2014, 5) outlines the ways in which anti-racist work for whites "is not necessarily an attempt to eliminate racial injustice—which, to be successful, might involve strategies or tactics that don't make white people look or feel morally good—but a desire to be recognized as Not Racist, perhaps especially by people of color." Furthermore, white liberal anti-racism's "use of white class hierarchies to perpetuate white domination of people of color" reinforces the intersectional nature of oppression not overtly recognized in anti-racist work, and it dismisses the modern colonial dynamics around maintenance of power and control at play systemically and relationally.

efforts to increase multiculturalism. In the midst of a largely unchanged church context in this area, however, some historically euroamerican traditions and congregations have managed to take strides toward racial diversity.³⁹ At its worst, diversity is seen as a strong-arming tactic forced upon pastoral leaders and churches by a society run amok with political correctness.⁴⁰ At its best, diversity can be an appropriately value-centered and theologically grounded endeavor to enhance the flourishing of the whole, both peoples and institutions alike. How diversity is perceived and defined can lead to any number of outcomes when efforts are made to “be more diverse,” whether in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and so on.

Similar to anti-racist approaches, calls and actions toward increased diversity alone do not constitute post/decolonial leaderships. In his work *A Leftist Critique of the Principles of Identity, Diversity, and Multiculturalism*, Richard Anderson-Connolly debunks the common ideology among liberal Protestants that “the most important struggle for justice today is increasing the representation throughout society of individuals from historically marginalized groups by ending discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, and similar characteristics.”⁴¹ Naming this practice *diversity as justice*, Anderson-Connolly argues

³⁹ See Mark Chaves and Shawna L. Anderson, “Changing American Congregations: Findings From the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53(4) (2014): 680. They assert that “congregations, especially white congregations, have become more internally diverse since 1998” but also caution that they “do not want to overstate the significance of this increasing ethnic diversity within American congregations. Eighty-six percent of American congregations (containing 80 percent of religious service attendees) remain overwhelmingly white or black or Hispanic or Asian or whatever.”

⁴⁰ For example, proponents of this view might argue that increased racial diversity within a congregation is correlated with decreased average church attendance. See Kevin D. Dougherty, Brandon C. Martinez, and Gerardo Marti, “Congregational Diversity and Attendance in a Mainline Protestant Denomination,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54(4) (2015): 668–683.

⁴¹ Richard Anderson-Connolly, *A Leftist Critique of the Principles of Identity, Diversity, and Multiculturalism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2019), 32.

that ideas and actions toward increasing diversity are not only coupled incorrectly with outcomes of decreased discrimination, but also “pose no threat to the interests or agendas of the economic and political elite.”⁴² In particular, pastoral leaders who work toward increased diversity must interrogate the underlying colonial forces at play that have kept homogeneity in place within their churches and religious organizations. In other words, energy spent questioning and disrupting shared cultural norms, assumptions, theologies, processes, rituals, and relational dynamics to expose the ways these reinforce coloniality/modernity and its commitments to homogeneity and uniformity would be a movement toward post/decolonial leadership praxes.

Inclusion, the phrasal complement to diversity, becomes the assumed enacted disposition of individuals who desire increased diversity. If a pastoral leader or congregation is committed to the idea of diversity in theory, then steps usually are taken to “be more inclusive” of others. In these instances, inclusion often emerges as an effort to bring others into the center, whereby the center embodies colonial/modern voices, perspectives, and ways of being-thinking-acting. For the socially and/or culturally “others” that the church is attempting to attract, this model of inclusion could result in outcomes that actually garner greater power for, and solidify colonial constructions of, pastoral leadership and church life, thus relegating the now “included” others to the church’s margins.⁴³ In these instances, patterns of colonialism are replicated from beginning to end through a kind of “cheap inclusion” in which

⁴² Anderson-Connolly, 10.

⁴³ To illustrate this phenomenon more broadly, decolonial scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui describes how reforms in Bolivia have played out politically for indigenous communities: “Since the nineteenth century, liberal and modernizing reforms in Bolivia have given rise to a practice of conditional inclusion, a ‘mitigated and second class’ citizenship. Today, the rhetoric of equality and citizenship is converted into a caricature that includes not only tacit political and cultural privileges but also notions of common sense that make incongruities tolerable and allow for the reproduction of the colonial structures of oppression.” See “*Ch’ixinakax utiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization*,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(1) (Winter 2012): 97.

the rhetoric of inclusion does not translate to engaged praxis.⁴⁴ Ultimately, what is reinforced constitutes *gatopardismo*, a “change so that everything remains the same,” as articulated by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui.⁴⁵ Although many efforts on the part of pastoral leaders and congregations toward greater inclusion have proven to be fruitful movements rooted in seeking justice (including movements and actions for inclusion of women, LGBTQ persons, and people with disabilities or neurodiversities within churches), some of these efforts have caused harm to historically marginalized peoples when not actualized authentically or fully.

Ultimately, anti-racist and diversity and inclusion approaches to pastoral leadership should not be equated with post/decolonial pastoral leaderships. However, rather than positing an either/or, zero-sum choice in the matter of frameworks, the very embrace of post/decolonial dispositions asks that pastoral leaders expand into *both/and* ways of being-thinking-acting. If pastoral leaders begin to recognize and disrupt coloniality in their church contexts, bringing into re-existence the possibilities of an otherwise, this might create the space for anti-racist and diversity and inclusion ideas and actions that hold possibilities for deepening experiences of *ekkleisia*.

Foundations for Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships

Leaderships that are post/decolonial in notion and practice do not require these precise monikers in order to be considered postcolonial or decolonial. Religious leaders, activists, and scholars the world over have engaged critically the ideas and praxes that reflect post/decoloniality in various forms and contexts. Contributions from liberation, critical race, indigenous, queer, feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologies, to name only a few, are grounded within post/decolonial contexts, worldviews, and ideologies in varying degrees. Post/decoloniality’s philosophical underpinnings in

⁴⁴ This is a direct reference to what Robert S. Heaney calls cheap postcolonialism in his chapter “Prospects and Problems for Evangelical Postcolonialisms,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Practice*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014), 29–43.

⁴⁵ Rivera Cusicanqui, 101.

post-structuralism, postmodernism, marxism, and critiques of Enlightenment rationalism expose a wide interdisciplinary web of engagement across continents and movements. Surprisingly, some of the most recent books on the practice of pastoral leadership display hints of post/decoloniality (even as they continue to center largely colonial/modern narratives and constructions of church typical within mainline Protestantism).⁴⁶

That being said, a growing body of literature is available on postcolonialism as it relates to the practice of ministry rooted in contributions of biblical scholars such as R.S. Sugirtharajah, Fernando Segovia, Musa Dube, Stephen D. Moore, Roland Boer, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Richard Horsley, to name a few. These scholars have sought to interrogate “accepted” biblical interpretations in consideration of nonwestern postcolonial contexts and worldviews, thereby unmasking colonial theological legacies. From biblical studies, postcolonial approaches have made their way into systematic theology and other areas, thanks in large part to individuals like Marcella Althaus-Reid, Kwok Pui-lan, and Catherine Keller, among others. Now, most recently, attention has turned to the postcolonial in practical theology; it is through this stream that explicit conversations are starting to take place

⁴⁶ I reference these authors with the utmost respect for their contributions. Susan Beaumont’s *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* and Gil Rendle’s *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*, both published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2019, offer nuanced approaches to leading change, with Beaumont referencing the importance of liminality, discernment within community, and emergent strategy and Rendle describing nonlinear change processes and flexible and decentralized systems, among other ideas. Yet, the assumed frameworks for these concepts continue to be the established (euroamerican) mainline Protestant church steeped in colonial/modern constructions of thinking-being-acting.

regarding post/decolonial practice of ministry in worship, ritual, pastoral care, education and formation, and leadership.⁴⁷

Several works in the last decade illustrate some of the key contributions to post/decolonial ministry practice (though this is not an exhaustive accounting by any means). Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns's work *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (2011) applies a postcolonial optic—a framework for “critical scrutiny of liturgical discourse and texts necessary in the struggle for liberation”—to traditioned texts, symbols, hymns, and lectionaries.⁴⁸ Claudio Carvalhaes's edited work *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One Is Holy* (2015) also considers liturgy in conversation with the post/decolonial, expanding beyond Christianity to Judaism and Islam as well.⁴⁹ HyeRan Kim-Cragg interrogates western conceptions of formation and ritual from a Korean-Canadian feminist perspective in her book *Story and Song: A Postcolonial Interplay Between Christian Education and Worship* (2012).⁵⁰ Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp, in *Creating Resistances: Pastoral Care in a Postcolonial World* (2020), introduces a postcolonial framework of individual and community care that centers on movement through five specific resistances: not me, not here, not now, not relevant, and not possible.⁵¹ Each of these texts highlights insights and approaches for pastoral leadership praxes

⁴⁷ It is important to note that the postcolonial trajectory of scholarship in practical theology, and among theological disciplines more broadly, takes place within western constructions of these disciplines themselves. For example, Christian education and worship are considered in the literature as largely separate, fixed areas of faith life (though, through post/decolonial pastoral perspectives, there exists potential for these categories to be reconsidered). With the whole of Protestantism and theological education as the product of western coloniality/modernity, these delineations are, in many ways, unavoidable and a continued tension for scholars and practitioners alike.

⁴⁸ Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2011), 36.

⁴⁹ Claudio Carvalhaes, ed., *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One Is Holy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁵⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Story and Song: A Postcolonial Interplay Between Christian Education and Worship* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

⁵¹ Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp, *Creating Resistances: Pastoral Care in a Postcolonial World* (Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2020).

that negate and dismantle coloniality in multiple manifestations, even though they are introduced here only briefly.

Toward the specific articulation of post/decolonial pastoral leaderships, however, pastoral theologian Emmanuel Y. Lartey provides the clearest, most comprehensive vision for embodiment and transformation. Situating postcolonial leadership within sub-Saharan African contexts, Lartey outlines some characteristics of postcolonial communities and leadership activities, with the acknowledgement that these are not meant to encompass the totality of the postcolonial faith community or leadership in all expressions. Lartey's characteristics of postcolonial communities consist of:

- Eruption of subjugated, indigenous knowledge;
- Collapsing of binary oppositions;
- Pluralities of discourse, diverse truths, and divergent histories (as an affirmation of multiple positions and perspectives);
- Recognition of social constructionism, especially of identity; and
- Resurgence of the conventional (acknowledging the continuing legacy of coloniality in conformity to western doctrines and practices).⁵²

It is important to emphasize that Lartey contextualizes these characteristics within non-U.S. (and nonwhite) faith communities that bear the historical and continuing legacies of western european colonization, including Christian missionization efforts that reinforce colonial church structures, practices, symbols, theologies, and so on. However, each of these characteristics also holds possibilities for the disruption and re-existence of church in U.S. eurowestern contexts and could create opportunities for challenging homogeneity, hegemony, socially constructed categories, and eurocentric supremacies present within these faith communities.

⁵² Emmanuel Y. Lartey, "'Borrowed Clothes Will Never Keep You Warm': Postcolonializing Pastoral Leadership," *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016), 23–25.

As examples, churches that make space (material/physical space, symbolic space, relational space, and theological/religious space) for eruption of subjugated, indigenous knowledges actively invite and empower people on the fringes of their communities to have an equalized role in shaping and leading in various areas of ministry, thus creating openings for new perspectives, practices, and rituals that transform the faith of the whole. Acknowledging and living into the reality that those who are designated as positional leaders or trained clergy are not the only ones with religious knowledge and authority—moreover, that everyone in the community possesses profound wisdom, experiences, and knowledges equally and in multiple forms beyond rational, intellectual knowledge—breaks open previously closed structures and systems surrounding worship, preaching, governance, and formation and discipleship, among other areas.⁵³ These disruptions, therefore, lead to faith communities in which pluralities of discourse, diverse truths, and divergent histories flourish—including “linguistic, cultural, and political differences within which multiple positions and perspectives are continually expressed.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, churches in which these disruptions of presumed ways of being-thinking-acting are embraced with openness, curiosity, and humility (rather than reticence, disregard, and arrogance/condescension) are more likely to engage in habits and practices that do not draw distinct boundaries and binaries between “the sacred and the secular, reason and intuition, science and art.”⁵⁵

Extending beyond postcolonial faith communities, Lartey also names several specific characteristics of postcolonializing leadership, thus arriving at the heart of what post/decolonial pastoral leaderships might look like within churches:

⁵³ See West, 55. West makes the argument, “Not only does the corporate efficient model of pastoral leadership lead to burnout, it perpetuates a binary of clergy and laity by distancing the pastor from the people in the congregation. This model focuses on organizational structure, with a hierarchical leadership structure in which the pastor is the ‘expert.’”

⁵⁴ Lartey, 24.

⁵⁵ Lartey, 24.

- Counter-hegemonic, insurgent, subversive activities (calling into question dominance and hegemony in human relations within the church, community, or world);
- Strategic (bringing into critical focus the dialogical nature of relations between theory and practice, resulting in actions with transformative intent in the church and world);
- Hybrid/variegated/plural (promoting multidimensional discourses and practices);
- Interactional and intersubjective (emphasizing the social and global nature of phenomena and encouraging approaches to subjects that engage interactively with all people's experience in the discourse on any subject);
- Dynamic (engaging in analyses that reflect time, change and movement);
- Polyvocal (recognizing and encouraging many voices to speak and be heard on the subjects under consideration); and
- Creative (calling for and producing new forms of being, institutions, and practices in the church, community, and world).⁵⁶

In order to nurture (trans)formations toward post/decolonial congregations in the modern colonial U.S. context, individuals and communities that can engage and embody the kinds of characteristics that Lartey highlights are critical. Not only do practicing (hopeful) post/decolonial pastoral leaders themselves stimulate and cocreate conditions for counter-hegemonic, insurgent, subversive activities that are hybrid, variegated, plural, and polyvocal (as characterized above within faith communities), they also do so strategically, interactionally, dynamically, and creatively.

Pastors who lead with a deep motivation for transforming the ways church life has been organized, governed, and practiced

⁵⁶ Lartey, 28–31.

toward empire and colonial thinking-being-acting—as well as how individuals and groups are directly and indirectly impacted by oppressive colonial systems and actions—are praxically and conscientizationally strategic. Knowing the people in their communities intimately, they engage relationally and deliberately to expand imaginations beyond comfortable norms and expectations. Pastoral leaders who are interactional and intersubjective recognize the interrelatedness of global phenomena and systems and reveal the ways in which these systems perpetuate oppressions within local, national, and international communities, continually keeping in check the “potential destructive nature of power wielded without caution, subtlety, and sensitivity” and ceding space and authority to marginalized peoples and their experiences, perspectives, and practices in all areas of congregational life.⁵⁷ Pastors who engage in dynamic activities recognize that reality is always in flux, thus reflecting and acting in ways that presuppose and anticipate change, as well as reactions to change that involve real and perceived losses of individual and communal colonial powers (structural, relational, religious, economic, racial, gender, and so on). Finally, pastoral leaders who are creative move beyond improvisation—“the left-overs and whatever is available in and from the colonial project that are used in the formulation of structures that are implicitly temporary”—to new, cocreated and conurtured forms of being and living together in faith that “go beyond the status quo inherited or established as standard by colonizers.”⁵⁸

What Lartey offers is by no means an exhaustive list of what is needed in the practice of post/decolonial pastoral leadership and community, as other important capacities such as resilience and interdependence were not named but hold important possibilities.⁵⁹ These activities and/or characteristics from Lartey serve simply as beginnings toward post/decolonial pastoral leadership praxes that religious leaders are to engage within their specific settings. Aspects of each of these items have been present throughout the conversation

⁵⁷ Lartey, 30.

⁵⁸ Lartey, 31.

⁵⁹ See adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, Calif.: AK Press, 2017).

on post/decoloniality in this article; yet, when contemplated together in this manner, they bring into focus movements toward what is needed in the practice of prophetic ministry within the church and the current U.S. context.

Caution must be given in review of these characteristics, however, as they are not intended to serve as a checklist when, upon *mastery* of all items, one has become a “post/decolonial” pastoral leader. The assumption that anyone is ever finished with the work of post/decolonial leadership is a trapping of coloniality/modernity, as is a presumption that the totality of these activities will automatically result in post/decolonial leadership and community in all times and places. Moreover, these activities must not be engaged in ignorance of the contexts and communities within which one is leading and serving. To do so without any regard for the faith community would be irresponsible at best and destructive at worst, especially as post/decolonial pastoral leadership centers these characteristics within the community. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that these activities will produce tensions, ambiguities, resistances of several varieties (for which study of McGarrah Sharp’s work might be beneficial), and experiences of loss as measured by colonial/modern and empiric/capitalist yardsticks (including losses around finances and membership, prestige and power, and order and homogeneity); yet these experiences should not serve as the deciding factor for whether pastoral leaders are to engage post/decolonial frameworks and praxes.

Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships

In furthering conversations on post/decolonial leadership, a re-existencing of the language of leadership emerges as an effect of considering such frameworks and characteristics. Indeed, if pastoral leaders are to take Mignolo and Walsh’s calls to pluriversality and Lartey’s commitments to counter-hegemonic, insurgent, subversive activities seriously, questioning the use of a singularized *leadership* seems to be a critical post/decolonial task. Just as new and varying frameworks contain the potential to shift worldviews and inform future praxes, re-languaging offers similar seismic shifts that nurture capacities for decentering modern colonial being-thinking-acting

within faith communities.

Language as an enduring tool for colonization and continuing colonialism is well documented. In his seminal work *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o details the ways in which forced glorification of the colonizer's language (whether English, French, or Portuguese in African contexts) at the expense of the language of the colonized ensured the erasure of culture and, in essence, "held the soul prisoner." He continues, "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation."⁶⁰ In the U.S. context, English language instruction has been used as a colonial hammer to eradicate indigenous languages, force Christian religious adherence, separate generations of families and communities, and inflict western worldviews, practices, and habits on indigenous populations.⁶¹ The English language—including its various grammatical exceptions to rules that evolved over time—continues as the eurocentric standard employed to measure those who know "proper" English against those who do not (and who are then subject to oppression and continued harms).⁶²

As a biracial *boriqua*, the effects of colonialism with regard to language have left their mark on me. Both of my parents were born in the United States during a time (early to mid-1940s) when speaking a language other than English was highly suspect and generally discouraged, even though the first language either of them learned as children was not English (Spanish and Italian, respectively). As a result, while I was a witness to daily household

⁶⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford, U.K.: James Currey Ltd., 1986), 9.

⁶¹ In U.S. history, this is most visible in the missionization of American Indians whose children were separated from their families, forced into boarding schools, and punished if caught speaking their native languages. See George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993), 49–50.

⁶² Two texts that provide detailed analyses regarding language are Rosina Lippi-Green's *English With an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and Eric A. Anchimbe and Stephen A. Mforthé's edited *Postcolonial Linguistic Voices: Identity Choices and Representations* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011), which offers global perspectives on language and colonialism.

conversations in other languages, we children were not taught any language other than English and were thus severed from this critical facet of our cultural and racial identities. The colonial effects of assimilation (a tactic for increased homogeneity) through historical and present pressures of language adaptation, particularly for U.S. colonies like Puerto Rico but extending to early twentieth-century European immigrants, continue to present complexities and tensions within hybrid bodies—in this instance, my own—that will never be fully reconciled.

Yet, even as peoples the world over have had languages forced upon them through the machines of colonization, they also have adapted and transformed the colonizers' languages, combining them with their own tongues in many instances, as acts of resistance and re-existence. The postcolonial notion of hybridity as articulated by Homi Bhabha highlights this phenomenon as the process of cultural translation on the part of the colonized that adapts the colonizer's discourses "with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange...[the] identity of [that discourse] and produce new forms of knowledge...new sites of power," creating a "strategic reversal of the process of domination."⁶³ As such, adaptation and transformation of "proper" uses of English constitute lived examples of the eruption of subjugated, indigenous knowledge, the collapsing of binary oppositions, the presence of pluralities of discourses and truths, and recognitions of the socially constructed nature of language that Larney highlights as elements of post/decolonial leadership and community.

Therefore, when considering the idea of a singular-as-plural *leadership* being fit to the task of embodying the myriad constructions that this concept entails, the English language is found wanting. A subversive, subjugated re-envisioning toward *leaderships*—thus centering an "improper" use of English—delineates a direct contestation of hegemony and homogeneity in expanding possibilities for pastors and leaders, especially given the pluriversalities of contexts, experiences, and worldviews present

⁶³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 120, 112.

within and beyond congregational lives. Fantastical ideas of pastoral leaders as conforming to coloniality's default notions of pastor as CEO, lead authority figure and knowledge bearer, singular head of staff, or white, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied (usually leading a large, white, suburban Protestant congregation) are reimagined in ways that contribute to the re-existence and resilience of the whole community, not to prescribed commitments to order, success, and competition endemic within eurowestern worlds.

In my own work as a theological field educator with students from varying religious backgrounds, identities, experiences, and communities, formation for pastoral and community leaderships can look quite different given these factors and more. For an African American single mother serving on a shared leadership team that is organizing a new multiracial urban faith community, leadership looks, feels, smells, sounds, and perhaps even tastes different than a white, married male student with four small children serving a small, majority white suburban church in the process of closing its doors. Universalizing the kinds of skills, qualities, and capacities needed in order to embody pastoral leadership subverts the contextual natures of leaderships and, subsequently, results in conformity to eurocentric constructions of the pastor role. The use of leaderships in formational agendas within theological education, therefore, solidifies the pluriversal as an *a priori* disposition that challenges, dismantles, and re-envisions pastoral and prophetic ministry within and beyond existing notions of church.

Beyond the context of the academy, the utilization of leaderships in discourse and praxis invites occasions to challenge assumptions embedded within the language of *pastoral* leaderships. The application of this unique nomenclature assumes a leadership that is set apart from (and often in eurowestern constructions, set above) the kinds of leaderships offered by others within the faith community. As has been articulated previously, notions of trained, credentialed clergy possessing positional authority and specialized knowledge to be imparted upon faith communities replicates hegemonic colonial patterns that minimize and negate leaderships (and the kinds of wisdoms those leaderships engender) present among the whole, thus prioritizing intellectual knowledge—in

the form of advanced degree attainment—as paramount to faith. Stephanie Y. Mitchem, in her conversation on womanist and postcolonial pastoral leaderships, emphasizes the historic and present exclusions that black women have endured from the profession. She remarks, “With few exceptions, black women continue to be pushed to sidelines of ministry, politics, and medicine since each of these fields developed hierarchical structures that reflected white, male, capitalist, mainstream American societies.”⁶⁴ Instead, Mitchem calls for a re-envisioning of pastoral leaderships, arising from black women’s “home training” through the shared, lived wisdom of elder mothers toward an ethic of communalism, care, and self-love. Drawing upon Toni C. King and Alease Ferguson’s work, Mitchem identifies this re-existencing as *kitchen table leadership*, asserting that “there is an authority given to the women who transmit wisdom, based on lived lessons, not merely pieces of paper granted by an impersonal institution.”⁶⁵ This offers just one illustration of the ways in which *pastoral* leaderships might be constructed anew when grounded beyond specified eurocentric academies of learning and formation, thereby nurturing decolonial pluriversality within and beyond faith communities.

Ultimately, the utilization of pastoral leaderships, rather than a singular pastoral leadership, creates critical movement toward post/decolonial re-linguaging of constructs. Lest such a vocabulary change seem insignificant, it is important to remember “how people’s choice of languages, and ways of speaking, do not simply *reflect* who they are, but *make* them who they are—or more precisely, allow them to make themselves.”⁶⁶ Summarily, pastoral leaderships expand theological imaginations regarding how ministry takes place, what kinds of qualities and skills are envisioned and practiced in ministry, and who can and should embody this work.

⁶⁴ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, “In Conversation: Womanist/Postcolonial/Pastoral,” *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016), 62.

⁶⁵ Mitchem, 69.

⁶⁶ John E. Joseph, “Identity,” *Language and Identities*, eds. Carmen Llamas and Dominic Watt (Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2010), 9.

Conclusions

Presented here are partial articulations arising from initial attempts to catalyze bodies of scholarship across several disciplines. It is hoped that these offerings will not lead to increased abstractions but, rather, to new experiments in faith leadership and community life. Unmasking the constructed and historicized natures of leadership and church—as covered in the trappings of U.S. coloniality/modernity and its destructiveness to human lives and communities—individuals might reflect on the ways that “colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts [humans], both colonizers and colonized,” as expressed in the opening words by Albert Memmi. Given the global pandemic and the disruptions it has imposed upon the world and the church, in addition to all of the ways that coloniality and empire in the forms of greed and neglect of human life existed previously and have surfaced uniquely in recent months, pastoral leaders and communities who can nurture and restore relationships, cocreate life-affirming structures and resources, and seek wholeness and justice individually, communally, and systemically are needed now more than ever. In the course of this critical being-thinking-acting, care must be given to not replicate colonial ideologies, practices, or structures, remembering that post/decolonial praxes are never a completed set of endeavors and, if attempted honestly and with humility, will involve tensions, ambiguities, resistances, and losses. Ultimately, post/decolonial pastoral leaderships offer a kind of eschatological framework through which we might learn and live into pluriversal visions of *ekklesia*.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ The D.Min. and master's students in my Spring 2020 Decolonizing Congregational Leadership course at Iliff School of Theology helped to shape some of the ideas presented in this article through online discussions. To them, I extend my sincere gratitude.

PROCESSES TOWARD POST/DECOLONIAL PASTORAL LEADERSHIPS

KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI

Abstract

This article constitutes the second in a two-part series focusing on post/decolonial pastoral leaderships that challenge constructed modern/colonial notions of leadership and church. Although an understanding of post/decolonial leaderships, including theoretical underpinnings and related frameworks, provides a preliminary foundation for pastoral leaders, the ways in which these leaderships are praxised and embodied within the contexts of community become the more critical endeavor for U.S. Protestant Christianity, thereby prompting deeper questions regarding the role of leadership in congregational change processes toward post/decoloniality.

“We have seen that colonization materially kills the colonized. It must be added that colonization kills [us] spiritually. Colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts [humans], both colonizers and colonized.”¹

Introduction

In a previous article,² I outlined initial definitional and characteristic frameworks for post/decolonial leaderships, including foundational articulations of postcolonialism and

Rev. Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi, Ph.D., is Term Assistant Professor of Leadership and Formation and Director of the Office of Professional Formation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.

¹ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, expanded ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 151. This quote also introduces the first article in the series to emphasize theological groundings for addressing colonization and, more specifically, its enduring effects through colonialism.

² Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi, “Frameworks Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 19(2) (2020): 100-130.

decoloniality contextualized subsequently within prevailing models of U.S. Protestant pastoral leadership and church.³ In addition, two frameworks—anti-racism and diversity and inclusion—were differentiated from post/decoloniality while also noting important connections between them. I provided a brief overview of theological scholarship in the areas of postcolonialism and decoloniality, culminating in a deeper overview of Emmanuel Lartey’s characteristics of postcolonial faith community and leadership. Finally, an initial argument was introduced for the use of *leaderships* as a subversive, subjugated re-language and contestation of hegemony and homogeneity embedded within the singular-as-plural use of pastoral leadership.

With these points in mind, the question then arises: How do pastoral leaders and faith communities practice—or, more appropriately, praxis⁴—post/decoloniality?⁵ Although I began to detail some beginning praxes in the first article, drawing upon Lartey’s characteristics, which signaled multiple “hows” of post/decolonial leaderships (i.e., counter-hegemonic and strategic activities, plurality/pluriversality, intersectionality, interactionality

³ I introduced some definitional caveats in the use of “post/decolonial” and “pastoral leadership” within the initial article and offer them here, as well. I choose to signify this work as “post/decolonial” in order to acknowledge the separate contextual and theoretical streams from which challenges to coloniality have arisen in the literature, as well as to highlight their common foundational aims as critiques to colonial being-thinking-acting. I use the term “pastoral leadership” as a reference to individuals functioning within and among the broad spectrum of Christian traditions and faith communities, with the hope that what is articulated in this article might be applicable, at least in part, to leaders and congregations beyond Christianity. Within the article, however, I speak most directly to my own religious context of mainline Protestantism as an Ordained Minister in the United Church of Christ and as a faculty member at a seminary connected with the United Methodist Church.

⁴ In this article, I am intentional about the use of *praxis* as a verb to emphasize the dynamic relationship between, and the simultaneity of, both action and reflection, as well as to bring forward an extension of the re-language work detailed in the initial article as critical to post/decoloniality praxis.

⁵ This question lies in juxtaposition to a query worded thusly: How do pastoral leaders and faith communities become post/decolonial? In the initial article, I address the ways in which this line of inquiry is problematic and exemplifies colonial praxes and worldviews: Lizardy-Hajbi, “Frameworks Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships.”

and intersubjectivity, polyvocality, dynamism, and creativity) and faith communities (i.e., eruption of subjugated and indigenous knowledges, collapsing of binary oppositions, pluralities of discourses and histories, recognition of social constructivism, and resurgences of the conventional), further explorations are necessary.⁶ Such movements, which I name as processes toward post/decolonial leaderships, are included among the myriad ways in which leaders and communities embrace and actualize undoing, subversion, resistance, and re-existencing “for the possibilities of an otherwise,”⁷ recognizing that there exist no set prescriptions, nor any finite point, by which leaders and communities arrive definitively at a monolithic “post/decolonial reality.”⁸

In juxtaposition to these conceptions, modern eurocentric colonial models for enacting leadership within U.S. faith communities reflect largely corporatized, capitalistic, hegemonized, and supremacist processes, which limit possibilities for the kinds of changes that actualize post/decolonial realities.⁹ The Protestant church in the United States has largely adopted these models as their own without the realization that they lend themselves to a replication of the colonial project within religious communities, whose faith products maintain the status quo by avoiding deep transformation of being-thinking-acting (otherwise known in the Christian world as repentance, the *metanoia* of turning about completely).

As such, this article seeks to challenge dominant assumptions about pastoral leadership as currently constructed in the U.S.

⁶ The characteristics of leadership and faith communities named within both sets of parentheses are detailed in the first article.

⁷ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2018), 17.

⁸ If one has arrived at such a reality, it would be a re-inscription of the very colonialism to be resisted and dismantled, asserting a kind of “epistemological arrogance” rather than an “epistemological humility.” See Otto Maduro, “An(other) Invitation to Epistemological Humility: Notes Toward a Self-Critical Approach to Counter-Knowledges,” *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latino Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 87–103.

⁹ On this point, examples and sources are detailed extensively in the first article.

Protestant context by interrogating the role of the pastor as a singular positional enactor of change in the church. Next, three colonially constructed and reinforced binaries regarding leadership and change are problematized and then reimagined—theory/praxis (knowledge/action), means/ends (process/outcome), and using/rejecting the “master’s tools” for change—thus invoking potential for envisioning alternatives beyond present existences. As a generative framework-and-as-process for pastoral leaders who seek to nurture practices and processes of post/decoloniality in their communities, a new binary of delinking and relinking is introduced, drawing upon experiences and practices of a United Methodist congregation in Sacramento to illustrate this offering. Finally, two specific frameworks-and-as-processes are explored as options for praxising post/decoloniality that alter the role and function of pastoral leaderships and congregations seeking change: Paulo Freire’s *conscientização*/popular education and adrienne maree brown’s emergent strategy.

Challenging Assumptions About Pastoral Leadership and Change

This article, in part, focuses on the processes by which pastoral leaders might nurture (or co-nurture) change within faith communities toward post/decolonial praxes.¹⁰ This statement carries implicit assumptions that the modern colonial construction of a singular (white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied male) figurehead of a congregation is the most God-like or holy image of pastoral leadership and, therefore, the most capable or effective

¹⁰ Processes toward post/decolonial pastoral leaderships also might invite an exploration of the ways in which pastoral leaders are formed for leadership and ministry. Although this is not the main subject of the article, Willie James Jennings provides an in-depth analysis, critique, and decolonial option based on Jesus and the crowd in his book *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Willian B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020). Jennings asserts that the goal of theological education is the formation and sustaining of the “white self-sufficient male,” engendering “a performativity aimed at the exhibition of mastery, possession, and control with the tacit assumption that this ongoing work of exhibition illumines talent and the capacity for leadership” (18).

model/progenitor of change within the church.¹¹ These two distinct notions of the singular pastoral figurehead and the pastor as the most capable change agent are linked inextricably and cannot be detached easily from one another when considering leaderships in U.S. Protestant contexts.

Most prevailing models for pastoral leadership (and leadership in the United States as a whole) assume that the leader—often, but not always, selected by the community (or select members of the community) to a visible, professionalized role—is the major catalyst for change within a church.¹² Regardless of the model, leadership—by its very etymology—assumes a sovereign-centric method and process for invoking change. In this regard, the pastor’s role is one of *singular positional enactor*, whereby the goal is to alter or shape the faith community in intentional ways. In a more generous sense, the pastor is the one who guides change (or simply helps weather change, as the case may be), invoking the often-romanticized biblical image of shepherding one’s flock (reconstituting the root use of the word *pastor*). However, Emmanuel Lartey and Hellen Moon argue that

in historicizing “pastoral,” the term was used primarily to convey a metaphorical model of shepherding care that showed authority and power of one species (i.e., the human) who was considered superior to the sheep (i.e., unthinking animal who needed guidance). This communicates an uneven message of leader being superior and human, while the image of flock somehow is

¹¹ See Choi Hee An, *A Postcolonial Leadership: Asian Immigrant Christian Leadership and Its Challenges* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), 53: “Leadership positions in U.S. culture have been occupied by an elite upper-class white Anglo-European heterosexual male group without disabilities (the privileged white group) throughout U.S. history.”

¹² This does not discount the existence of co- or tri-pastorates, but these constitute a minority within Protestant churches.

beneath that of the leader and less than fully human (read: colonialism).¹³

Or, more explicitly related to an imperial model, the pastor serves as a reflection of myriad Hebrew biblical images of sovereign kings and queens, as well as the signification of Christ as king, each of whom are assumed to take on the religious and political responsibilities of bringing about systemic-level change.¹⁴ In all of these cases, the underlying assumption invoked is that change takes place primarily through action by a more human/holy individual in a visible position of authority upon (or on behalf of) a particular group of people. This top-down approach has been nuanced within secular and religious leadership literature; however, scholarship and practice continue largely to center leadership models that involve a sole figurehead-centric model for change within faith communities.¹⁵

Although this construction possesses roots in pre-modern empires of conquest as witnessed in biblical texts, and is also more recently canonized by works such as Niccolò Machiavelli's 1532 treatise *The Prince*,¹⁶ both modern and so-called postmodern

¹³ Emmanuel Y. Lartey and Hellena Moon, *Postcolonial Images of Spiritual Care: Challenges of Care in a Neoliberal Age* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 5.

¹⁴ For an exploration of colonial constructions of the image of Christ as king (as well as prophet and priest) in conversation with the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher, see Jeorg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 197–236.

¹⁵ See Christian N. Thoroughgood, Katina B. Sawyer, Art Padilla, and Laura Lunsford, "Destructive Leadership: A Critique of Leader-Centric Perspectives and Toward a More Holistic Definition," *Journal of Business Ethics* 151(3) (2016): 629. The authors outline several reasons why the literature has focused largely on leader-centrism: (1) "a fascination with [singular] leadership outcomes, particularly destructive ones;" (2) "a popular perception of *leadership* that looks to *leaders* for answers to group and organizational problems;" (3) "much of the leadership literature is a reflection of psychologists' traditional emphasis on traits and behaviors, as opposed to higher macro-level processes more inherent to fields like sociology, institutional economics, history, and political science;" and (4) "simultaneous analysis of leaders, followers, and environments is difficult given all the factors to consider."

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 2nd ed., trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1532] 1998).

leadership literatures have maintained elements of these understandings and practices and adapted them to the colonial enterprise, most saliently within corporate America. In reality, though, significant adaptation was not necessary because the aims of modern colonialism remain compatible with empiric aims of past centuries.¹⁷ Likewise, various Christian traditions have assented to the primacy and assumed efficacy of the singular positional enactor model of leadership, most notably through the election of bishops, general ministers, presidents, and other heads of religious bodies, replicating royal imperial governing structures in order to gain political and religious power.¹⁸

At the same time, however—and more often than not in the case of congregations—the positional leader as pastor is often selected precisely for *his* ability to repel change, at least the kinds of change that might alter power structures, disrupt and reimagine processes, or engage other ways of being-thinking-acting toward

¹⁷ Now classic leadership works such as Peter F. Drucker's *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done* (New York: HarperCollins, [1967] 2006), James Collins's *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), and many others perpetuate a singular positional enactor model for change within the business sector, with the end goal of increased production and profit.

¹⁸ My own denomination, the United Church of Christ, underwent a national leadership restructure in recent history that culminated in 2000 with the creation of a shared leadership model between four executives overseeing different areas of the life of the church, with one individual serving as General Minister and President but having limited unilateral authority. Just fifteen years later, this model was deemed “ineffective” by factions of the denomination, including new denominational leadership; and a push was made for a new/old governing structure that increased greatly the authority and unilateral decision-making of the General Minister and President, thereby also decreasing the power of the other executive positions. A resolution brought to the General Synod as a rewriting of the denomination's constitution and bylaws failed in 2015 due to strong resistance but passed in 2017 with virtually no resistance or discussion. See Anthony Moujaes, “Synod Delegates Reshape UCC Leadership With Constitution and Bylaws Changes,” *UCC News*, July 4, 2017, https://www.ucc.org/news_gs_synod_delegates_reshape_ucc_leadership_with_constitution_and_bylaws_changes_07042017/.

post/decoloniality.¹⁹ In this sense, the pastor is paid to maintain colonial structures and processes that neither challenge hegemony and homogeneity, nor disrupt the theological beliefs and cultural, political, epistemological, and ontological worldviews of community members. At most, (white, male, heterosexual) pastors might be hired to “grow the church” by bringing in (white) young adults and (nuclear) families. Or perhaps toward nobler aims, the pastor is asked to extend the reach of the church into the surrounding community (for white urban or suburban congregations, this means engaging with increasingly nonwhite individuals who have moved into the church’s surrounding neighborhood as a result of white flight), but with the intention of either increasing its charitable services to these communities or assimilating them into the church, both of which constitute colonial endeavors that maintain the church’s hegemony.

Processes toward post/decolonial leaderships challenge assumptions about the singular pastor as primary change agent (or stasis agent, as the case may be) and instead invite possibilities for non-capitalistic, non-hegemonic, community-centered praxes around change. Before offering examples of processes, however, several other assumptions must be discussed and disrupted, particularly in their actualizations as fixed binaries related to pastoral leadership and congregational life.

Disrupting Binaries

Binaries might originate with the intention of expanding singular frameworks for being-thinking-acting, but they often become cemented as fixed polarities with time, interpretation, and implementation (particularly by colonial powers). Three such binaries as related to post/decolonial leaderships include: theory/

¹⁹ Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote, “The illusion which thinks it possible, by means of sermons, humanitarian works and encouragement of other-worldly values, to change people’s consciousness and thereby transform the world, exists only in those we term ‘naive.’ The ‘shrewd’ are well aware that such action can slow down the basic process of radical change in social structures.” See Paulo Freire, “Education, Liberation and the Church,” *Religious Education* 79(4) (1984): 525.

praxis (or knowledge/action), means/ends (or process/outcome), and using/rejecting the master's tools for change. Through problematizing each of these binaries and alternatively highlighting the interplays and interconnections between each coupling (with different resolutions offered for each pairing), ways forward in engaging and nurturing post/decolonial pastoral leaderships and community change might become more apparent.

Theory/Praxis (Knowledge/Action)

As referenced in the initial article, Mignolo and Walsh disrupt the binary construction of theory versus praxis by suggesting a decolonial “theory-and-as-praxis and praxis-and-as-theory...the interdependence and continuous flow of movement of both.”²⁰ Although this binary seems nonexistent because praxis includes the use of thought and reflection to inform action, it is the Westernized, colonial elevation of theory and thinking *alone* as the primary, “correct” practice over a more integrated praxis that poses problems for post/decolonial pastoral leaderships. In their coauthored book *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, the first four chapters written by Walsh focus on queries around praxis: “The for, the how, the with whom, and what for...to disturb the notion that theoretical and conceptual frameworks must necessarily precede praxis, as well as the idea that meaning is only conceptually derived.”²¹ The latter chapters written by Mignolo focus on the conceptual frameworks and discussions of colonialism in terms of the what and the why, as he asserts that “decoloniality is first and foremost liberation of knowledge, of understanding and affirming subjectivities that have been devalued by narratives of modernity that are constitutive of the CMP [colonial matrix of power].”²² Each author's commitments as articulated within the structure of the book highlight the broader tensions between theory and praxis/knowledge and action,

²⁰ Mignolo and Walsh, 7.

²¹ Mignolo and Walsh, 19.

²² Mignolo and Walsh, 146. Mignolo is referring here to an understanding that “knowledge in the CMP occupies two positions: knowledge is one of the puppets (one domain, and the domains are the content of the conversation, the enunciated), and knowledge also refers to the designs (the enunciation) that the puppeteer creates to enchant the audience” (144).

emphasizing one construct more heavily than the other. Yet, in the introduction, they solidify the interwoven nature of the two conceptions with these questions: “Are you not doing something when you theorize or analyze concepts? Isn’t doing something praxis? And from praxis—understood as thought-reflection-action and thought-reflection on this action—do we not also construct theory and theorize thought?”²³

For embodying processes toward post/decolonial pastoral leaderships, knowledge and action (theory and praxis) are engaged dialectically in creative interplay, at times not distinguishable from one another. However, what is most central to theory-and-as-praxis and praxis-and-as-theory is the “continuous work to plant and grow an otherwise despoiled and in the borders, margins, and cracks of the modern/colonial/capitalist/heteropatriarchal order.”²⁴ In the realms of knowledge (recognizing such as knowledge-and-as-action), Otto Maduro proffers several important hypotheses that might move communities toward post/decolonial processes, four of which are articulated as follows:

Whatever we understand by knowledge, we always and only know in community, in a culture and language shared by community. “Individual” knowledge is never merely individual: It is always knowledge claimed by an individual within a community, but not quite yet knowledge until it is understood and validated by a community (or another).

Whatever we understand by knowing or knowledge (or, by extension, true or truth), we almost invariably know amid unstable, asymmetric power relations, interests, and dynamics. The meaning of an utterance, if any, is (re)produced in relation (both specific and variable) to the history, culture, and dynamics (including power dynamics) of a specific community.

²³ Mignolo and Walsh, 7.

²⁴ Mignolo and Walsh, 101.

Whatever we understand by knowing or knowledge, we could submit that it is less so (held less and by fewer people as knowledge, as “real,” as “true”), the less the attention, importance, and consequences (as well as its denials, refutations, rejections, and dismissals) it is capable of bringing forth. Whatever is shared, recognized, and accepted in a certain community as knowledge is such a result of the investment of time and energy in constructing and safeguarding such knowledge as valid, legitimate, true, and important. In this sense, knowledge is accumulated labor.

A claim to know, to have knowledge, to know where knowledge is, how to get it, and who has it is more perilous than just an intellectual claim. Such an epistemological claim...might reactivate, reanimate, reawaken dormant memories, worries, patterns, and desires...regardless of, and also over against, the best intentions of those reintroducing certain knowledge claims in a particular juncture of a group's history.²⁵

Knowledges, therefore, in processes toward post/decolonial pastoral leaderships constitute more than mere abstract thought or theory divorced from context, community, place, and the present moment. *Knowledge-and-as-action* (and *theory-and-as-praxis*) includes relational, power-laden dynamics that are conveyed not only through the content being shared, but also through the very terms undergirding the process of knowledge transmission. This begs the following questions: What knowledges are being transmitted/sanctioned/embodied by pastoral leaders within faith communities? How are these knowledges expressed or understood (as divine, holy, sacred, etc.)? Conversely, what knowledges are being negated/hidden/delegitimized by pastoral leaders, and how are such knowledges expressed or understood (as mortal, sinful, “other,” etc.)? What are the terms set forth by the structures,

²⁵ Maduro, 88–89, 90, 92–93, 101–102.

domains, processes of the church and denomination/tradition that sanction some knowledges and delegitimize others?

Disrupting dominant knowledges—and the terms through which these knowledges have been sanctioned—opens possibilities for pastoral leaders toward new actions, thus bringing theory and praxis into closer relationship with one another. Such knowledges in U.S. Protestantism include traditioned rituals, liturgies, hymns, orders of worship, patterns of governance, theological truth claims, and much more. Processes/praxes that embrace post/decoloniality must interrogate knowledges, uncover the ways knowledges have been historically and culturally constructed and why they have been constructed in such ways, and engage with those knowledges that have been negated, hidden, and delegitimized in favor of colonial motives and narratives (as well as those knowledges that have been used subversively and in resistance to colonial motives and narratives).

Means/Ends²⁶ (Process/Outcome)

U.S. Protestantism—situated within eurowestern colonial/modern values of achievement and continual progress—generally remains mired in an implicit prioritization of ends/outcomes over means/process. Measures of success for congregations often center on two numerical variables: people and money (or money and people). Pastoral leaders or church members might not express this so bluntly, but the model of the modern/colonial congregation relies on generating enough income to pay professional staff (including the pastor's salary and benefits), cover necessary building maintenance expenses, and meet denominational dues requirements (with increasing dollars for mission and program included when surpluses exist). This requires enough people to tithe appropriately in order to fulfill those financial obligations (or, rather, a few people who are of significant means to fund the bulk

²⁶ While not the subject of this section, it is important to note ongoing ethical discussions regarding “means justifying ends” and vice versa. In the organizing classic by Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, [1971] 1989), 24–27, Alinsky devotes a chapter to this very conundrum and offers an insightful power analysis.

of these expenses). Consequently, such a dynamic often creates a pay-for-service model of ministry whereby those who are paid by the church are expected to perform their duties to the satisfaction of the salary funders in ensuring the success of the “business.” The more people in the pews and money in the bank, the more successful is the pastor,²⁷ minimizing both biblical visions of *ekklesia* and the importance of process in congregational change.²⁸

Many congregations engage in processes of re-visioning and re-missioning, endeavors that invite changes that rarely make substantive shifts toward post/decolonial praxes of negating empire and the trappings of coloniality/modernity. As with disruptions regarding theory-and-as-praxis/knowledge-and-as-action, the content (the explicitly and implicitly named components, motivations, and theologies) and the deeper terms (the histories, structures, values, and worldviews through which these terms have been made to flourish) of any process for change must be interrogated, challenged, and dismantled within an acknowledgement of the particular power dynamics and complex relationships at play in the congregation. Ultimately, in post/decolonial activities, process—that is, the process that the community undertakes—*becomes* the outcome/ends or, at the very least, gains equality with (and, in many cases, priority over) the ends/results. In this manner, colonial reflexes of hegemony, monovocality, universalization, control, and mastery might be mitigated somewhat through what such processes engender toward the post/decolonial.

As a model/framework and a process (or framework-and-as-process), Matthew Wesley Williams, in the coauthored work *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose*, calls for

²⁷ See David E. Fitch, “Our Definition of Success: When Going From Ten to a Thousand Members in Five Years Is the Sign of a Sick Church,” *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church From Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 27–46.

²⁸ In the initial article, I referenced feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp’s description of *ekklesia* as a counter-public sphere of justice and as a community of friends engaging in a praxis of connectedness, outlined in her book *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 62–69.

“liberating leadership,” which “seeks to dismantle the dominant forms of living and leading that reinforce the oppressive norms of empire.”²⁹ Williams juxtaposes the notion of warrior-hero (a singular figurehead whose tasks are to rescue and fix) with the image of warrior-healer (one who helps communities reconnect with themselves and “cocreates the conditions for the community to discover its power and address its complex challenges”).³⁰ Based on concepts and praxes of community and church arising from indigenous African and black American traditions highlighted throughout the book, liberating leadership—as a way of freeing the notion of leadership from its conventional (i.e., empiric/colonial) utilizations—is characterized by a series of negatives thusly:

It is not synonymous with public speaking. Ella Baker modeled an approach to leadership that suggests that *public listening* rather than public speaking might be the most important skill in a community when facing complex and systemic ills.

It is not about lone rangers. Dominant notions of leadership arise from the [colonial] Western intellectual tradition that privileges the individual as the source and end of all useful endeavors.

It does not use people as means to achieve an end. Even the most well-intentioned efforts to dismantle oppression and inaugurate eternal alternatives can fall into the habitual flaw of using people to achieve change. Borrowing logic from industrial-age innovation of interchangeable parts, this leadership reflex uses people in congregations, organizations, and movements as incidental, replaceable assets in the machine of the mission. Human beings are the ends, not the mere means, of liberation.

²⁹ Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker, *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose* (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2020), 129.

³⁰ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 129.

It is not best known for its products, but by its processes. We tend to determine whether a leader is effective solely by what the person acquires or achieves. What if instead of focusing on the products of leaders, we paid more attention to the processes of leadership?³¹

By negating the warrior-hero role of the pastoral leader and instead cultivating options for warrior-healerships that prioritize means/process toward the co-creation of communities discovering their power for change, the ends/outcomes experience liberation as well. From bottom-line numbers to the collective flourishing of community members to live their faith in new ways, the transformation of ends/outcomes provides pastoral leaders and congregations with a deeper “why” and motivation to engage post/decolonial knowledges-and-as-actions in the first place. The question of whose human collective flourishing, however, is important to examine, particularly if dominant faith communities continue to flourish while subaltern communities continue to decline and perish (culturally, economically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and otherwise).³²

Using/Rejecting the “Master’s Tools” for Change

Audre Lorde said famously, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”³³ Many leaders, changemakers, activists, and scholars have relied upon Lorde’s words to engage in the work of decolonizing social movements, community and nonprofit organizations, and—to a limited extent—faith communities. Anything resembling “the master’s tools” are dismissed; and processes and plans negating modernity, white heteropatriarchy, hegemony,

³¹ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 134–135, 137–140.

³² *Subalternity*, a term first introduced and detailed by postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak, is “less an identity than what we might call a predicament...in Spivak’s definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power [and voice] is radically obstructed.” See Rosalind C. Morris, “Introduction,” *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 8.

³³ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, [1984] 2007), 112.

capitalism, exploitation, etc. are sought and implemented/experimented within these spheres. This creates, therefore, a binary reality in which such tools can either be utilized fully or rejected altogether.

The question becomes: For individuals who reside within the United States, is it possible to reject the tools of coloniality/modernity completely? Whether a pastoral leader's identities and affiliations with white heteropatriarchy, empiric aims, etc. are more or less apparent (e.g., whether one is a white, cisgender, heterosexual male serving a white, affluent, suburban church, or a gender nonbinary, queer person of color serving a lower socioeconomic urban faith community, or any combination of intersecting identities and circumstances), there exist difficulties—nay, impossibilities—to becoming a wholly post/decolonial leader or congregation. As offered in the initial article, post/decoloniality is a *process* in and of itself of complexities, tensions, and “resurgences of the conventional” (as named in Emmanuel Lartey's characteristics of postcolonial faith communities) that never reaches definitive ends. Even if the totality of coloniality's tools were to be rejected somehow, the theories-and-as-praxes and praxes-and-as-theories by which such rejections occur would be constant and continual (which is an iterative work that many social movements, organizations, and faith communities embrace in processes toward post/decoloniality).

Mignolo and Walsh quote the work of Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon in moving beyond the binary toward a praxis of “not only with the master's tools”:

Slaves have historically done something more proactive with such tools than attempt to dismantle the Big House. There are those who used those tools, developed additional ones, and built houses of their own on more or less generous soil. It is our view that the proper response is to follow their lead, transcending rather than dismantling Western ideas through building our own houses of thought. When enough houses are built, the hegemony of the master's house—in fact, *mastery*

itself—will cease to maintain its imperial status. Shelter needn't be the rooms offered by such domination.³⁴

Pastoral leadership in U.S. Protestantism today has relied too heavily on the master's tools to further coloniality/modernity and reap its many benefits of legitimation, power, control, and mastery. Before such leaders and communities undertake the iterative work of rejecting or using not only the master's tools, they must learn to recognize such tools in the first place (not only the tools themselves, but when and how those tools are used to further coloniality). Such work transcends the binaries of theory and praxis to engage processes that allow for knowledge-and-as-action and action-and-as-knowledge toward liberation. This work also requires a re-prioritization of process/means in relationship to outcomes/ends, whereby the binary might then be dissolved and processes-and-as-outcomes creates new visions of *ekklesia*.

Embracing and Transcending a New Binary for Change

In the midst of reimagining fixed binaries as pluralities with multiple commonalities and intersections, one generative framework-and-as-process for pastoral leaders who seek to nurture practices and processes of post/decoloniality in their communities involves the complimentary acts of *delinking* and *relinking*. Mignolo suggests:

Decoloniality emerges out of the need to delink from the narratives and promises of modernity—not to resist, but to re-exist...decoloniality names the vision and energy of delinking (disconnect) to relink (re-connect) with the praxis of living, thinking, doing that we, decolonially speaking, want to preserve.³⁵

³⁴ Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, "Introduction: Not Only the Master's Tools," *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), ix, quoted in Mignolo and Walsh, 7.

³⁵ Mignolo and Walsh, 145–146, 147.

He articulates further the act of relinking: “Re-existing means using the imaginary of modernity rather than being used by it. Being used by modernity means that coloniality operates upon you, controls you, forms your emotions, your subjectivity, your desires. Delinking entails a shift toward using instead of being used.”³⁶ In the colonial matrix of power, all individuals are being used for some ends, whether those ends are power, authority, control, profit, or otherwise (with many used to the point of oppression, violence, delegitimization, and erasure from the U.S. empire). In this manner, using the tools of coloniality operates in similar ways to drawing upon “not only the master’s tools,” but building from them to re-envision multiple different “houses” of faith and belonging.

For pastoral leaders and congregations, delinking and relinking actions will look and feel quite different depending on context. While engaging post/decoloniality is everyone’s work, location, identity, and power matter. Pastoral theologian Melinda McGarrah Sharp articulates it in this manner:

Postcolonializing unearths pain from structures of everyday life that are still shaped by historical colonialism whose basic logic is that some human beings are more human than others. The colonizing logic enrolls gender, identity, nationality, age, skin pigmentation, race, bodily abilities, geographic location, family history, and the myriad of other ways of identifying ourselves and other people into hierarchical patterns of superiorities and inferiorities that pervade contemporary life. Resisting these hierarchies plays out differently for folks who are crushed by them daily and folks for whom the structures are largely invisible or optional extracurricular activity if considered to matter at all. No wonder we humans differ in our desires to

³⁶ Mignolo and Walsh, 146–147.

resist this hierarchical postcolonial status quo or to
resist changing anything about it.³⁷

What might nurturing practices and processes of post/decoloniality within a large Methodist church of largely white, affluent families in a suburban metropolitan area look like? In comparison, what might nurturing such practices and processes in a small, native Lutheran mission church on a reservation look like? Or a mid-size, fourth-generation, middle-class Japanese American Methodist congregation in a sprawling urban area? Coloniality has rendered—and continues to inflict—violence and pain in starkly varying degrees for each of these communities. On the whole, leaders and congregations that are majority white and/or middle- or upper-class (and/or heterosexual, able-bodied, possess citizenship, etc.) might not readily comprehend the work of post/decoloniality because they constitute those who have benefited from the very hierarchies that McGarrah Sharp references, thus rendering modernity/coloniality invisible. Recognition of the systems and “master’s tools” at play—inviting a delinking of particular knowledges—might be an important initial praxis, one that will no doubt bring challenge and resistance.

For pastoral leaders and congregations that are historically and presently othered, erased, and/or oppressed in the colonial matrix of power, knowledges-and-as-actions and actions-and-as-knowledges that *relink individuals to themselves*, their traditioned ways of knowing, being, and doing, with intention “to create rather than to be dependent on the creativity of the actors and institutions that produce and maintain the narratives of modernity,” provide possibilities for re-existencing new orientations of *ekklesia*.³⁸ In Courtney T. Goto’s work *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning Into God’s New Creation*, Goto describes the introduction of a collaborative art installation (*The Garden Series*) at the Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church (SJUMC), a congregation founded by Japanese immigrants who came to the United States

³⁷ Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp, *Creating Resistances: Pastoral Care in a Postcolonial World* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 183.

³⁸ Mignolo and Walsh, 146.

before World War II. The installation was designed to mirror a distinctive feature of the church, the Issei Memorial Garden, located in the center of the church grounds. The garden, constructed in 1972 to honor the “perseverance, sacrifices, and faith” of the *issei* (or first) generation of church founders who “suffered economic hardship, racism, and incarceration with their families in wartime relocation camps,” is landscaped with flora and other elements in traditional Japanese style.³⁹ The narratives of how the garden has been maintained over the years became as much a source of meaning and pride for the faith community as the garden itself, even helping the congregation through a particularly conflictual moment in its existence in conversation with *The Garden Series* installation. In this regard, through SJUMC’s continual relinking to cultural aesthetics (the Issei Memorial Garden), congregational history (church ancestors who demonstrated perseverance through difficult times), the sharing of oral narratives by those who care for the garden (current wisdom-bearers), and aesthetically imaginative co-creation (*The Garden Series* as initially implemented by pastoral leadership), the faith community is able to re-existence itself as future generations and challenges arise.

Frameworks-and-as-Processes Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships

Remembering that any work engaged toward post/decoloniality is necessarily contextual, pluriversal, and communal (among other characteristics), there exist specific frameworks-and-as-processes that have arisen, elements of which may be—and, indeed, have been—useful for faith communities in the praxis of post/decoloniality. Such frameworks-and-as-processes are myriad; however, two specific models will be explored, highlighting possibilities for pastoral leaders and faith communities: *Conscientização* (as popular education) and emergent strategy.

³⁹ Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning Into God’s New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 97.

Conscientização and Popular Education

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who, in 1970, published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and is most well-known for the process detailed in his work as *conscientização* (or conscientization), “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”⁴⁰ This critical consciousness-centered process negated a banking approach to education that understood the oppressed/colonized/“uneducated” as objects and the teacher as professional authority (or *singular positional enactor*) who would impart the necessary knowledge.⁴¹ Instead, Freire argued, those considered objects should be speaking about their own experiences and oppressions so that they themselves can alter power dynamics and negate oppression, for “it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it.”⁴²

The specific process that Freire practiced involved training individuals from beyond the community, to observe said community, by holding “evaluation meetings” to share observations. In these meetings, investigators would engage with community members dialogically, listening as much as possible to articulations of “present, existential, concrete situation[s], reflecting the aspirations of the people.”⁴³ Such conversation would create generative themes that would then lead to the community’s increased collective awareness (conscientization) of the “limit-situations” they were experiencing. Through what Freire calls “critical perception,” “a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads [humans] to attempt to overcome” their limit-situations.⁴⁴ Consequently, such dialogue transforms “untested feasibility” into testing action, empowering individuals within these conversations to become “teacher-students,” who will work more directly with others

⁴⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, [1970] 2014), 35.

⁴¹ Freire (2014), 73.

⁴² Freire (2014), 88.

⁴³ Freire (2014), 95.

⁴⁴ Freire (2014), 99.

within their community to co-create knowledge-and-as-action and dismantle/transform/re-exist realities.⁴⁵

Although this is a significantly simplified summary of the Freirean process, it provides a basic understanding of the paradigm shift from one form of knowledge gaining by oppressed peoples (i.e., the banking system) to a more dialogical, community-centered, and grounded approach in which the purpose is to liberate individuals and give voice to the subaltern so that they can negate and resist colonial realities and violences. Freire's notions of conscientization and popular education have been applied broadly around the world, including within Western, Eurocentric, colonial contexts. For example, book groups have been referred to as processes that can bring about conscientização, thus labeling (or appropriating) any educational process that rejects the banking approach as being "Freirean." However, if such groups are not centered on education for the purpose of social change and they do not lead to post/decolonial praxis, then they might not constitute Freirean approaches.⁴⁶

As a result, Freire's process has been the subject of critique by postcolonial and decolonial scholars and leaders alike, particularly in its wider applications beyond specific localized and historicized contexts in which it was first practiced, but also related to facets of the process itself. For example, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that Freire's "research process has a very clear sequence, and the control of the sequence is in the hands of the researcher."⁴⁷ Freire's focus was on the educational project that, while having some interconnections with post/decoloniality, is not synonymous with it. Rather, in "epistemologies of the South" (as de Sousa

⁴⁵ Freire (2014), 113, 120.

⁴⁶ See Loretta Pyles, *Progressive Community Organizing: Reflective Practice in a Globalizing World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 85: "Reading books as a group about progressive ideas can be a way of learning novel perspectives and formulating a value-based outlook as a group. Such study groups could evolve into publishing a newsletter clarifying the ideas, or they could evolve into some other kind of social action."

⁴⁷ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 260–261.

Santos describes within decolonial praxes), the main endeavor is the “ecologies of knowledges,” whereby the researcher or investigator “must be a rearguard intellectual, never a vanguard intellectual.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, the Freirean model still maintains a hierarchical relationship between subject and object, although it certainly is geared toward dialogue and liberative movement. Related to broader applications of Freirean conscientization, de Sousa Santos continues, “There is a danger that the phases and sequences controlled by the researcher may turn into a recipe, that is to say, into an educational process totally disconnected from the political action it was supposed to promote.”⁴⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasized this point further to stress that Western, colonial processes and violences have occurred under the self-proclaimed use of Freirean methodologies and pedagogies, as well.⁵⁰

Even in considering these critiques, Freirean pedagogies still might have something of substance to offer U.S. Protestant pastoral leaders and faith communities toward engaging post/decolonial knowledges-and-as-actions; for, as Catherine Walsh suggests, it is possible to “both think with and beyond Freire” for new possibilities.⁵¹ To this point, the value of Freirean pedagogy lies within the dialogical process that has the potential to unearth silenced, oppressed, subaltern narratives and realities that contribute to a congregation’s *conscientização*. However, for pastoral leaders and churches that would rely on such a process of “education,” whereby knowledge is *extracted from* the other with no regard for power inequalities, reciprocities (as well as reparations), and the need for resistance/dismantling/re-existencing of the othered, such faith communities reinscribe colonialism and inflict further harm. Freire himself said of clergy and churches:

⁴⁸ de Sousa Santos, 261.

⁴⁹ de Sousa Santos, 261.

⁵⁰ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 169.

⁵¹ Mignolo and Walsh, 91.

The *sine qua non* which apprenticeship [with the oppressed] demands is that first of all, they really experience their own Easter, that they die as elitists so as to be resurrected on the side of the oppressed, that they be born again with the beings who were not allowed to be. Such a process implies a renunciation of myths which are dear to them: the myth of their “superiority,” of their purity of soul, of their virtues, their wisdom, the myth that they “save the poor,” the myth of the neutrality of the church, of theology, education, science, technology, the myth of their own impartiality—from which grow the other myths: of the inferiority of other people, of their spiritual and physical impurity, and the myth of the absolute ignorance of the oppressed.⁵²

Assuch, the framework-and-as-process that Freire recommended for Christians and churches was one of apprenticeship with poor and oppressed communities⁵³ in Latin America working toward their own *conscientização* and liberation, not necessarily the aforementioned educational process he outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (though this process was adapted and revised in various contexts throughout the world at Freirean institutes). That process, in reality, was not designed for elite Christians who benefit from the colonial matrix of power and possess closer ties with empire, hegemony, and heteropatriarchy. Instead, such pastoral leaders and

⁵² Freire (1984), 525–526.

⁵³ de Sousa Santos, 258–259, notes some important points regarding differences between Freire’s contexts and current contexts: “Literacy tasks [which were Freire’s original concern] are today less pressing, and the oppressed groups are of such variety that they cannot be identified through the general categories of peasants and workers. They include women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, Dalits, and peasants and workers with different traditions of resistance in different continents.” Moreover, “The contradiction separating oppressors and oppressed is crucial in the epistemologies of the South, but the character of the domination sustaining it is now far more complex. In the work of Freire, the principal mode of domination, if not the only one, is capitalism, whereas in the epistemologies of the South, domination has three pillars: capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.”

faith communities are to take on the role of apprentice to subaltern communities, not to extract, impose, or control but to learn from, work under the tutelage of, and experience in dialogue with, those most impacted by empire.

What is the role of the pastoral leader in such a process? This framework-and-as-process for change creates a model in which the leader is a *communal co-learner/sharer* (in juxtaposition to a singular positional enactor). Communal co-learners/sharers embody a leadership-by-example framework in the deepest sense, whereby they invite the church alongside them in the unlearning and relearning only available by doing the work of engaging with communities beyond their own (i.e., a praxical delinking and relinking). Negating and monitoring one's tendencies for asserting hegemony, control, "truth" and "knowledge" in Westernized, Eurocentric ways—at the direction of those one is being apprenticed by—becomes the means-and-as-ends by which the congregation understands other ways of being-thinking-acting as legitimate. In this manner, the pastoral leader guides the faith community in the cultivation of counter-knowledges that take seriously the third hypothesis by Otto Maduro cited earlier in the article: "Whatever is shared, recognized, and accepted in a certain community as knowledge is such a result of the investment of time and energy in constructing and safeguarding such knowledge as valid, legitimate, true, and important. In this sense, knowledge is accumulated labor."⁵⁴ By pastoral leadership's openness to, and praxis of, communal co-learning/sharing, such accumulated labor might result in new knowledges-and-as-actions that transform/reshape worship, liturgy, governance, education, and formation, as well as community values, habits, and lived beliefs and theologies in conversation and conspiracy with those seeking post/decolonial realities.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Maduro, 93.

⁵⁵ While not detailed in this article, Freire provides a fitting example of the process a Christian might encounter through apprenticeship that mirrors praxical delinking and relinking, as well as the challenges such work poses to the individual's ties with imperialism. See the section "Education for Liberation," Freire (1984), 528–531.

Emergent Strategy

adrienne maree brown is a Detroit-based social justice facilitator and doula who, in 2017, published *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* based on her experience as a nonprofit leader, organizer, and student of activist Grace Lee Boggs and Afrofuturist Octavia Butler. brown's book is unlike any other in its organization, structure, and framework-and-as-process for leaderships and change, inviting "possibilities for an otherwise" in both regards.

Although emergent strategy—like Freirean education for change—is another process that is difficult to define and describe succinctly, brown summarizes it as a way "for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions...emphasiz[ing] connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind."⁵⁶ Such strategy relies on principles of biomimicry—"the imitation of models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems"—and permaculture, or "a system of agricultural and social design principles centered around simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and features observed in natural ecosystems."⁵⁷ Ultimately, brown says, it constitutes "how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."⁵⁸ brown expands upon several grounding principles in the book:

Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant. (Be like water.)

There is always enough time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.

⁵⁶ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 2–3.

⁵⁷ brown, 23.

⁵⁸ brown, 24.

Never a failure, always a lesson.

Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy.)

Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows.⁵⁹

The elements—or ways of being-thinking-acting—through which brown frames these principles (drawing from nature and natural systems) include fractal, adaptive, interdependent and decentralized, nonlinear and iterative, resilient and transformative justice-oriented, and creating more possibilities. Evident in principles and elements are notions of leaderships that rely upon a communal approach centering change by, with, and dependent upon the people (not a single positional enactor). In a decentralized model whereby power is distributed among the multitude, those who are charismatic singular leaders or who are lifted up by any group as the leader must resist such “rock star” temptations. As brown indicates: “Rock stars get isolated, lose touch with our vulnerability, are expected to pull off superhero work, and generally burn out within a decade.” She continues, “People stopped seeing us. We became a place to project longings and critiques. And we learned the hard way that rock star status is a cyclical thing. It becomes its own work, maintaining and promoting the rock star in the organization.”⁶⁰ Moreover, this model of leadership replicates the very dynamics of hierarchy and power that are inherent in colonialism and which Lartey’s characteristics of postcolonial leadership negate. Fittingly, those characteristics—counter-hegemonic and strategic activities, plurality/pluriversality, intersectionality, interactionality and intersubjectivity, polyvocality, dynamism, and creativity—contain similarities and complementarities to brown’s emergent

⁵⁹ brown, 41–42.

⁶⁰ brown, 99.

strategy principles. Thus, brown redefines a great leader to be “one who is inspirational in collaborative action, accountability, and vulnerability” and who surrounds oneself with those who will name power dynamics at play through honest relationships.⁶¹

The entanglements of pastoral leadership with rock star status exist to various degrees based on contexts, identities, and dynamics, but are often exacerbated by perceptions of the role of pastor (whether or not such perceptions are grounded theologically, biblically, or structurally/denominationally) as set apart, more spiritual, or simply as head of the church community. Nevertheless, new ways of leadership and change like the kind that brown outlines are emerging in religious and secular settings. As an example, since the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., many religious and political leaders have been searching for a (male, cisgender, heterosexual) leader to take his place in the struggle for civil rights. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been a direct contestation of that assumed leadership model by describing themselves as, and practicing, a “leader-full” decentralized movement. Such decentralization “would allow for a different practice of power, where many people rather than a small few determined the direction of the project,” with the recognition 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.”⁶² With chapters across the country that have their own shared leadership practices and that cultivate leaders from within, all chapters also help to make decisions about the collective actions and statements of the larger network, challenging the idea “that one leader, or even three, can speak for all or make decisions for all.”⁶³ There is caution in such a model, however, as BLM cocreator Alicia Garza warns:

⁶¹ brown, 101.

⁶² Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart* (New York: One World, 2020), 162.

⁶³ Garza, 163.

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.⁶⁴

In this regard, brown's work offers some helpful tips, wisdom, and practices for decision-making that can be (and have been) used within congregations.⁶⁵

Another model with notes of (and an explicit reference to) emergent strategy framework-and-as-process is one articulated by theological educators Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker in their work *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose*. In addition to conceptions of liberating leadership shared earlier in this piece, the authors detail a process by which congregations, educational institutions, and other faith-filled groups might move beyond colonial, Westernized, hierarchical ways of change through movements they collectively name as CARE:

C = Create hospitable space.

A = Ask self-awakening questions.

R = Reflect theologically together.

E = Enact the most faithful step.⁶⁶

Grounded in the authors' own experiences and theologies, CARE creates alternatives for the work of religious organizations with such "what if" questions as: "What if we helped people better

⁶⁴ Garza, 164.

⁶⁵ See brown, "Tools for Emergent Strategy Facilitation," 213–270. brown categorizes processes and other tools according to the elements of emergent strategy; and the section includes everything from ways to create group agreements to efficient consensus decision making, conflict relationship prompts, and collaborative ideation processes.

⁶⁶ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 3.

align their espoused values with their leadership practices? What if we exposed alternative ways of leading, ways that value collective wisdom and action? What might be possible if changemaking leaders gain the tools to imagine and enact alternatives to the status quo? What if we explore together the steps that courageous change requires of us? What if we could create such opportunities for people to explore their call beyond the four walls of the church?”⁶⁷ Each aspect of CARE speaks directly to co-facilitating ways of being that echo principles of brown’s emergent strategy and offer a possible response to such questions. Creating hospitable space “is about creating conditions where Spirit-inspired alternatives to the current reality may emerge,” and invites the gatherers to sit face to face, share silence and stillness, establish shared guidelines, slow down, and turn to story.⁶⁸ Asking self-awakening questions entails five movements of creating space, employing a muse, discerning questions that are truly self-awakening, letting the questions breathe, and catching what surfaces.⁶⁹ Critical theological reflection invokes a communal metanoia, a “shift in our consciousness and way of being in the world that directs our action toward the embodiment of empowering alternatives.”⁷⁰ Finally, enacting the most faithful step catalyzes a human-centered design (HCD) approach of listening (to those most affected by the solution), ideating (imagining alternatives), trying something (experimenting), reflecting, and beginning again (listening again to those most affected).⁷¹

Such models as BLM and CARE that incorporate (explicitly and implicitly, knowingly and unknowingly) principles and elements of emergent strategy in their theories-and-as-praxes of leaderships and change hold critical promise for pastoral leaders and churches seeking post/decolonial realities. In recognizing that this work necessitates delinking from hegemonic paradigms of how churches are “run” and calls into question long-held traditions,

⁶⁷ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 8.

⁶⁸ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 43, 33.

⁶⁹ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 68–69.

⁷⁰ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 112.

⁷¹ Lewis, Williams, and Baker, 155.

structures, and embedded (and embodied) heteropatriarchal, hierarchical conceptions of the practicing of faith in the current U.S. colonial context, pastoral leaders who have been trained and socialized within current Protestant denominational systems might yearn for more concrete evidence that such frameworks-and-as-praxes really produce the kinds of change they seek. This yearning must be revealed for what it is: another colonial instinct that seeks proof by the standards and measures that post/decolonial pastoral leaderships negate and resist. Such seeking of “proof of concept” also includes desires for concrete examples of X Church and Y Pastor having implemented a particular model, resulting in “success.” While additional examples most certainly exist in which pastoral leaders and congregations are engaging collaboratively and collectively the work of praxising post/decoloniality in and throughout various areas of life together (as illustrated in one brief instance with the narrative regarding Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church), the contextualized grounding of processes relative to localized faith communities remains critical to any delinking and relinking movements.

Conclusion

Similar to the initial article that introduced frameworks toward post/decolonial pastoral leaderships, what is offered in this piece is preliminary, as additional analyses and configurations are needed in order to further explicate, refine, contextualize, and even question these articulations. Moreover, underlying what has been shared here exists a binary that has yet to be investigated fully, though aspects of its presence are woven throughout—the generally bounded dichotomy between pastor and congregation, between clergy and laity. The hope is that colonialism/modernity has not saturated U.S. Protestant constructions of pastoral leadership to the point that we cannot be freed from current formulations and praxes. Movements from pastoral leader as singular positional enactor to communal co-learner/sharer—creating space for new models that consider emergent, leader-full, liberating, and other leaderships to flourish—generate permeability between what is (and who is) a pastor/clergy person and a congregant/layperson. In

this sense, post/decolonial leaderships might begin to be expressed characteristically as counter-hegemonic, insurgent, strategic, hybrid/plural, intersubjective, interactional, dynamic, polyvocal, creative, and more. At least (or at last) the line between pastor and congregation has been pierced and the binary disrupted.⁷² With the concept of change removed from the sole grasp/hands of the pastoral leader, theory and praxis (knowledge and action), process and outcome (means and ends), and rejecting and using the “master’s tools” are similarly disrupted and re-existenced as power becomes shared (resisting hegemony), multiple bodies and voices contribute wisdom and knowledge-and-as-action (resisting homogeneity), and *ekklesia* takes shape. The quote by Albert Memmi introducing the initial article and this piece serves as a beacon for all pastoral leaders to resist (delink) and reimagine (relink) their roles, calls, work, and the entirety of their being-thinking-acting not only for themselves, but for the collective flourishing of the church.

⁷² Such a “line” is an indirect reference to Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s notion of the *abyssal line* that “persists as colonialism of power, of knowledge, of being, and goes on distinguishing metropolitan sociability from colonial sociability” (22).

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LIDERAZGO MESTIZO/MESTIZO LEADERSHIP: RELATIONAL CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERSHIP FOR THE BORDERLANDS

MARTIN RODRIGUEZ

Abstract

The growing pluralism of our neighborhoods requires leadership that cultivates shared life together amid contexts of profound and enduring difference. Presented here is the first article of two that promotes a relational social constructionist account of cross-cultural leadership. It draws on a narrative inquiry among twelve Latinx pastors serving in multicultural congregations in Southern California. This article proposes a relational (re-)conception of culture in light of Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of mestizaje and the borderlands and then advances a praxiological and missiological framing of relational leadership, or liderazgo mestizo, which describes four interconnected categories of leadership practice. The second article, to be published in the following issue, will examine ways that liderazgo mestizo reflects and re-accentuates Relational Social Constructionist Leadership theory.

Introduction

When I first set out to research Latinx pastors for my doctoral dissertation project, I hypothesized that Latinx pastors by virtue of their Latinx culture would exhibit particular aptitudes for leadership within culturally diverse communities. I was looking for evidence that culture shapes capacities and that capacities shape leadership. My project at that point was informed by a postcolonial agenda that sought to promote marginalized Latinx voices as leaders with important lessons to teach the dominant culture. However, as I

Martin Rodriguez is Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Azusa Pacific University and since 2011 has been the minister of a multicultural congregation in Los Angeles.

reflected on the narratives of the Latinx pastors that I interviewed in light of constructionist articulations of hybridization—in particular, those of Mikhail Bakhtin and Gloria Anzaldúa—it became clear that my hypothesis was overlooking many interesting things that God’s Spirit was doing in these diverse communities. There was of course evidence in the pastors’ narratives that culture shapes leadership. But my hypothesized progression was equally true in reverse order: leaders shape culture. Often in our enthusiasm to measure how cultural factors influence leadership behaviors and the effectiveness of leadership practices, researchers like Geert Hofstede and I have spared little attention for how the dynamics of leadership shape cultures—the very cultures that supposedly shape leadership. The foundational assumption behind these cross-cultural leadership studies is that a person’s national context imprints a value-based and cognitively constraining culture (“software”) in one’s mind that manifests itself in organizations through distinctive behavioral patterns. Such approaches to cross-cultural leadership not only tend to obscure the agency of organizational members, as the focus is almost entirely on the activities and qualities of a few exceptional individuals (“leaders”), they also obscure the agency of the leaders themselves, as their own behavior is (allegedly) determined by cultural constraints (narratives) over which they have no say or control.

What is the relationship between leadership and culture? How does culture influence leadership? How does leadership influence culture? Among cross-cultural leadership scholars, our emphasis has, to an overwhelming extent, been on the question of how culture influences leadership, and this has reflected and reinforced two major reductionisms—one related to agency and the other to diversity—at the heart of modern western leadership studies. However, Bakhtin (1895–1975), whose theories have been at the center of critical discussions of cultural hybridity in western postcolonial discourse since the early 1980s, highlights the intimate link between agency and diversity. He suggests that all knowledge and meaning is a product of dialogue; that our worlds are constructed by language; and that agency is the capacity to coauthor new meanings and the power to “re-accent” the words

(language) we use. In short, we are never simply bound to the ways in which words have been used before us, for it is in the midst of each particular conversation between speakers and listeners that meaning emerges. Even though meanings are situated (i.e., shaped by contextual realities)—and therefore resist being re-accented—and even though authorities may seek to control meanings (“monologue”), there are always “loopholes” in our dialogical interactions for “creative understandings.” This space for creative understandings emerges from the fact that every word draws on a host of prior dialogues, stories, and experiences and thus has a plurality of possible meanings (“polyphony”). Diversity (polyphony) and agency (the capacity to generate meaning together) go hand in hand. Without agency, there is no diversity. Without diversity, there is no agency.

Yet in a growing number of our neighborhoods touched by globalization, at their best, cross-cultural leadership models serve as a kind of “sophisticated stereotyping”¹ that might just as easily limit our imaginations with regard to the agency of neighbors and the polyphony of their cultural narratives. Most cross-cultural leadership theories—regardless of whether they are mainstream or postcolonial or decolonial—have tended toward what Professor Willie James Jennings calls a “deeply distorted relational imagination.” These models of leadership distort identity and hinder efforts to cultivate belonging, because they have been formed within an imagination shaped by methods of domination that perceive *others* not as creative relational agents but as objects to be manipulated for our own ends and outcomes. As students and practitioners of cross-cultural leadership, we need relational accounts of both culture and leadership to disrupt homogenizing conceptions of culture and hegemonic approaches to leadership. As a Latinx practitioner and scholar myself, and drawing on field research among Latinx pastors, in what follows I offer one such relational account of culture and leadership.

¹ J. S. Osland, A. Bird, J. Delano, and M. Jacob, “Beyond Sophisticated Stereotyping: Cultural Sensemaking in Context,” *Academy of Management Executive* 14 no. 1 (2000): 65–79.

Mestizaje and the Borderlands

Latinx scholars debate the precise shape of and approach to Latinx identity. Yet most agree that our (so-called) assimilation to the United States involves a hybridization of cultural narratives rather than the erasure of one and wholesale adoption of another. Gloria Anzaldúa—a Chicana, queer, feminist, and postcolonial activist—describes her experiences of hybridization in terms of *mestizaje*. Anzaldúa was raised in the border country of south Texas, and she draws on her borderland experiences to paint vivid pictures of what it means to be a *mestiza*, a person “alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between different worlds she inhabits.” Anzaldúa called these spaces between worlds *borderlands* and people who experience them *borderlanders*.

By marrying a constructionist theory of knowledge (*la conciencia de la mestiza*) to a decolonizing agenda, Anzaldúa mapped a pathway for moving beyond reified, essentializing, exclusion-oriented, victim-oriented, and boundary-marking configurations of cultural identity. *La conciencia de la mestiza* entails, among other things, an imagination and an intellectual posture characterized by a tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction, by a spirit of hospitality that includes rather than excludes difference, and by a resistance to attempts by those in power to control knowledge or define reality. Even thirty years later, Anzaldúa’s frameworks continue to impact Latinx discourse, because her lasting contribution lies not so much in her answers to the questions of who Latinx peoples are or what Latinx culture is, as in the way she helps us deconstruct the epistemic assumptions behind these questions that have so often obsessed western cultural theorists. Anzaldúa highlighted the importance of narrative in identity formation—the stories we tell (and embody) continuously (re)shape our sense of self and community and our ways of relating in the world.

An analysis of the Latinx pastors’ narratives in light of Anzaldúa’s constructionist theories of identity suggests that experiences of *mestizaje* and the borderlands entail (at least) three interrelated psychosocial dynamics that I term—coalescence, collision, and displacement. These interconnected experiences operate

simultaneously and on a continuum, with each Latinx person and Latinx community identifying with each of these three experiences to differing degrees (see fig. 1).

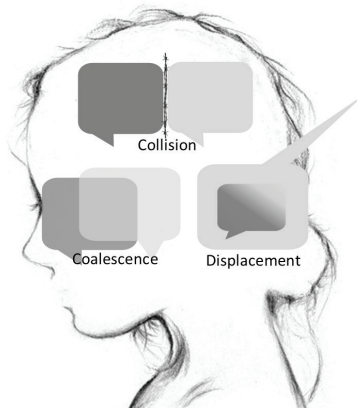


Figure 1. Mestizaje and Dynamics of the Borderlands

- *Coalescence* refers to the experience of a continual fusion of identities—the creation of new and distinct narratives through the blending and integration of multiple cultural narratives (see fig. 2). Anzaldúa analogizes the dynamic of coalescence within a person or community to the weaving of a unique tapestry that incorporates materials from the multiple worlds one inhabits.



Figure 2. Coalescence and Creation of New Narratives

- *Collision* refers to the experience of living with the myths and worldviews of two or more cultures informing one's imagination (see fig. 3). Anzaldúa analogizes the dynamic of collision to a Mexican-American border running right through her heart and imagination. The experience of collision, she explains, feels like the ongoing conflict of bordering nations within one's psyche or social system—"within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture."²

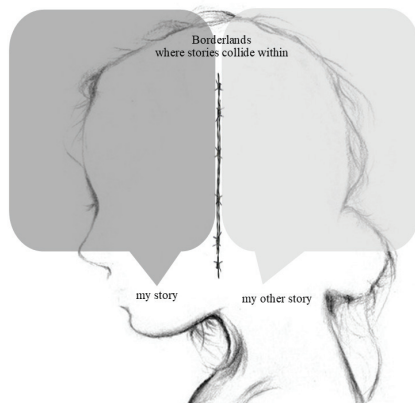


Figure 3. Collision and Borders Within

- *Displacement* refers to an experience of otherness and alterity—of never being fully at home nor fully accepted in one's place—where one's narrative is continuously resisting and (at the same time) incorporating narratives of the broader context (see fig. 4). Anzaldúa

² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/la frontera*, 100, 195. Foundational to Bakhtin's hybridity theory is the dialectical assertion that hybridity involves not only the "mixing of two socio-linguistic consciousnesses" but also the simultaneous "collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms." Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 360.

illustrates displacement using the indigenous Náhuatl concept of *nepantla*—a perpetual state of transition, “the liminal space between” that “uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity.”³

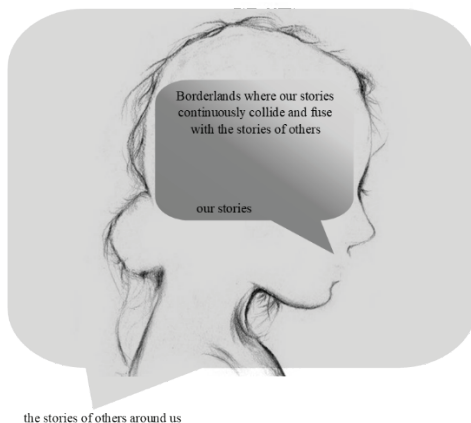


Figure 4. Displacement and *Nepantla*

My qualitative narrative study suggests that at least some—and likely a growing number—of our neighbors’ cultural identities are complex, multivalent, and fluid. Many Latinx peoples experience within themselves and their communities the dynamic tension of multiple cultural narratives. These narratives continuously collide and coalesce into new shapes, even as they resist and change amid encounters with the narratives of their neighbors. By holding in tension the dialectics of collision, coalescence, and displacement, this framing of *mestizaje* offers a complex vision of unity in which difference persists even as change continues through relational interactions with others. In creating visions of life together in contexts of pluralism, leadership would do well to expect and embrace dynamics of coalescence, collision, and displacement.

³ Anzaldúa and Keating, *This Bridge We Call Home*, 180.

Webs of *Testimonios*: Reimagining Culture for the Borderlands

A coalescence-collision-displacement framing of mestizaje points to the need for accounts of culture that create conceptual space for situatedness, flux, polyphony, and agency as integral dimensions of cultural identity. In other words, cultural identities in the borderlands are at once:

- *Situated.* The shapes of our cultural narratives are inseparable from dynamic constellations of relationships, places, and activities. All of our embodied experiences are inexorably tied to social, political, and historical situations.
- *Shifting.* Our experience of places is continuously shifting due to migrations and relocations. We might move to another neighborhood, or others might move into our neighborhood. Either way, our cultural narratives are only provisionally stable, as they remain linked to shifting contexts.
- *Plural.* Communities and individuals experiencing mestizaje describe navigating multiple (often incommensurate) cultural narratives, indicating that our cultural narratives are not monolithic.
- *Chosen.* Our contexts and relationships shape us, but they do not determine us. Experiences of mestizaje can, to a certain extent, be chosen and embraced or muted and suppressed. For instance, participants sometimes experienced displacement, coalescence, and collision due to factors beyond their control (e.g., the participant's parents move to a new country), but at other times participants experienced displacement, coalescence, and collision due to their own choices (e.g., participants chose to fellowship with a church of an unfamiliar culture).

In light of these experiences of mestizaje, one prototype for conceptualizing culture can be found in the corporate practice of

testimonios in Latino churches. Culture in this view is understood as webs of *testimonios* continuously (re)constructed through relational interactions. A *testimonio* is a novella-length, first-person narration of significant life experiences in which the narrative voice is that of a witness who recounts events with the aim of inspiring social transformations. *Testimonios* have a metonymic function by which one's story is representational of others who have lived through similar situations. At the same time, *testimonios* are inherently polyphonous in that they always leave space for the stories of others, so although *testimonios* involve truthfulness and veracity, they are never simply "the truth."⁴

The multi-voiced practice of *testimonio* in Latino congregations illustrates a complex and dynamic unity that embraces difference. In urban centers of North America, the composition of local congregations is continuously shifting due to immigration patterns tied to globalization. Newly arrived neighbors bring distinct, often competing, stories by which they make sense of the world. As they share their *testimonios*, these newcomers introduce new words and distinct meanings for familiar words, meanings that reflect the diverse ways they construe the world. Pastora Nadia's church in Long Beach prioritizes *testimonios* in corporate worship settings, in small-group settings, in one-on-one conversations, and even in leadership meetings. She describes it this way:

When we get to sit at a table together I want you to bring your history [testimonio] with you, because it's going to make me better, and it's going to grow me as well as a leader. Right? So, when we sit at staff meeting, I love to hear the heart of people who have a different understanding of systems and growth and church that have been influenced by their upbringing. It's been influenced by their education. It's been influenced by the relationships that they're in; that I'm not a part of, right? So, we bring it all to the table and it makes the kingdom stronger.

⁴ John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 173, 178.

The aggregate testimonios of a congregation reflect a kind of cacophony of imaginative structures and conceptual schemes. As congregants interact and share life together, their testimonios evolve and are mutually enriched. The very words (language) of their testimonios are continuously re-accented with a wide range of cognitive, aesthetic, and affective meanings. Testimonios coalesce, and yet they each retain their own integrity and their own particular narrative voice. Through dialogue and reflection, a faith community reaches agreement (which stimulates mission and action to transform the world); and yet all agreements remain provisional, for wherever they experience agreement (coalescence), they also find contestation (collision). In shared praxis, difference persists.

Testimonios are an ongoing practice, and so the meaning-making never ends. In the same way, cultures are not closed or fixed systems. Cultures remain in permanent flux. Like webs of testimonios on which a congregation draws for meaning in the midst of living discourse—webs of meaning that shape the congregation's praxis—culture is situated and embodied, plural and permeable. Finally, this conception of culture is inherently relational, for testimonios are always a relational practice, a shared practice. Webs of testimonios can only be authored together.

Borderlander Spirit: A Pneumatology of Culture for the Borderlands

For Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, testimonios are “a meaning-making ritual” that awakens people to the work of God in *lo cotidiano* (ordinary, everyday experiences), and it is the Holy Spirit who propels and guides this work of conscientization and meaning creation.⁵ Pastora Julieta, who today leads a multicultural Nazarene congregation in Pasadena, California, was born in Guatemala. She was a young child when her parents moved to the United States

⁵ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Testimonios: Relato, Agencia, y La Mujer Latina” in *Vivir y servir en el exilio: Lecturas teológicas de la experiencia latina en los Estados Unidos*, eds. Jorge E. Maldonado and Juan F. Martínez (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2008), 125–28, 144.

to work as missionaries among the growing Spanish-speaking immigrant communities in Southern California. Julieta likens ministry to the cacophony of salsa music and the improvisation of salsa dancing:

I'm reading you. I'm reading the room, and I'm responding to what feels appropriate. And I recognize the uniqueness of this connection right now that will never be the same, and yet this is deeply tethered to a larger story...the movement of the Spirit... I can step into it and forego my own insecurities.

In the messiness and disorientations of the borderlands, Julieta remains aware of God's Spirit:

[T]his thoughtful, generous, expansive Spirit was there...just holding what in the world is happening [sic]. So, I understand the Holy Spirit to be ever-present in those times where I have thought: there's no way God is in this. There's no way this is God. And then there was [sic] glimpses of the Wild Child that would spark up and would kind of like [she makes a grasping and pulling gesture toward herself] bringing me back...in those border spaces, where it's like, "Let's just eat together. Can we sit here? Um, can we sit here and enjoy what's happening?"⁶

In a missiological reimagining of the borderlands, the Spirit is the *coyote*, the Borderlander Spirit, always out ahead of us, crossing borders, disrupting the barriers that divide us, creating spaces for dialogue, inviting us into relationship with others, and cultivating

⁶ Conde-Frazier et al., describe dancing with the Holy Spirit, the *wild child of the Trinity*, who is "anywhere and everywhere moving, calling forth, and stirring things up...She is untamable, full of possibilities and creative potential...She is the miracle of the mélange that terribly confound[s] some but keep[s] others praising God who never ceases to surprise and amaze us." Loida Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Perez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 14.

shared life together amid enduring difference. The Borderlander Spirit models for us a different way of engaging difference. Instead of dominating or managing the narratives of others—whether through homogenizing methods that stifle the polyphony of our neighbors’ contesting stories or through hegemonic methods that stifle the creative agency of our neighbors’ storytelling—the Borderlander Spirit leans into the messiness of real relationships, (re)accenting our stories through dialogue.

Liderazgo Mestizo: *Relational Leadership Practices for the Borderlands*

Constructionist articulations of relational leadership begin at the very point at which dominant cross-cultural leadership research (e.g., Hofstede and GLOBE) stumbles, that is, with the assertion that we exist in a mutual relationship with others and our surroundings and that we both shape, and are shaped by, our social experience in everyday interactions and conversations.⁷ Others do not determine our actions, nor do we determine their actions. Organizational members and neighbors are not objects to be managed but irreducibly complex, creative, relational agents. Relational Social Constructionist Leadership (RSCL) theory, the focus of the second article of this series, takes as its point of departure the constructionist assertion that everything we say and do manifests our relational existence—all reason, emotion, compulsion, memory, and experience are “performances within relationship.”⁸ This metatheoretical starting point compels

⁷ Key works in this conversation include: Mary Uhl-Bien and Sonia Ospina, *Advancing Relational Leadership Research: A Dialogue among Perspectives*, Leadership Horizons (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Pub, 2012); Mary Uhl-Bien, “Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the Social Processes of Leadership and Organizing,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 17 (2006): 654–676; Mary Uhl-Bien, John Maslyn, and Sonia Ospina, “The Nature of Relational Leadership: A Multitheoretical Lens on Leadership Relationships and Processes,” in *The Nature of Leadership*, eds. D. Day and J. Antonakis, 289–330 (London: Sage, 2012); and Dian Marie Hosking, “Moving Relationality: Meditations on a Relational Approach to Leadership” in *Sage Handbook of Leadership*, eds. Alan Bryman, David Collinson, Keith Grint, Brad Jackson, and Mary Uhl-Bien, 455–467 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011).

⁸ Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 397.

RSCL scholars to “examine leadership as a more dynamic and socially-constructed system of interdependent relations in which shared leadership and organizational change can occur.”⁹ Within this leadership theory, relationships are not treated as things to be manipulated/managed but as the raw material within which leadership emerges.¹⁰ My mestizo-re-accenting of social constructionist approaches to relational leadership begins with the premise that real embodied relationships with others are wonderfully and irreducibly messy experiences and that anytime we engage in dialogical (meaning-making) relationship, we step into borderlands.

In RSCL theory, meaning-making processes are embodied in distinct and discernible practices.¹¹ Thus, *liderazgo mestizo* (LM), is built on the assumption that leadership is embedded in everyday relationally-responsive dialogical practices. LM outlines four interrelated categories of practice—bridge-building practices, storytelling practices, advocative practices, and catalytic practices. Each sphere of practice is overlapping and interconnected and should be understood as building on and informing each other rather than as clearly demarcated categories. Each category of practice also draws our attention to important dimensions of life together—namely, relationships, discourse, power, and change. Reflecting the relational-orientation at the heart of this framework, storytelling practices, advocative practices, and catalytic practices

⁹ Ospina and Uhl-Bien, *Advancing Relational Leadership Research*, 260.

¹⁰ Uhl-Bien, Maslyn, and Ospina, “The Nature of Relational Leadership,” 289–330.

¹¹ Interest in practices “of leadership in the plural” continues to grow in conjunction with interest in discursive and relational leadership theories. Cf. Uhl-Bien, “Relational Leadership Theory”; Jean-Louis Denis, Ann Langley, and Viviane Sergi, “Leadership in the Plural,” *Academy of Management Annals* 6(1) (2012): 211–283. Jean-Louis Denis, Ann Langley, and Viviane Sergi, “Leadership in the Plural,” *Academy of Management Annals* 6, no. 1 (2012): 211–283. Jean-Louis Denis, Ann Langley, and Linda Rouleau, “The Practice of Leadership in the Messy World of Organizations,” *Leadership* 6, no. 1 (2010): 67–88.

are best understood as subcategories of bridge-building practices, which focus on relationships (see fig. 5).



Figure 5: Liderazgo Mestizo: Four Overlapping Spheres

In articulating these four categories, I remain indebted to two important leadership frameworks: Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal's four-frame model, and Mark Branson's leadership triad. In *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal advocate for leaders to view their organization from multiple perspectives ("reframing") to better understand what is going on and thus to develop more effective strategies for organizational change.¹² Within their leadership framework, the four-frame model serves as a managerial diagnostic tool. Though our starting points reflect very different philosophical orientations, the four-frame model provided a helpful typology for sorting categories of practices in my thematic analysis of the pastors' narratives.

Branson's leadership triad emerged from his reflection on his ministry experiences at an urban congregation in Oakland,

¹² Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (Newark, NJ: John Wiley, 2017).

California.¹³ The leadership triad describes three spheres of activity to which leaders must attend when fostering a culture of and spaces for action-reflection in a church: (1) *interpretive leadership* is about understanding and shaping meanings in text and context in order to raise awareness of God's missional initiatives; (2) *relational leadership* attends to all of the human dynamics among a church's participants and with the world around them; and (3) *implemental leadership* is about reforming and initiating activities and structures that are consistent with the interpretive and relational work. LM, as we shall see, clearly echoes these spheres of activity, though I have included a fourth category of practice drawing on Bolman and Deal's "jungle frame." This fourth frame focuses on dynamics of power.¹⁴

The more significant debt, however, lies at the theoretical level, for LM builds on a number of missiological assertions that are foundational to the leadership triad:

- (1) God is the initiator, always present and active in the local;
- (2) disciples in community (churches) are invited to discern and participate in God's missional initiatives;
- (3) discernment is about praxis, dialogical cycles of action and reflection;
- (4) neighbors are creative agents whose voices are instrumental in the ongoing work of discerning God's initiatives; and
- (5) intercultural realities shape our praxis.

¹³ The leadership triad was first outlined in 2002 for the World Council of Church's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. Recent iterations include: Mark Lau Branson, "Forming Church, Forming Mission," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 365 (2003) and Mark Lau Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church" in *Missional Churches in Context*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 94–126 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁴ The term *advocating* is drawn from Bolman and Deal's description of the "advocate" in their political frame. Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 355.

With regard to leadership, then, missional leadership in multicultural contexts “is about shaping an environment in which the people of God participate in the action-reflection cycle as they gain new capacities to discern what God is doing among and around them.”¹⁵ Leadership is about promoting ways of doing life together that grow attentiveness to God’s initiatives. Branson and Martínez contend that “the complexities of the issues we face are such that the most important thing a leader can learn in response to our changing world is discernment linked with multiple practices.”¹⁶ These assertions shaped the hermeneutical question at the heart of my narrative inquiry and analysis: What leadership practices help cultivate communities characterized by a growing capacity for missional discernment amid enduring levels of diversity?

The pastors shared many practices that do not appear in the LM framework, because I focused on leadership practices that I interpreted as having potential for shaping learning environments that grow people’s capacity to discern and participate in the Spirit’s missional initiatives. As a practice-oriented framework, LM should not be understood as a leadership strategy nor as a list of transcendent/universalizable competencies. Both of these readings misconstrue LM because: (1) a strategy reading transplants these practices to a different context and thus separates them from the embedded relational realities in which they emerged; and (2) in a transcendent list of leadership competencies reading, LM would reinforce individualistic visions of leadership that constructionist frameworks explicitly attempt to deconstruct. In each category below, I begin by sharing stories and practices from the narrative data, which I then re-accent in light of the missiological and relational frames outlined above.

¹⁵ Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011) 57.

¹⁶ Branson and Martínez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 233.

Bridge-Building Leadership Practices

Pastora Adriana of Iglesia Puente de Gracia (Bridge of Grace Church) understands leadership in terms of “bridging gaps” and “barriers” among cultures, language groups, generations, socioeconomic classes, and even theological traditions. For Adriana, bridging is about understanding the cultures from which she came and yet being sufficiently assimilated in her current cultural context/neighborhood that she can “live in both worlds.” She outlines the relationship between her identity and her vocation by saying, “I am able to befriend and I have friends in both. I live in both lands.” When asked about practices, Adriana describes how she intentionally sought out friendship with Father Charles Juarez, a Catholic priest, though *catolicos* and *evangelicos* have historically avoided each other. Pastora Adriana and Father Charles share pulpits regularly, organize joint prayer services, and partner together to bless their neighbors. Their practices of friendship are bridging their congregations. Pastora Adriana admits that learning bridge-building is not comfortable or easy, but adds that bridge-building is a skill she now teaches others. She explains, “I think that one of the things that I’m able to do is to take a [culturally unassimilated] person and walk them in a journey to be a [bicultural] person.” She mentors potential leaders and explains to them, “you don’t have to stay here. You’ve been here [in the United States], you know the language, you’re bilingual. Let’s help you be a bridge-builder instead of staying comfortable where you are.”

Pastor José grew up in a bilingual home, but he does not speak Spanish. José intentionally looks for opportunities to practice his broken Spanish during their weekly church leadership meetings. Spanish-speakers, usually first- and second-generation immigrants, laugh and tease him for his broken Spanish, but he does it anyway. He explains, “The fact that I’m risking ridicule to go up there and work my way through Spanish—butcher[ing] the language sometimes—they love it. Because our Spanish-speakers know what it’s like to learn English and also risk ridicule.” José steps out of his comfort zone and his insulated role as senior pastor, not only because it creates space for more marginal voices, but also because laughter and a shared experience of vulnerability draw his diverse

leadership team together.

Pastor Mateo's mentoring relationships have been a particularly life-giving aspect of his ministry. Mateo describes his relationship with Rafa and Michael—the former, a player on the neighborhood soccer team that he coached, and the latter, a member of his church youth group. Mentoring is about developing a “friendship of trust and honesty,” explains Pastor Mateo, and friendship is about helping people recognize and embrace their creative agency. For him, agency involves “breaking through the predetermined categories and narratives of what does it mean to be Latino and Latina [*sic*].” Friendship is about helping each other learn to tell our own story, to reimagine new ways of doing things, and to develop a voice that's unique and does not have to mimic the voices of those in power.

Bridge-building leadership practices are practices with potential for fostering learning environments that promote friendships that disrupt cultural, linguistic, doctrinal, and socioeconomic divides, relational spaces where God's people can grow in their capacity to discern the ways in which the Spirit is working to bridge people within and beyond the church. Bridge-building practices enhance the church's awareness of the agency of neighbors and cultural others.

Bridge-building practices facilitate discernment of questions such as these: Where is the Spirit drawing our attention to the relational gaps in our community and neighborhood? Where is the Spirit inviting us to join in fostering friendships that build bridges in the borderlands? In what ways is God inviting us to risk discomfort to befriend our neighbors? Bridge-building leadership practices are not complicated. They take no expertise, no special training, and no heroic powers. Friendships that open our imagination to the creative and embodied agency of God and neighbor often start by sharing meals in people's homes and creating time and space to laugh together.

Storytelling Leadership Practices

Pastora Nadia grew up in the city of South Gate, California, where her friends and neighbors and church were all “heavily

Mexican.” Today, however, Nadia serves in Long Beach, California, where she is pastoring people who have stories that are very different from her own. She recounts the day, early in her pastorate, when she received a phone call from a non-Latina neighbor, a victim of intimate partner violence. Nadia recalls sifting through her own cultural prejudices and feelings of profound discomfort in order to respond with compassion rather than repulsion to this woman who had had children by multiple men and had just been brutally beaten by her latest boyfriend. “I know pain,” explains Nadia, “but I know brown pain, right? I know Latino pain.” Here was a battered woman who did not fit into her Latina ideals of *familia* in any way. Still, she listened to the woman’s story, held her close, wept with her, fed her children, bought her groceries, and even picked up her prescriptions.

People often pull away from relationships with those whose stories are significantly different than their own. “Culturally speaking, sometimes it’s easier for us to stick to what is safe and normal, to what we’ve known...[B]ut the gospel never calls us to be safe and comfortable,” Nadia reflects. In her experience, compassion and friendship and mission begin by listening to people’s stories. Today, in her ministry, she is intentional about creating spaces for cross-generational and cross-cultural storytelling, often in the context of shared meals. “When we get to sit at a table together, I want you to bring your history with you, because it’s gonna make me better, and it’s going to grow me as well as a leader,” she explains. Nadia acknowledges that it takes practice to share stories in ways that reflect the complex and messy realities of life, in ways that are honest about our ongoing processes of discipleship. People tend to sanitize their *testimonios*, but she explains that good story-sharing makes room for process and grace.

Pastora Isabel from Nicaragua has eighteen years of experience working with multiethnic churches. “We can think idealistically that we’re just gonna flatten all the differences, but that’s not the reality. And so there has to be an anchoring truth like a familia without negating these differences. We can’t negate them, we can’t flatten them. They’re very important.” Pastora Isabel knows the temptation to foster unity by forcing agreement and by crushing

difference—unity through uniformity, she calls it. “If there’s conflict, we deal with that as familia. If there’s tension, we should deal with [it] as familia. Familia doesn’t leave each other.” When I ask her how we can be familia amid our profound differences, Pastora Isabel replies succinctly and without hesitation (like she has shared these ideas many times) that churches must promote: (1) a culture where disciples set aside their privilege—privilege often couched in stories that defend the values and biases of one’s own ethnic/cultural/political group; (2) the practice of naming and repenting of our cultural prejudices and stereotypes, for “no one comes to the table...with a clean slate”; (3) a culture in which people share and receive stories, especially stories about hurts and wounds—“I may not agree with how we got to this, but if it’s hurting you, can you help me understand?”; (4) the value of ongoing learning in the community, which above all entails the practice of asking questions—questions like, “Can you help me understand your story? Because it is unlike my story.” And questions like: “Help me understand your pain, because it’s different than my pain—I have some pain too, but it’s different, so I need you to help me understand.”

Though practices within this sphere at times involve relating personal and communal anecdotes, storytelling here works synecdochically by encompassing any practice that cultivates learning environments where God’s people grow in critical awareness of their own situatedness, in receptivity and appreciation of new or incompatible cultural narratives, and in awareness of the Spirit’s initiatives in the midst of their discourse. Storytelling leadership practices sensitize God’s people to the Spirit’s initiatives in the midst of our relational dialogue. Storytelling leadership practices facilitate discernment of questions like: Who are those cultural-others in our church and neighborhood that the Spirit is calling us to engage in dialogical relationship? How is the Spirit inviting our community to grow in our capacity to listen and welcome the (often competing) stories of others? Storytelling leadership practices are not complicated. They take no expertise, no special training, and no heroic powers. Growing in awareness of the Spirit’s presence and work in *lo cotidiano* can be as simple

as making time for storytelling with congregants and neighbors, reflecting on Scripture in ways that explicitly draw attention to our situatedness, and creating spaces for discernment and dialogue with cultural-others.

Advocative Leadership Practices

It was the first of many such calls Pastora Isabel received. This one was from a young mother in the neighborhood who was seeking help. “My husband is an alcoholic, and he hurts me. He beats me...I know that at the community service center nearby, they give, uh, birth control shots. And I think that I want to do that, because I can’t keep having children,” she explained urgently. Isabel recounts that they made a plan. They waited for the husband to leave for work one morning, and then Isabel picked her up and they drove together to the community center. They were home before the husband returned, and he never found out. Isabel recalls how the young mother beamed, “I have agency over my body, and I want to start studying again.” Like many immigrant mothers in the community, this young mother had never finished elementary school. “There was a lot of dysfunction in those communities,” laments Isabel. Amid the dispossession and oppression, she sought “to minister to women who were lonely, sad, needed...genuine friendship, but also needed to connect their lives to and their children’s lives to things that could allow their lives to flourish.” She explains that her motives were simple: “I just wanted them to see Jesus alive through me, and that Jesus loved them, and that they had agency over their lives.” Her leadership practices created spaces where these young women could deepen their awareness of their personal agency in a context of abusive patriarchy.

Pastor Mateo associates the abusive patriarchal leadership in some Latino churches with a colonial wound and a history marred by *caudillismo*, a term in Latin America associated with leaders of quasi military authoritarian regimes, and thus having to do with

abuses of power, authoritarianism, and disempowered followers.¹⁷ Mateo's pastoral team is multicultural and gender inclusive. He explains: "Even though I lead, I'm very conscious of my power, especially because of what I do with the colonial wound and all this kind of stuff [*sic*]. I'm aware of my male normativity in a Latino context." Mateo is not only aware of the power dynamics, he often draws others' attention to the ways he personally benefits from patterns of hierarchical patriarchy. The question he constantly asks himself is: "How do I disperse [my power] in healthy ways?" Caudillismo ignores and silences and manipulates dissenting voices, but Pastor Mateo regularly facilitates conversations that create space for a diversity of perspectives.

Advocative leadership practices sensitize the church to the Spirit's initiatives amid the complex power dynamics in diverse communities. Advocative leadership practices foster learning environments where God's people can grow in their capacity to identify and resist behaviors that repress agency and stifle competing narratives. Advocative leadership practices increase responsiveness to the Spirit's work to re-accent dehumanizing stories and language so that our narratives resist patterns of dominance. These practices take no expertise, no special training, and no heroic powers. These are not reserved just for the few exceptional individuals in positions of authority. Communities committed to advocative leadership practices may be found befriending vulnerable peoples in the neighborhood, creating safe spaces for marginal voices to share their stories, facilitating the participation of less-dominant voices in organizational discernment processes, and examining (and exposing) the ways in which their narratives may lend to hegemony and homogeneity. These practices open spaces for people to notice and join the Spirit's liberating initiatives amid their relationships.

¹⁷ See chapter five of Oscar García-Johnson, *Spirit Outside the Gate: Decolonial Pneumatologies of the South*, Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

Catalytic Leadership Practices

Pastor Juan reflects that during his twenty years of ministry, he has never stopped learning. He describes his church as a place to experiment: “San Vicente Church became like our sanctuary, our lab, you know, like, ‘Come, let’s try what works here. What can work here?’” For Juan, the concept of the church as a laboratory means that there’s room for mistakes: “I have made errors. I’m sure I’ve made errors, but I’ve tried to learn from them.” A coffee shop, yoga classes, after-school tutoring programs, sports camps—the church continues to experiment with ways to engage and befriend their neighbors. Sometimes experiments take root, Juan explains, and sometimes they don’t. Either way, the church learns from each experiment. When shared life together is imagined as a laboratory, disciples are invited to live in a continual learning mode.

Pastora Isabel explains that the church’s neighborhood was changing quickly with the influx of thousands of working-class immigrants from Latin America. New experiments like a summer camp for children left at home by working parents and suffering from food insecurity were ideas that emerged from friendships and dialogue with these new neighbors. The congregation experimented with tutoring programs, medical services, women’s Bible study, women’s support groups, and English classes. When it comes to discerning the Spirit’s work, Isabel explains, “you don’t know what the Spirit is going to do unless you’re paying attention.” For her, paying attention involves taking long, slow walks in her neighborhood and making time to listen to her neighbors’ stories. With a smile, she recalls God’s life-giving initiatives in this broken, hurting neighborhood: “[Y]ou could see the physical transformation of the trailer park—the joy in their lives physically, but also emotionally...That’s what the flourishing life of the Spirit should look like when Jesus steps in and does transformation.”

The missiological assumption behind all catalytic leadership practices is that the Spirit is moving and catalyzing transformation in our context, which means that local churches live in the dynamic tension between the questions: Where is the Spirit of God working in this particular context, and how is the Spirit inviting us to participate in this work? Churches discern these questions through

dialogical processes that involve, among other things, iterative cycles of critical reflection on experiments. Catalytic leadership practices create learning environments where God's people grow in attentiveness and responsiveness to the Spirit's initiatives in the midst of the community's experimentation. Such practices enhance a church's capacity for missional improvisation.¹⁸ These practices raise awareness of ways the Borderlander Spirit is calling the church to include the voices and stories of neighbors and less dominant voices in their praxis and experimentation. These practices take no expertise, no special skills, and no exceptional personality traits. They may simply involve responding to failed experiments as opportunities for learning or creating space to reflect on ways in which experiments promote (or fail to promote) the agency of God and neighbors.

Conclusion

Rather than being about exceptional individuals who catalyze or motivate action in others,¹⁹ *liderazgo mestizo* is about relational practices—practices for anyone in the community—that shape ways of life together that celebrate difference and are responsive to the relational initiatives of the Borderlander Spirit. Monological conceptions of culture and leadership—that obscure agency and crush difference into sameness—cultivate unrelational habits of mind that lead us to engage (cultural-)others, be they neighbors or organizational members, as objects to measure, manage, and master. The borderlands, however, continuously thwart our efforts to control the stories. They invite us to lean into the messiness and wonder of everyday embodied friendships with neighbors. They

¹⁸ Kathleen Eisenhardt and Benham Tabrizi, "Accelerating Adaptive Processes: Product Innovation in the Global Computer Industry," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1995): 84–110. Also, Mark Lau Branson and Alan J Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021) 128–31.

¹⁹ Cf. Tacy Byham and Richard S. Wellins, *Your First Leadership Job: How Catalyst Leaders Bring Out the Best in Others* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2015).

remind us that our webs of testimonios do not threaten visions of life together but instead enrich our relational imaginations and thus promote ways of life together that pay attention to God's initiatives.

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**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).

The Rev. Clara King is a doctoral candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary.

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 Thompson, *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

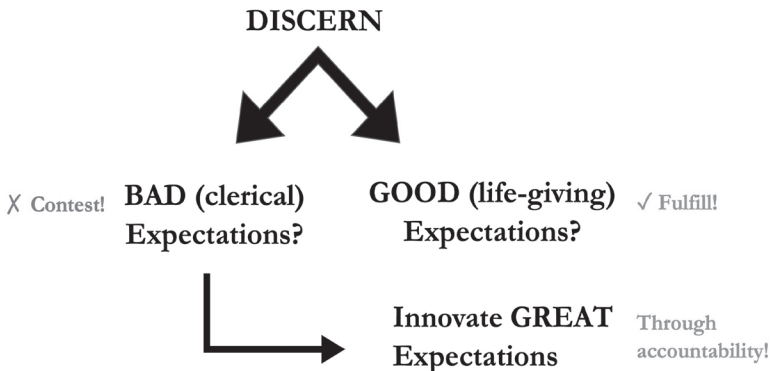
Conclusion and Recommendations: The Leadership that Leads Beyond Clericalism

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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HOW CAN WE LEARN ACROSS DIFFERENCE? A CONVERSATION ABOUT ETHICAL RESEARCH AND WRITING VIS-À-VIS IDENTITY AND POSITIONALITY

ROBERT K. MARTIN

KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI

SUSAN J. DUNLAP

DALE L. LEMKE

JASON A. MILLER

Abstract

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

Dr. Robert K. Martin, retired dean and professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, is the editor of the Journal of Religious Leadership.

Rev. Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi, Ph.D., is term assistant professor of leadership and formation and director of the Office of Professional Formation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.

Susan J. Dunlap is consulting faculty and director of the Master of Divinity/Master of Social Work Degree Program at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Dr. Jason A. Miller is associate director of TEND (tendwell.org), a nonprofit in Tustin, California, and has served as an adjunct professor of Christian ministry and leadership at Talbot School of Theology and Biola University.

Dr. Dale L. Lemke is associate professor of Christian ministries and assistant dean of academic innovation at University of Northwestern-St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason Miller and Dale Lemke, “Experience of Black Pastoral Leaders”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

continue with this critical research.

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

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

Susan Dunlap, *Shelter Theology*

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

Susan said that it quickly became all too obvious that her academic, Presbyterian, progressive theological language and

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

perspective was not theirs and that she did not agree with a lot of the statements and the underlying worldviews that seemed to be very sustaining for the residents. She said:

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

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

Our research can all too easily infantilize or reproduce harmful stereotypes about the poor or people of a different race. We run the risk of subtly blaming them for their poverty or victimization or setting oneself up as the valiant hero or as the brilliant one who has the solutions. But Dr. Taylor argued that representing vulnerable groups in research and writing can be

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

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

need to be aware of the exploitative forces at play where we live and work.

Motivation and Application in Research

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

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

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

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

By application, we mean a whole host of factors related to whatever happens, whatever changes, whatever results from the research intervention, and how that relates retroactively to our initial motivations and sets up the next set of problems and future research agendas. In this respect, motivation implies application,

anticipates it, and orients content and methods to it.

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

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

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

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

Yet, what would be an appropriate balance between reflecting on themselves and telling the stories of black pastors? It is a difficult

balance to determine; they did not want the article to become an exercise in autoethnography, as Dale put it.⁴ How can we name our identities and positionalities without our stories becoming predominant and overshadowing the actual subject?

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

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

The conversation with Susan about her motivations and anticipated outcomes was illuminating as well. Recall that research and writing was part of her activist engagement with homelessness and populations most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of rapacious capitalism. Although her primary aim is to change the circumstances of persons who are unhoused, she also did not want to romanticize

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

the population or uncritically portray them. She said,

Some people might want to say that if I'm going to talk about a vulnerable population, then I do want to eliminate from my discourse any kind of negativity or negative perspective; I don't want them to come off badly. But we can't romanticize the population because that doesn't do justice to them. It is untruthful to represent these people as sweet, innocent, and childlike and who have pure, uncomplicated faith. To disregard anything that falls outside that template is just lazy research. It's dehumanizing to think that there is a group of people who are not vulnerable to temptation; and it's unfaithful to the full, complex reality of our common humanity.

I've thought a lot about the differences between my life and my reality and their life and their reality. Sometimes I think, 'We're all alike,' and I am tempted to overlook the real differences. One time, I was sitting with a woman; and we were chatting about this or that. I thought, 'Wow, we're just two human beings here, and we're just alike. And then she began talking about how her child had been taken away because she had mistreated her child. This woman had not only endured horrible circumstances, but also had inflicted horrible suffering on others. In that brief moment, I experienced a major gestalt change from thinking that we were so similar to being blown away by our differences. Now, I can recognize our similarities; in many ways we are alike. But in many ways, we have very different life experiences of poverty, hardship, and the effect of violent police officers or over-eager social agencies, for example. So, I like to think about my relationships with people I work with as people with whom I can connect, but who have had very different experiences. It is crucial that we strive to faithfully

reflect that complex reality.”

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

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

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

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

open to how the Spirit is leading, how God beholds the person in front of us, and how the interaction is not only up to us but that there are other 'powers' that are a part of our relationships.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of others. We go into the research relationship with the willingness to be changed by it, to have our world turned upside down. To enter into research with vulnerable populations means that we risk our assumptions and make ourselves available for discomfort.

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

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

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

and we have to deal with them.

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

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

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

External validity asks: “Do the conclusions of a study have any larger import? Are they transferable to other contexts? Do they ‘fit’? How far can they be ‘generalized’?”⁶ Two of the most salient threats to validity, especially in learning *with* living religious leaders and communities, are researcher bias and reactivity.⁷ Susan, Dale, and Jason—as scholars, practitioners, and religious leaders themselves—

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

⁶ Miles and Huberman, 279.

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

have recounted the varying ways they gave particular and sustained attentiveness to both of these threats, being careful to check their own biases and assumptions and to name explicitly their identities and locations. They were attentive to their own reactivities to certain theological phrases and practiced self-reflexivity when moments of discomfort or resistance arose. Moreover, with integrity and balance, they were intentional in discussing such validity threats in writing about their research.

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

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

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

Conclusion

Kristina and Robert initiated this reflective conversation about our research practices to engage several levels within this

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

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

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

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

HOW AN UNDER-RESOURCED SEMINARY BECOMES MISSIONALLY INDISPENSABLE

RENE (CHENGYUAN) GUO

Abstract

This essay argues that struggling theological schools must, to survive, strategically renew their civic mission. From a trinitarian, Asian diasporic, postcolonial perspective, the essay critiques colonial and neoliberal scarcity cycles, proposing Missio Dei as a liberating leadership framework to shift from institutional maintenance to theologically oriented public engagement. It applies this perspective to digital and AI challenges, offering low-cost pathways for forming “rooted cosmopolitan” leaders. Ultimately, it posits that such purposeful public engagement is the most viable and faithful strategy for differentiation, community support, and sustainable relevance.

Introduction

The dominant models of leadership animating North American theological education today remain artifacts of midcentury managerial and therapeutic culture.¹ For example, “transformational leadership,” in its popularized forms, charges the leader with the quasi-charismatic task of elevating followers’ motivation and moral aspiration toward a shared, often abstract, vision.² A second, widely known perspective, “servant leadership,” inverts the organizational pyramid by casting the leader as the humble steward of follower needs and institutional

¹ See the foundational critique in Peter Block, *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993), though Block’s republican framework differs from the theological argument advanced here.

² Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006), 3–27.

Rene Guo (they/them) is a queer Chinese American theologian currently pursuing a degree in Higher and Postsecondary Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

well-being.³ Both frameworks, however well-intentioned, share a critical flaw when pressed into service for institutions caught in structural decline: they locate the crisis in individual leader capacity or ethical disposition rather than in the inherited colonial logics and institutional scripts that produce scarcity in the first place.⁴ For the under-resourced theological school, this literature offers diagnosis without etiology, exhortation without escape.

The institutional predicament of such a school is not primarily a failure of leadership character or vision. It is a failure of legitimation within a crowded, competitive field where prestige adheres to scale, heritage, and mass of endowment. Following DiMaggio and Powell, we recognize this as a crisis of “isomorphic pressure”: the struggling seminary mimics the programmatic portfolios, marketing vernacular, and even architectural aspirations of its wealthier peers, exhausting precious resources to become a less convincing copy of a model it cannot afford to inhabit.⁵ The result is mission homogenization, strategic paralysis, and a deepening narrative of managed decline. Conventional leadership discourse, with its emphasis on internal culture and dyadic relationships with followers, offers little traction here. It cannot explain why a theologically sound, well-governed, mission-faithful institution might nonetheless face existential threat—nor can it supply the conceptual tools for an alternative.

This essay proposes that such an alternative requires a prior conceptual move: *the displacement of leadership theory from the individual to the institution’s public, theological identity*. I argue that the most viable strategy for seminaries lies not in better execution of

³ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977). For theological appropriation, see Don N. Howell Jr., *Servants of the Servant: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

⁴ For an astute critique of Servant Leadership from a practical theological perspective, see David G. Forney and Kyle J.A. Small, “The Ghost of Servant Leadership: Power, Performance, and the Illusion of Virtue,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Spring 2025, pp. 7–28.

⁵ Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147–60.

inherited models but in a theologically audacious re-founding of its civic mission. To make this case, I advance *Missio Dei*—the doctrine that mission originates in the triune God’s own outward movement of love—as a normative framework for institutional strategy and a critical corrective to the anthropocentrism of transformational and servant leadership.⁶ Where these models tether institutional hope to the qualities of persons, *Missio Dei* relocates that hope to participation in God’s prior, public, reconciling work. This shift is not a strategic ornament; it fundamentally reorders institutional attention from self-maintenance to contextual discernment, from competition to partnership, from scarcity’s defensive crouch to the generative posture of sending.

I develop this argument from a specific vantage: the Asian diasporic, postcolonial experience of navigating hybridity, marginality, and creative adaptation within dominant systems. This perspective is not ancillary to institutional analysis but essential to it. It renders visible the colonial inheritance embedded in the seminary’s very form—its residential model, disciplinary canons, and assumptions of cultural centrality—and reframes institutional fragility not as deficiency but as a potential site of theological and strategic innovation.⁷

From this standpoint, I critique the implicit ecclesiology and political theology of prevailing leadership models and retrieve *Missio Dei* as a theology of institutional liberation. I then trace its concrete implications for digital engagement, campus use, curriculum, and financial modeling, demonstrating that civic mission renewal is not an elective add-on but the most direct, cost-effective strategy for differentiation, community re-legitimation, and sustainable relevance. For the seminary caught between deferred maintenance and diminished enrollments, the question is no longer whether to turn outward, but whether it can institutionally and spiritually afford not to.

⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–93.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 55–56; Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 89–112.

Context & Literature Review

The crisis of the under-resourced seminary—its captivity to isomorphic mimicry, entanglement in colonial institutional scripts, paralysis before deferred maintenance and declining enrollments—is fundamentally a crisis of theological imagination. It is not resolvable by more skillful application of prevailing leadership frameworks or sophisticated instructional techniques. The dominant paradigms animating North American theological education, in both organizational and pedagogical registers, share a common anthropocentric anchor: they locate institutional vitality, strategic direction, and transformative learning in the qualities, capacities, and ethical dispositions of individual human agents.

This review traces the conceptual lineages of these inherited models, identifies their characteristic omissions, and retrieves an alternative grammar. I argue that a genuinely liberating framework for the struggling seminary requires not the refinement of managerial or andragogical technique but a fundamental theological reorientation: the displacement of the leader and the learner from the center of the institutional imagination. The doctrine of *Missio Dei*—the triune God's prior, outward, reconciling movement toward creation—supplies this alternative center, repositioning institutional agency from anxious self-assertion to discerning participation, from strategic production to missional alignment.

The Anthropocentric Inheritance: Leadership Theory

The leadership literature permeating seminary boardrooms, presidential searches, and accreditation self-studies draws from two well-sedimented streams: transformational and servant leadership. James MacGregor Burns articulated transformational leadership as a moral enterprise in which leader and follower elevate one another's motivation and purpose.⁸ Bernard Bass operationalized this vision around idealized influence, inspirational motivation,

⁸ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 20. Burns distinguished transforming leadership from transactional exchange; the former engages persons with diverse purposes in such a way that "leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality." The moral dimension was central to Burns's conception and has been variably attenuated in subsequent operationalizations.

intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.⁹ The leader functions as a catalytic agent who raises consciousness and mobilizes collective aspiration. Servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf's inversion of the organizational pyramid, positions the leader as steward and supporter, attending first to followers' needs and flourishing.¹⁰ Its resonance with Christian motifs secured enthusiastic adoption across denominational and evangelical seminaries alike.

Both frameworks, however, suffer from a shared structural limitation that renders them inadequate for institutions caught in the isomorphic trap DiMaggio and Powell describe.¹¹ Transformational and servant leadership remain tethered to methodological individualism. They treat the leader's character, vision, and ethical orientation as the independent variable; institutional health follows as a dependent effect. Diagnosis of crisis thus defaults to a search for deficiencies in leader capacity or moral disposition. If the seminary struggles, it requires a more visionary president or a humbler dean. The etiology of crisis is internalized; the cure is personalized.

This individualist horizon obscures the possibility that institutional fragility may originate not in leader inadequacy, but in the very institutional scripts and legitimacy criteria the leader is expected to perform. A seminary president, however

⁹ Bernard M. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985). Bass's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire operationalized transformational leadership into the four components now canonical in the literature. For a critical overview of the model's diffusion and critique, see Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2021), 185–218.

¹⁰ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). Greenleaf's formulation was deliberately nonsectarian but resonated deeply with Christian organizational contexts; Larry C. Spears, "Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of Servant-Leadership," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Servant Leadership*, ed. Satinder Dhiman and Gary E. Roberts (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 3–22.

¹¹ DiMaggio and Powell, "Iron Cage Revisited," 147–60. The authors identify three isomorphic mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, and normative—that produce organizational homogenization in mature organizational fields.

transformational or servant-oriented, cannot by force of character alone dislodge the colonial institutional blueprint her school inhabits—the residential model designed for a demographic and economic context that no longer obtains, the disciplinary canons canonized in nineteenth-century German research universities, the assumptions of cultural centrality that no plausible sociology of North American religion can sustain. DiMaggio and Powell's account of mimetic isomorphism explains why this is so: organizations facing environmental uncertainty and resource scarcity imitate the structures and practices of peers they perceive as more legitimate or successful.¹² The under-resourced seminary, seeking legitimation, mimics the programmatic portfolios, marketing vernacular, and architectural aspirations of its wealthier competitors. It exhausts precious resources to become a less convincing copy of a model it cannot afford to inhabit. Transformational leadership offers no analytic purchase on this dynamic; its emphasis on leader-generated vision may inadvertently reinforce the mimetic trap. The result is not liberation but homogenization, not strategic clarity but mission drift.

Adult Learning Theory

The pedagogical counterpart to transformational and servant leadership resides in adult learning theory, particularly Malcolm Knowles's andragogy and Jack Mezirow's transformative learning. Knowles distinguished pedagogy from andragogy—the art of helping adults learn—on the assumption that adults are self-directing, possess rich experience, orient learning around social roles, and seek immediate application.¹³ Andragogy, institutionalized in

¹² DiMaggio and Powell, "Iron Cage Revisited," 151–52. Mimetic isomorphism arises under conditions of uncertainty; organizations model themselves on peers they perceive as legitimate or successful. The cost of such imitation, for under-resourced organizations, is often the neglect of contextually appropriate alternatives.

¹³ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge, The Adult Education Company, 1980). Knowles's framework evolved across multiple editions; for the mature formulation, see Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 8th ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

theological field education and professional curricula, validated the learner's experience as a theological locus and decentered the professor as sole arbiter of meaning. Mezirow specified the mechanism: transformative learning occurs when a disorienting dilemma disrupts taken-for-granted frames, precipitating critical reflection, discourse, and revision of meaning schemes.¹⁴ The educator fosters conditions for such reflection and supports reintegration. This framework proved generative for cross-cultural immersion and justice engagement, supplying vocabulary for the dislocating encounters that characterize formation for public ministry.

Yet adult learning theory, like the leadership paradigms it parallels, operates within an anthropocentric frame that requires scrutiny. Knowles's andragogy remains methodologically individualist: the autonomous, self-directing adult remains the subject of the educational transaction. Mezirow's framework, while attending more carefully to social and discursive dimensions, similarly locates the engine of learning in the learner's reflective encounter with disorienting experience. The theological problem is not that these accounts are false; adults do indeed learn in these ways. The problem is incompleteness. They cannot account for the possibility that transformative learning—like institutional vitality—may be not a human achievement but a reception, not a production but a participation.

Trinitarian Missio Dei

The doctrine of *Missio Dei* supplies precisely this missing grammar. Its classical formulation, crystallized in Karl Hartenstein and Georg Vicedom and synthesized in David Bosch's *Transforming Mission*, ruptures earlier missionary paradigms.¹⁵ Prior to the mid-twentieth century, mission was understood as an activity of the church: the church had a mission, which it discharged through

¹⁴ Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, *Adult Learner*, 39–62. The sixth assumption—motivation—was added in later formulations; adults learn most effectively when they perceive learning as enhancing their performance or addressing immediate life challenges.

¹⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. Bosch's synthetic treatment remains the definitive English-language account of the *Missio Dei*'s emergence and elaboration.

evangelization, church planting, and humanitarian service. The *Missio Dei* reversal, formalized at the 1952 Willingen conference of the International Missionary Council, asserted the opposite: mission is not an activity of the church but an attribute of God. The triune God is, in God's own eternal life, a sending, outward-moving communion of love. The Godhead sends the Son; the Godhead and Son send the Spirit; the Godhead, Son, and Spirit send the church into the world.¹⁶ The church does not have a mission; the mission of God has a church. His is not a merely taxonomic adjustment. It fundamentally reorders the grammar of agency. Mission is not the church's project, for which God supplies warrant and blessing; mission is God's project, into which the church is invited as participant and witness. Bosch, retrieving patristic sources and engaging contemporary trinitarian theology, emphasized that the *Missio Dei* is not exhausted by the church's activities. The triune God is at work in the world prior to, alongside of, and sometimes despite the church's efforts.¹⁷ The missional task is therefore less one of strategic planning than of spiritual discernment: the church must ask not "What should we do for God?" but "What is God doing, and how may we participate?"

This reorientation carries profound implications for theological education. If the seminary's mission is derivative of God's prior mission, then the institution's primary task shifts from self-preservation and competitive positioning to contextual discernment and faithful alignment. The seminary, like the church it serves, is not the author of its own purpose; purpose is given, received, and enacted through participation in the divine economy. This is not a pious gloss on strategic management theory but a genuine alternative to it. It releases the institution from the exhausting burden of generating its own legitimacy *ex nihilo*. It frees the

¹⁶ The classical formulation appears in Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965). For the trinitarian grounding, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389–93. Bosch emphasizes that the *Missio Dei* framework liberates mission from ecclesiocentrism without dissolving the church's distinct identity and calling.

leader from the weight of being the singular bearer of institutional hope. It relocates the locus of institutional transformation from the president's vision to the Spirit's prior movement.

Toward a Missio Dei Leadership Model

The synthesis I propose is neither an integration of leadership theory with theological concepts nor a translation of missiological doctrine into organizational strategy. It is a displacement and recentering. A *Missio Dei* leadership model does not add theological vocabulary to a secular managerial framework; it re-narrates the entire institutional project within the grammar of trinitarian mission. The leader's task is not to generate vision but to discern where the Spirit is already animating life, healing wounds, and reconciling division in the school's specific context—its neighborhood, its denominational networks, its digital publics. The leader's agency is not the heroic assertion of transformational influence but the humble, persistent practice of institutional attentiveness: creating structures for communal discernment, removing obstacles to participation, interpreting the signs of the times in light of the gospel, and aligning institutional resources—curriculum, campus, budget—with the *Missio Dei* already underway.

This reorientation resonates with postcolonial and diasporic thought. Mai-Anh Le Tran's work on unlearning violence and relearning hope, grounded in the Asian American immigrant experience, models theological education that begins not with the presumption of institutional agency but with the receptivity of the sojourner.¹⁸ The diasporic consciousness, formed in hybridity, marginality, and creative adaptation, knows that survival and vitality do not require mastery of dominant institutional scripts. They require discernment of the Spirit's provision in unexpected places, strategic negotiation of identity across multiple publics, and patient cultivation of networks of reciprocity. This is not a

¹⁸ Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017). Tran's work, drawing on Vietnamese American diasporic experience, models a practical theology of receptivity, lament, and hopeful practice that resists the activist presumption of much Western theological education.

leadership of assertion but a leadership of reception, not a pedagogy of transmission but a pedagogy of participation.

The seminary that embraces this *Missio Dei* framework does not abandon strategic planning, financial stewardship, or curricular rigor. It recontextualizes them. Strategy becomes the practice of discerning God's prior movement and aligning institutional capacity with that movement. Stewardship becomes the faithful deployment of resources not for institutional aggrandizement but for missional participation. Curriculum becomes the formation of leaders capable of reading their contexts—urban, rural, digital, polarized—as theaters of divine activity. The question is no longer, “How do we, as leaders, save this institution?” The question becomes, “What is God already doing in, through, and sometimes despite this institution, and how might we align our work with that saving, reconciling, sending movement?” That question, I contend, is not only theologically faithful; it is, for the under-resourced seminary facing existential threat, the only strategically viable question left.

Postcolonial Analysis of the Under-Resourced Seminary

To navigate a path toward renewal, one must first understand with clarity the precise mechanisms of the trap. For seminaries with limited financial reserves and high physical overhead, the interplay of deferred maintenance, enrollment stress, and mission drift creates a debilitating dynamic that finds a stark parallel in Barry Checkoway's analysis of civic mission erosion in the broader American research university. Checkoway notes that while universities possess immense resources, they have often drifted from their founding civic purpose, becoming remote “castles” inaccessible to the communities they were meant to serve.¹⁹

A similar contraction has occurred in theological education. The original civic impulse of many 19th- and early 20th-century denominational seminaries—to form learned, virtuous clergy who would provide moral and intellectual leadership for society—has

¹⁹ Barry Checkoway, “Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 72, no. 2 (2001): 125–147.

frequently attenuated. It has often narrowed into a more technical focus on internal church management, congregational dynamics, and pastoral counseling, driven by the immediate employability concerns of tuition-dependent students and the functional demands of partnering denominations. The grand vision of forming public leaders for the common good can shrink to producing skilled professionals for a shrinking ecclesiastical sector.

Neo-institutional theory, particularly the concept of isomorphic change developed by scholars such as Paul DiMaggio, Walter Powell, and Patricia Bromley, provides a powerful lens for explaining the strategic paralysis that can ensue for institutions under pressure.²⁰ Isomorphic mimicry describes the process whereby organizations in uncertain, resource-scarce environments imitate the structures, programs, and practices of peers they perceive as more legitimate or successful. For an under-resourced seminary, this might manifest as launching a Doctor of Ministry program because a wealthier rival has one, or adopting a generic “leadership” branding because it seems marketable, or hastily constructing online courses without the pedagogical expertise to do them well, simply because “everyone is going online.” This imitation consumes scarce capital and faculty energy, dilutes the institution’s unique identity and history, and fails to address the distinctive challenges and opportunities of the school’s own context. The result is a lose-lose scenario: the school becomes a poorer, less convincing version of a wealthier model, while neglecting to cultivate its own potential as a distinctive, contextually attuned institution. It spends its limited resources to become more generic, thereby worsening its competitive position in a crowded field.

A postcolonial critique, sharpened by an Asian diasporic consciousness, deepens this analysis by revealing the historical and ideological roots of this mimicry. The blueprint of the modern theological seminary is, in global perspective, a colonial export. Its model of residential graduate education, its disciplinary divisions, its canons of knowledge, and its assumptions about the relationship

²⁰ DiMaggio and Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited”; Bromley and Powell, “From Smoke and Mirrors.”

between theology and public life were developed in a context of European and North American cultural dominance, relative financial stability, and a captive demographic of aspirants to clerical status.²¹ Lamin Sanneh and other historians of mission have detailed how this model was transplanted worldwide, often functioning as a tool for creating a theologically compliant indigenous elite.²² Schools founded in the diaspora or in postcolonial contexts have historically struggled to fit into this mold, perpetually feeling institutionally “behind” or “deficient” according to metrics set by the historic centers of theological production.

For an under-resourced North American seminary today—whether a historic Black seminary, a struggling denominational school in a Rust Belt city, or a small evangelical college—this dynamic manifests as a form of internalized colonialism. It is the unconscious belief that the institution’s value, legitimacy, and future are measured by how closely it can approximate the endowment size, faculty pedigree, library holdings, and manicured campus aesthetics of elite, historically well-endowed Ivy League divinity schools or flagship university theology departments.²³ This colonial mindset directs precious emotional energy, strategic focus, and scarce financial resources toward a race it is structurally destined to lose.

More destructively, it blinds the institution’s leadership to the unique gifts, strategic opportunities, and theological insights born of its location, its constituency, its constraints, and its often-closer proximity to the struggles of marginalized communities. It ignores the fact that its perceived weaknesses—small size, local focus, financial precarity—could be recast as potential strengths: agility, deep community ties, and freedom from the bureaucratic inertia that often plagues larger, wealthier institutions.

²¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

²² Ibid.

²³ This dynamic of internalized colonial standards is a recurring theme in postcolonial and diaspora studies. See, for example, the works of Frantz Fanon and contemporary scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

The diasporic experience, however, offers a radically different epistemology and a toolkit for institutional survival and innovation—one of creative adaptation, hybridity, and network-based vitality. Diasporic communities throughout history have excelled at building robust cultural, economic, and religious vitality without large endowments or state support. They leverage social capital, shared narratives, mutual-aid societies, and the agile blending of traditions from the homeland with the realities of the hostland.²⁴ They understand that identity, power, and influence can be reconstituted through dense relationships, purposeful collective action, and the strategic translation of their unique story, not merely through the accumulation of financial capital. Applying this lens to the under-resourced seminary, its location—its very physical plant in a specific neighborhood with a unique history and needs—and its existing relational networks (with local churches, alumni, community organizations) become primary, undervalued assets, not just cost centers or a nostalgic burden.

The pervasive problem of deferred maintenance serves as the potent symbol of this misorientation. A massive, underutilized Gothic Hall is seen almost exclusively as a drain, a source of anxiety, and a symbol of past glory fading into irrelevance. A postcolonial imagination prompts a different set of questions: How can this space be reconceived as a platform for mission and civic partnership? Could that vacant wing, with some creative partnership, become a low-cost incubator for faith-based community development nonprofits or a studio for artists? Could the chapel host not just services but also town hall forums on local issues like affordable housing or racial reconciliation, fulfilling the call to be a “neutral facilitator” for deliberation on contentious public issues?²⁵ Could classrooms be offered in the evenings to literacy nonprofits, immigrant support groups, or neighborhood associations, thereby embedding the seminary in the daily fabric of community life?

²⁴ For a theological exploration of diasporic resourcefulness, see Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

²⁵ This role of “neutral facilitator” for deliberation is highlighted in the provided source material as a key function of a seminary in a polarized society.

The goal here is not to turn the seminary into a landlord, but to intentionally become a host and hub, a formative common. The aim is to embed the school so deeply in the life of its community that its physical presence is perceived not as an isolated enclave, but as a vital public good and a shared resource. This strategic shift begins to change the narrative around maintenance from one of liability and dread to one of shared stewardship and community investment. It can unlock motivations for donors—who may be more inspired to fund a “community window restoration project” than a generic “facilities fund”—and open doors to municipal grants or partnerships focused on neighborhood revitalization and civic infrastructure.

This outward reorientation is the operational essence of renewing the civic mission. It represents a strategic pivot from a scarcity mentality to an abundance mentality, where abundance is redefined not by the size of an endowment report but by the depth, mutuality, and generative potential of the school’s relationships within the complex ecology of its city, its denomination, and its intellectual tradition. This pivot, however, requires more than strategic pragmatism; it demands a theological recentering, a return to the foundational Christian understanding of a triune God whose very nature is to go out, to seek, and to reconcile.

***Missio Dei* as a Theology of Institutional Liberation**

The classic Christian doctrine of *Missio Dei* provides the necessary theological engine and moral imperative for this pivotal turn outward. Historically, this doctrine was itself co-opted to provide cover for colonial expansion, framing Western missionary movement as the exclusive vehicle of God’s saving activity.²⁶ A postcolonial retrieval is required to liberate it for authentic institutional renewal. At its heart, *Missio Dei* makes a radical claim: mission is not first and foremost a program of the church, but an attribute of God. The triune God—Godhead, Son, and Holy Spirit—is inherently a sending, outward-moving communion of

²⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–393.

love. The church, therefore, does not have a mission as one of its activities; it is invited to participate in the prior and broader mission of God, which is directed toward the healing, reconciliation, and redemption of all creation.²⁷ For a financially strained theological education institution, this theology is profoundly liberating and strategically clarifying on three critical fronts.

First, it decenters the institution from its own exhausting preoccupation with the realist burden of self-preservation. The seminary's primary *raison d'être* is no longer its own perpetuation as an end in itself, but its call to discernment and partnership in a larger story. The pressing, orienting question for shared governance becomes: "Where is the Spirit already at work in our city, among our marginalized neighbors, in the digital public square, in movements for justice, and how can we align our teaching, learning, physical resources, and intellectual capital to participate in that work?" This shifts the institutional focus from internal deficit to external vocation. It frees leaders from the soul-crushing burden of having to generate meaning *ex nihilo* and instead invites them into the hopeful, open-ended practice of discovering meaning in collaboration with the needs, gifts, and struggles of their specific context. This is the theological foundation for moving from being an isolated castle to becoming a networked hub.

Second, it theologically validates a posture of receptivity, humility, and learning—a posture that is also a strategic necessity for the under-resourced. A school with a small endowment simply cannot afford the luxury of the ivory tower, the pretense of possessing all knowledge needed to solve community problems. *Missio Dei* provides a theological mandate for a stance of listening and co-laboring. This means the seminary enters its community not as a benevolent expert descending with pre-packaged solutions, but as a learner, neighbor, and potential partner. Faculty research agendas can evolve from purely library-based scholarship to include participatory action research that addresses local issues in collaboration with community organizations. Student field education or ministry placements transform from mere vocational

²⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

training modules into primary sites of mutual theological discovery, where the written theology of the classroom is tested, challenged, and deepened by the living theology of the streets. This posture is not only theologically faithful but also strategically astute. It builds social capital, trust, and goodwill, which can translate into tangible community support, student recruitment from non-traditional pools, and partnerships that stretch the seminary's limited resources by sharing costs, expertise, and space.

Third, its structure reframes all institutional assets through a missional lens. Under a *Missio Dei* framework, every feature of the seminary is evaluated not for its prestige or its burden, but for its missional potential. The aging, costly building is not just a maintenance sinkhole; it is a missional outpost in a particular neighborhood, a tangible platform for hospitality and gathering. A small, teaching-focused faculty is not a limitation when compared to research giants; it is a nimble cohort of mentor-guides positioned for intensive, community-embedded learning and formation. The lack of a large, impersonal endowment necessitates more relational ties to supporting churches, alumni, and local foundations; these ties can be intentionally deepened from a transactional donor model into a living network of missional partnerships, where each party contributes to and benefits from a shared vision for the common good.

As Dean Flemming argues in his work on contextualization, "God's mission... calls the church to immerse itself in the life of the world, to read the signs of the times, and to respond in imaginative, contextually appropriate ways."²⁸ For the under-resourced school, contextual appropriateness is not an elective missiological principle; it is a daily economic and strategic necessity. This necessity, when embraced through *Missio Dei*, is transformed from a mark of poverty into a theological virtue and a source of unique identity.

This liberated understanding of *Missio Dei* directly and powerfully addresses the strategic trilemma. It provides a powerful, authentic, and theologically rich basis for mission differentiation.

²⁸ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 42.

A seminary can confidently define itself as “the place that trains leaders for the urban crossroads,” “the seminary embedded in the Appalachian context,” or “the institution forming bilingual leaders for the Latino diaspora.” This clarity of purpose attracts a specific cohort of students, faculty, and donors who are passionately aligned with that vision, not just shopping for the cheapest or closest degree. It transforms the challenge of deferred maintenance into a concrete opportunity for public engagement, as the campus is actively leveraged for community benefit, changing its story from one of decay to one of service.

Finally, it actively engages enrollment challenges by appealing to a broader, more diverse cohort. It attracts not only traditional ordination-track candidates but also second-career students, lay leaders, community activists, nonprofit professionals, and artists seeking theological formation not for ecclesiastical office but for public life, social entrepreneurship, and the integration of faith with their vocation in the world. This aligns with the vision of forming leaders for others, individuals whose love of God is expressed through committed service to their neighbors and the pursuit of social justice.

The “world” into which this missional identity is lived out is now inescapably digital, algorithmically mediated, and shaped by the nascent revolution of artificial intelligence. Engaging this complex reality need not be a capital-intensive burden that further strains the budget, but can be understood and implemented as a logical, cost-effective extension of the same contextual, partner-oriented, and ethically grounded posture mandated by *Missio Dei*.

Digital and AI Engagement on a Budget

For a seminary administration preoccupied with a leaky roof, a dwindling account, and the urgent need to recruit the next entering class, investing in state-of-the-art AI labs, virtual reality suites, or digital learning platforms seems not just absurd, but irresponsible. The temptation is to see digital technology as either a threat to “real” formation or as a fiscal tool for delivering content more cheaply to more students. However, a posture of disengagement is not a theologically or strategically viable option; the digital sphere

is now a primary “context” for human relationship, knowledge dissemination, public discourse, and even spiritual seeking. For the seminary committed to a civic mission, this digital territory is part of the polis it is called to serve. The task, then, is one of frugal innovation—the strategic leveraging of low-cost, high-impact, mission-aligned strategies to engage technology not as a master or a utility, but as a field for faithful presence, ethical formation, and public theology.²⁹

The first and most important strategy is a partnership to build digital capacity. Few seminaries can or should attempt to hire a team of instructional designers, software developers, and digital ethicists. The solution lies in collaboration. A seminary can partner with a local university’s computer science or communications department. A formal partnership could involve the seminary offering theology and ethics seminars or guest lectures to their students, while in exchange, student teams from the partner institution take on the seminary’s digital challenges as real-world capstone projects. These could include developing a more accessible and dynamic website, setting up a podcast studio for public theology conversations, creating a digital archive of local oral histories from aging congregants, or building a basic app for a community resource network.³⁰

This approach externalizes development costs, provides invaluable experience to students in the partner institution, and injects fresh, technologically savvy perspectives into the seminary’s work. Similarly, seminaries should proactively pursue grants from foundations such as the Lilly Endowment, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the John Templeton Foundation, which have funded initiatives at the intersection of theology, technology, and the public square. The proposal should not focus on buying hardware but on funding a specific project—like “The Digital

²⁹ The term “frugal innovation” is borrowed from development economics and refers to creating more value with fewer resources, focusing on core functionalities and strategic partnerships.

³⁰ This model of academic partnership for digital capacity is being pioneered by some smaller liberal arts colleges and could be effectively adapted by seminaries.

Storytelling Project for Urban Faith Narratives” or “Developing AI Ethics Curriculum for Local Church Leaders”—that clearly advances the seminary’s public mission.

A second, highly accessible approach is to adopt a “platform-agnostic” model of public theology. A robust digital presence does not require expensive proprietary platforms. Seminaries can and should use free or low-cost, available tools to create and disseminate compelling public content. This could mean starting a thoughtfully produced podcast that interviews local faith leaders, activists, and officials on pressing community issues, modeling the deliberative dialogue needed in a polarized society. It could involve using a YouTube channel to host a series of short, engaging “Theology for Today’s Headlines” videos by faculty, making scholarly insight accessible to a broad audience. It could mean curating a regular blog on Medium or Substack where students and faculty publish reflective essays on faith in public life, responding to current events with theological depth.

The goal here is not technological sophistication for its own sake, but consistent, high-quality, accessible theological contribution to the digital public square. This practice embodies the seminary’s role as a responsible citizen, using its intellectual capital for the relief of the human condition and the enrichment of public discourse. It also serves as a powerful form of marketing, showcasing the school’s relevance and thought leadership to potential students and donors far beyond its geographic locale, all at minimal cost.

A third, non-negotiable component is the ethical and critical integration of AI literacy across the curriculum. Generative LLM tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and others represent a disruptive shift in how humans access information, create content, and even conceptualize thought. For seminaries, access to these tools is currently low-cost or free, but the cost of ignoring their ethical and pedagogical implications is extraordinarily high. Seminaries have a paramount responsibility to educate future leaders not merely in how to use AI (e.g., to generate a sermon draft), but more importantly, how to critique it theologically, understand its limitations, and

foresee its social consequences.³¹ This imperative requires minimal financial outlay but significant pedagogical creativity. Faculty can design assignments where students use an AI to draft a sermon on a given biblical text, and then require a rigorous peer workshop where the draft is analyzed for its theological omissions, its embedded cultural biases, its homogenizing voice, and its lack of embodied connection to a specific community.

A required module in every degree program could address the ethics of AI, utilizing the wealth of open-access resources from organizations like the MIT Media Lab, The Ethics Centre, or the AI Now Institute. This positions the seminary as an essential, forward-thinking institution preparing leaders for a complex future. It directly answers the need for “lifelong learning” and continuous adjustment to a rapidly changing environment, ensuring graduates can guide their communities through technological change with wisdom and ethical grounding. It forms the “competence and character” necessary to navigate new technological powers responsibly.

Finally, seminaries can engage in the tangible, place-based work of repurposing physical space to address digital inequity. The underutilized campus, a symbol of maintenance burdens, can be activated as a digital commons hub. This involves designating rooms with reliable, high-speed internet as free, reservable workspaces for local nonprofits, freelance workers from the community, or after-school tutoring programs. In neighborhoods where broadband access is limited or home environments are not conducive to study or work, this simple act turns the seminary into a vital community infrastructure asset—a place of digital inclusion. It addresses the digital divide not with abstract policy but with practical hospitality. This initiative creates natural, daily touchpoints for relationship between the seminary and its neighbors, embodies a commitment to the common good, and provides a constant, visible answer to the question, “What

³¹ Wolff, “Responsible Relations for AI Ethics,” explores the ethical imperatives and colonial patterns in AI development that theological education must address.

is that seminary good for?” It transforms the physical plant from a passive drain into an active generator of social trust and community connectivity, fulfilling the civic mission in a profoundly concrete, low-tech, and high-impact way. These approaches are not expensive tech add-ons; they are logical extensions of a *Missio Dei* posture. They are externally focused, collaborative, ethically rigorous, and oriented toward forming leaders who can bridge deep theological wisdom with the complexities of a technological society. They build public relevance, differentiate the institution, and create formative experiences for students, all while operating within the severe financial constraints of the under-resourced seminary. They demonstrate that engaging the digital frontier is not a distraction from the core mission, but a necessary, contemporary venue for living it out.

Synthesis: From Isomorphic Captivity to Missional Agency

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the under-resourced theological school occupies a structural position for which prevailing leadership and pedagogical frameworks offer no adequate remedy. Transformational and servant leadership models, anchored in methodological individualism, diagnose institutional fragility as a deficit of leader capacity or ethical disposition; adult learning theory, for all its attention to experience and reflection, similarly locates the engine of transformation within the autonomous learner. Both paradigms, whatever their internal coherence, cannot account for an institution where distress originates not in the qualities of people but in the legitimacy criteria of the organizational field itself.

When a seminary exhausts its endowment mimicking the programmatic portfolios of wealthier peers, the problem is not insufficient leadership vision. The problem is that the very definition of institutional success—the script the leader is expected to perform—has been written by competitors whose resource base the struggling school cannot replicate. This is not a crisis of character. It is a crisis of legitimation, and it requires not better execution of inherited models but a fundamental reordering of the

institution's relationship to the criteria by which it is evaluated.

The doctrine of *Missio Dei* supplies the grammar for this reordering. Its central claim—that *mission originates not in the church's initiative but in the triune God's own outward movement of love*—displaces the institution from the center of its own imagination. The seminary does not generate its purpose through strategic planning; it receives purpose as gift and calling. It does not secure legitimacy through competitive positioning; legitimacy follows from faithful participation in God's prior, reconciling work. This is not a theological ornament applied to a secular managerial framework. It is a genuine alternative to that framework, one that releases the leader from the burden of being the singular bearer of institutional hope and releases the institution from the exhausting project of generating its own justification *ex nihilo*. The question shifts from "How do we save ourselves?" to "Where is the Spirit already at work, and how may we align our resources with that movement?"

A postcolonial, diasporic hermeneutic renders this theological claim institutionally legible. The colonial inheritance embedded in the seminary's very form—the residential model, the disciplinary canons, the aesthetic of manicured permanence—produces a specific pathology for the under-resourced school: the conviction that institutional value correlates with proximity to elite prototypes. This is mimicry not as conscious strategy but as internalized epistemology. The seminary measures its deferred maintenance against the gleaming campuses it cannot afford, its faculty credentials against the research portfolios of tier-one institutions, its enrollment against the yield rates of denominational flagship schools. It exhausts itself in a race structured to ensure its defeat. The diasporic consciousness, formed in the necessity of navigating multiple cultural scripts without full assimilation to any, recognizes this dynamic and refuses its terms. Vitality, from this vantage, does not require mastery of dominant institutional forms. It requires the patient, creative work of translation: rendering the seminary's particular tradition, location, and relationships into assets rather than liabilities, into sources of differentiation rather than marks of deficiency.

The Embedded Theological Hub and Formative Commons operationalizes this refusal. It is neither a retreat to nostalgic localism nor an uncritical embrace of market logics. It is, rather, a disciplined institutional practice of discerning the missional potential latent in every feature of the school's existence: its physical plant, its faculty expertise, its denominational networks, its geographical specificity. The aging Gothic hall ceases to function primarily as a symbol of lost grandeur and becomes a platform for community hospitality. The small faculty, freed from the impossible expectation of competing with research-intensive divinity schools, redirects its scholarly labor toward embedded, collaborative projects that produce both peer-reviewed publication and tangible local benefit.

The curriculum, redesigned around civic theology labs, transforms field education from vocational placement into mutual theological discovery, positioning community partners not as sites for student practice but as co-educators whose experiential knowledge corrects and deepens classroom learning. Each move requires not capital infusion but conceptual reorientation: the willingness to see what has always been present but was previously invisible because the dominant institutional script had no category for its value.

This model directly addresses the strategic trilemma of mission homogenization, deferred maintenance, and enrollment stress. Mission differentiation follows not from manufacturing a unique selling proposition but from the hard, slow work of contextual discernment. A seminary that knows its neighborhood—its demographic composition, its economic history, its existing networks of mutual aid and advocacy—cannot be generic. Its curriculum, its partnerships, its public programming, the very questions it poses in admissions interviews and board meetings will bear the mark of that particularity. Deferred maintenance, reframed as platform stewardship, becomes a recurring opportunity for public witness rather than a recurring occasion for shame. The roof repair campaign, when narrated as an investment in the neighborhood's only dedicated space for interfaith dialogue and community organizing, attracts donors who would never write a check labeled "facilities fund." Enrollment stress, while not eliminated, is

mitigated by the expansion of the seminary's relevant public. The student who seeks theological formation not for ordination but for community organizing, nonprofit leadership, or the integration of faith with creative practice finds in this model a coherent answer to the question: "Why this school?" The seminary ceases to compete only for a shrinking pool of traditional ministerial candidates and begins to cultivate a broader, more diverse cohort of public leaders who understand their vocation as participation in the *Missio Dei*.

The implications for higher education research extend beyond the theological sector. The isomorphic pressures DiMaggio and Powell described have only intensified in the decades since their classic formulation. Small colleges, regional comprehensive universities, and professional schools across the nonprofit landscape face the same legitimacy trap: the imperative to resemble wealthier, more prestigious peers, even when that resemblance consumes resources that cannot be replenished. The Embedded Theological Hub model offers a counter-narrative to the dominant logic of retrenchment, which typically proceeds through austerity, program elimination, and merger. It demonstrates that mission clarification is not the soft, aspirational alternative to hard financial decisions, but rather the most consequential financial decision an institution can make.

Differentiation achieved through deep contextual embedding is not easily imitated; it cannot be purchased through consultants or accomplished through rebranding. It requires sustained institutional attention, the willingness to forego certain aspirations, and a theology—or, for secular institutions, an axiology—that locates organizational value in fidelity to purpose rather than in positional status. This is not a strategy available to every struggling college, but it is a strategy available to any struggling college willing to ask the question its competitive peers do not ask: "What would it mean to stop trying to become a slightly poorer version of institutions we cannot afford to resemble and instead become the fullest, most faithful version of ourselves?"

The most profound implication, however, concerns the formation of institutional leaders. The seminary president or dean capable of executing this reorientation cannot be produced by the

standard professional development apparatus of higher education administration. This leader must be bilingual in ways existing doctoral programs do not cultivate: fluent in the languages of theology and of community development, of institutional finance and of postcolonial critique, of strategic planning and of spiritual discernment. This president must possess what might be called institutional humility—the conviction that the school's future does not depend solely on their executive competence but on the school's capacity to listen, to its context and to the Spirit, and to align its resources with what it hears. This is not the humility of inaction but of reoriented agency: the leader as steward rather than author, as weaver rather than architect.

Graduate programs in higher education, if they are to serve the sector of the field that most needs their expertise, must develop curricular pathways that address the distinctive challenges of small, mission-anchored, resource-constrained institutions. They must teach not only the standard toolkit of enrollment management and development strategy but also the hermeneutical skills necessary to read an institution's history, location, and tradition as sources of strategic insight. They must prepare leaders who can distinguish between the isomorphism that guarantees irrelevance and the adaptive imitation that enables survival.

The under-resourced seminary that embraces this path does not solve its financial problems. It does not escape the hard work of development, the anxiety of admissions cycles, or the grief of deferred dreams. What it escapes is the more fundamental trap of mistaking its own survival for its purpose. The *Missio Dei* framework, properly understood, offers no guarantee of institutional perpetuity. It offers something more valuable: the assurance that institutional fidelity does not require institutional permanence. A seminary can close having fulfilled its calling; it can persist in diminished form having faithfully adapted; it can thrive in ways its founders could not have imagined.

In each case, the measure of its success is not the size of its endowment at dissolution or the number of its graduates in any given year. The measure is whether it participated, in its time and place, in the reconciling movement of a God who sends,

and whether those it formed continue that participation in the varied vocations to which they are called. This is not a strategy of desperation. It is the recovery of a prior, more faithful grammar of institutional agency—one that releases the seminary from the exhausting fiction that it is the author of its own meaning and invites it, instead, into the generative, uncertain, liberating work of discerning what God is already doing and joining in.

Conclusion: From Scarcity to Strategic Vitality

For the seminary with a small endowment and a large maintenance bill, standing at the crossroads of decline, the path forward is not found in a defensive crouch, in austerity alone, or in a desperate mimicry of unattainable models. It is found in a theologically audacious, strategically shrewd, and courageously embodied embrace of its deepest civic vocation. The postcolonial, diasporic perspective offers the critical insight that institutional power and vitality are often reconstituted at the margins through adaptive hybridity, dense relationships, and a clear, contextual identity born of particularity, rather than through mere replication of centralized forms.

The doctrine of *Missio Dei* provides the theological liberation, shifting the institution's center of gravity from the exhausting project of self-preservation to the joyful, demanding project of participating in God's outward movement of love and reconciliation in a wounded world.

By renewing its civic mission through this lens, the under-resourced seminary can perform the alchemy of turning its perceived vulnerabilities into strategic strengths. Its specific location becomes a platform for partnership and presence, not just a postal address. Its limited size enables the agility, relational depth, and pedagogical innovation that larger bureaucracies struggle to achieve. Its financial constraints, rather than dictating a future of diminishment, demand the kind of creative, contextual, partner-oriented engagement that is the very heart of faithful mission and impactful public theology. Engaging the digital and AI frontier through frugal innovation and critical formation is not a separate burden; it is an essential dimension of this mission in the 21st century, preparing rooted

cosmopolitans who can lead with wisdom in an age of algorithms.

This is not a call to abandon theological depth, denominational heritage, or the essential task of preparing people for ministerial office. It is, rather, a call to express that depth, heritage, and preparation in the most pressing arenas of public life—in the polarized town square, in the digitally mediated conversation, in the struggle for justice, in the care for the neighborhood. It is to answer the fundamental questions of civil society—what our purpose is, what is the right way to act, what is the common good—not only within the seminary walls, but in and with the community it is called to serve.

In doing so, *the under-resourced seminary does more than merely survive; it becomes indispensable*. It justifies its existence not by the figures on its endowment report, but by the tangible health it contributes to its neighborhood and the transformative leaders it sends into the world for the common good. In a time of profound social fracture, spiritual hunger, and technological disorientation, this is a mission worthy of investment, a narrative that can inspire a new generation of students, and a faithful participation in the *Missio Dei*. The heavy traffic on the Damascus Road—the chaotic, unpredictable, and grace-filled space where identities are transformed and callings are clarified—is not a threat to be avoided by the struggling institution. It is the very location, the essential context, where such a school, trusting in the God who sends, can discover its renewed vocation and, in that discovery, find its sustainable and significant – and more importantly, faithful – future.

BOOK REVIEW

VISIONS OF VOCATION: COMMON GRACE FOR THE COMMON GOOD

BY: STEVEN GARBER

Downers Grove, Il: Intervarsity Press, 2014

255 Pp. Paperback

Isbn 978-0-8308-3666-6

Steven Garber's *Visions of Vocation* offers a thoughtful and theologically grounded exploration of calling that challenges modern reductions of vocation to career choice, professional advancement, or personal fulfillment. Garber, a moral philosopher and advocate for faith-informed public life, claims that vocation is fundamentally about serving as a means of God's common grace for the good of others and the wider world. Calling is not a static decision or a moment of discernment. It is a way of life, lived faithfully over time, shaped by moral responsibility, and attentive to its cultural consequences.

Garber frames the book not as a technical argument but as an invitation. He invites readers to "come and see that this vision of vocation is being lived into by men and women, younger and older, who are committed to a faith that shapes vocation that shapes culture" (18). This invitational posture sets the tone for the entire work. Garber aims to form readers by drawing them into a vision of calling embodied in lives marked by conviction, coherence, and long-term faithfulness.

The book's structure reflects this formative purpose. *Visions of Vocation* is not organized around a linear framework or a step-by-step process. Garber weaves together narrative accounts, historical examples, philosophical reflection, and theological insight to present a cumulative vision of vocation. Stories of individuals who have lived faithfully within their callings function as the primary means of instruction. These narratives are not offered as models to be replicated, but as witnesses to the integration of belief and practice over time. The book unfolds patiently, inviting reflection

rather than pressing for immediate application.

A defining feature of these narratives is that each person Garber highlights demonstrates not momentary success but a lifetime of faithfulness. Garber's emphasis on longevity underscores his conviction that vocation is not proven in isolated seasons, but in lives marked by endurance, consistency, and integrity over time. This same commitment to long-term faithfulness is evident in Garber's own life and work, lending credibility to the vision he presents. His writing reflects not only philosophical reflection but lived conviction shaped by years of teaching, mentoring, and public engagement oriented toward the common good.

Throughout the book, Garber insists that vocation is inseparable from moral responsibility. Calling is not simply about identifying one's gifts or passions, nor is it confined to ecclesial roles or ministerial offices. Instead, vocation is portrayed as a response to God's call that takes shape within networks of relationships and institutions, carrying consequences for families, communities, and cultures. Garber challenges individualistic understandings of vocation by arguing that calling always exists in relation to others and is oriented toward the common good.

Garber's theological engagement is implicit yet substantial. Drawing from the Christian doctrine of creation, he presents vocation as participation in God's ongoing care for the world. Work and calling are central expressions of faith. Faith, in Garber's vision, cannot be reduced to private belief or internal conviction; it must take embodied form in the way one lives and works over time. By grounding vocation in creation and common grace, Garber resists compartmentalizing faith and insists that belief necessarily shapes public life.

One of the notable strengths of *Visions of Vocation* is its refusal to measure vocation primarily by efficiency, immediacy, or visible success. Garber consistently challenges vocational paradigms that prioritize measurable outcomes or instrumental effectiveness. Instead, he emphasizes faithfulness sustained across decades rather than validated by short-term affirmation. This perspective offers a corrective to leadership and vocational narratives that equate effectiveness with faithfulness. Garber reminds readers that the

moral integrity of a vocation cannot be determined solely by results, particularly in contexts where faithfulness may involve obscurity, resistance, or suffering.

The book's reflective, narrative style is both a strength and a limitation. Readers seeking practical tools, structured discernment models, or immediate application may find the book lacking in concrete guidance. Garber intentionally avoids such approaches, choosing instead to cultivate sustained theological and moral reflection on the topic of calling. While this limits the book's usefulness in settings that require prescriptive instruction or strategic planning, this limitation reflects the book's purpose rather than a weakness in its execution.

The primary audience for *Visions of Vocation* includes those wrestling seriously with questions of calling, faithfulness, and moral responsibility. The book would be invaluable for seminary students discerning a call to ministry, pastors reflecting on the endurance and integrity of their vocational commitments, and Christian professionals seeking to integrate faith and work without reducing either. It would also serve educators well in formation-focused courses that prioritize theological reflection over technical competence. While less suitable for congregational study or strategy-oriented leadership training, given its intentionally reflective approach, it serves as an effective formative text.

Visions of Vocation offers a compelling alternative to utilitarian and individualistic understandings of calling. Garber calls readers to a vision of vocation marked by faithfulness, responsibility, and service to the common good. The lives he presents—and his own vocational journey—demonstrate that such faithfulness is not merely aspirational, but attainable over a lifetime. In a cultural moment shaped by fragmentation and short-term thinking, this book stands as a reminder that vocation is not about finding the perfect role but about living a faithful life shaped by conviction, hope, and perseverance sustained across decades.

Thomas Baran
Grace Baptist Church
Bristol, CT

BOOK REVIEW

A THEOLOGY OF AUTHORITY: RETHINKING LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

By: CHRISTA L. MCKIRLAND

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025

273 Pp. Paperback

Isbn 978-1-5409-6816-6

Christa McKirland believes that debates about *who* should exercise authority in the church (for example, women as well as men, only those who hold office/are ordained) conceal the fact that no one should have authority over anyone else in the church. Her argument is that the post-Pentecost church should be a community of equals, where authority is shared and exercised collectively, and believers relate to each other as siblings-in-Christ. McKirland identifies as a white, female, professional theologian, an evangelical Christian who is part of the Southern Baptist Church. Although now living and teaching in New Zealand she describes how her experience of not being permitted to teach in her mother-church has prompted her study.

A Theology of Authority intends to prompt fresh thinking on what kind of authority is exercised within churches by developing an argument from first principles. McKirland uses an extended metaphor. In part one, she speaks of forming bricks. This involves delineating different forms of authority, principally executive and non-executive. She engages with Richard D. George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority* (1985) and theologians, Letty M. Russell, Bernard L. Ramm and Walter L. Liefeld. In part 2 she uses these bricks to form boundary walls. This involves exploring divine authority (including God, Son and Spirit); the authority of scripture (it is the principal, not sole, channel through which divine authority is mediated); and the relationship of power and authority and authority in human community. She distinguishes between the unique authority given to the apostles and prophets (because

they founded the church and wrote the New Testament) and their successors. Throughout parts 1 and 2 she iteratively develops a diagram. This culminates in a single page summary which assists the reader in keeping track of the many strands of her argument.

In part 3 she considers what practices are appropriate within the walls constructed by these bricks, that is how authority should be exercised within the church. This includes a definition of leadership as “using one’s Spirit-given power to help others discover their royal-priestly calling and Spirit-given power so that every sibling-saint might live into their specific vocation, to bring all things into unity under the lordship of Jesus” (207).

A Theology of Authority has many strengths. Three things I appreciated were, first, its careful analysis and explanation of different kinds of authority. Issues of power and authority constantly arise in church and wider society. McKirland’s framework makes a deeper understanding and, therefore response, possible. Second it is clearly structured: a linear, detailed argument is developed with extensive engagement with other scholars, while the iterative development of a running diagram saves the reader from drowning in detail. Third is that McKirland is explicit about her background and convictions. This invites the reader to engage with her argument at a deeper level.

Theologically I share many of McKirland’s convictions and have considerable sympathy with her argument. Ultimately, however it did not convince me because, after a lifetime in church leadership, I do not think her model is sufficiently robust to work in practice. Although she describes how this model has been found to work in some churches in New Zealand, I question the extent to which it is widely replicable for a number of reasons. Chief among these is her model of authority being that of siblings-in-Christ. The concept of siblings implies an inherent equality, which may be the reason it is used widely in the New Testament to describe believers’ relationship to each other. McKirland acknowledges that, in human families, there is often a pecking order among siblings. Her counter to this is that in the New Testament “all of the status distinctions are not enacted or implied” (181). That is, all believers have the same access to God, possess the same Holy Spirit and therefore

have equal standing within the church community. While I agree with this it misses the point. Simply stating that all are equal does not make it happen. Misuse of authority in churches is the result of human fallenness which takes advantage of whatever structure is put in place. Believing all are equal siblings in Christ will not, of itself, ensure that authority is used appropriately. In fact, because distinctions in authority (which will exist) are unnamed and unacknowledged it may prove harder to ensure authority is well stewarded.

A Theology of Authority offers a well-researched and clearly structured theology of power and authority which is married to a bold application to the life of the local church. It will stimulate seminary students, prompt leaders of congregations to reflect on their actions and require practical theologians to examine their convictions.

Neil Dougall
St Andrew Blackadder Church
North Berwick, Scotland.

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BOOK REVIEW***IMAGINATION: A MANIFESTO***

By: RUHA BENJAMIN

New York, Ny: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024

178 Pp. Paperback

Isbn 978-1-324-10501-5

In this short, public-facing treatise, Ruha Benjamin weaves together research across a variety of disciplines to script a prophetic call. Benjamin, the Alexander Stewart 1886 Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, is the author of several books related to race, technology, science, and medicine. In this latest contribution, she builds upon her vast knowledge of current technological advances to critique the ways that the imaginations driving these advances are leading away from liberative futures, particularly for those who are historically and presently marginalized. Benjamin invites readers to resist the limits of imagination placed upon societies by larger systems and structures enacting particular imaginaries to co-imagine different realities in which all may thrive.

Benjamin argues that societal imaginations have been monopolized by those with the most resources—including tech giants, power-hoarding governmental entities, and media bent toward capitalist and consumptionist appetites—limiting options with regard to who has been given the support to imagine, both historically and presently. Returning to the example of schooling throughout the book, she details the limits of educational systems in the U.S. to cultivate the imaginations of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children for futures beyond poverty and incarceration. In general, Benjamin emphasizes the lack of play for all children within a capitalist society and advocates for spaces in which play as a necessary human right is nurtured.

Such imaginations must not be limited to children, however. Benjamin references cultural theorists, scientists, technologists, and educators alike in arguing that all of us are currently locked

in a struggle for the imagination—more directly, a struggle for deciding who gets to imagine and which imaginaries are centered—and that artists, philosophers, and marginalized communities are continuing to find ways to imagine and be differently, refusing to acquiesce to imaginaries imposed externally. From Ronald Rael's creation of teeter-totters across the U.S.-Mexico border, to the humanization of incarcerated persons through art and education investments, to cities across the globe implementing self-sustaining food and energy programs through democratic leadership and engagement models, to children in an impoverished school district developing their own system of currency, to apps that imagine Black and Brown bodies with unlimited agency, Benjamin lays the groundwork for decolonizing imagination. Furthermore, she highlights the deep wisdom and tradition that subjugated persons bring to this collective endeavor, pointing to Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism as vehicles for igniting old-new realities.

One area for further exploration related to Benjamin's brief discussion on sacred imagination in the final chapter would be the ways in which religious traditions have often served as catalysts for imagining the world differently, especially with regard to social justice and equity. While Sacred Design Lab's work, originating from Harvard Divinity School, is named as a primary resource for readers to engage in the task of spiritual formation, additional concrete examples from past and present religious histories—including Christian abolitionist, medical debt relief, and climate justice actions—would create deeper theological connections for religious leaders, particularly in actualizing collective imagination.

Beyond captivating and compelling prose, readers may be drawn more concretely to the imagination exercises in the last chapter, as well as the framework for understanding different types of futures (possible, plausible, probable, and preferable futures) especially useful for religious leaders. In addition, the appendix contains a number of prompts for envisioning new endeavors, knowledges, and relationships through discussion, project-creation, and speculation. These offerings are ready to use in any context, including congregations, denominations, seminaries, and other

faith-based settings. In fact, this work would serve as a fitting book study, discussion series, or strategic planning and implementation process within any of these contexts. It would be especially helpful for DMin leadership or planning courses and master's level leadership or capstone courses, inviting students to develop imaginative ministry and community projects for implementation.

As a whole, this work cannot be recommended highly enough for religious leaders. While not an explicitly religious or theological text, the sociologically-informed naming of the present context, the clearly articulated gap in imaginaries and the who/how of imagination, and the deliberative, animated call to re-claim imagination beyond what has been fed to us from life-denying imaginaries provides impetus to religious leaders and their communities to think, be, do—in other words, to imagine—an otherwise of justice, liberation, and a resurrected faith.¹

Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi
 Iliff School of Theology
 Denver, Colorado

¹ For an introductory dive into Ruha Benjamin's work, check out her two-part Tanner Lectures on Human Values series entitled "Imagining Beyond the Artificial Intelligentsia," delivered at Harvard University, April 9-11, 2025, available on the Mahindra Humanities Center YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@MahindraHumanitiesCenter>.

BOOK REVIEW

ANOTHER WAY: LIVING AND LEADING CHANGE ON PURPOSE

BY: STEPHEN LEWIS, MATTHEW WESLEY WILLIAMS, AND DORI GRINENKO BAKER

Saint Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2020

198 Pp. Softcover

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Leadership books often promise clarity, momentum, and results. What they frequently overlook is the inner and communal work required to sustain change over time. In *Another Way: Living & Leading Change on Purpose*, Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker offer a different starting point. Rather than focusing on strategies or systems alone, the authors invite leaders to reconsider how change is approached, emphasizing purpose, reflection, and shared discernment.

The book grows out of the authors' work with the Forum for Theological Exploration and reflects their experience forming leaders in ministry and nonprofit settings. At its core, *Another Way* suggests that change is not something to be forced or managed from the top down. Instead, meaningful change emerges when leaders and communities slow down, listen carefully, and attend to what is unfolding among them. This posture feels particularly relevant in a season when many church leaders are navigating fatigue, uncertainty, and constant transition.

The opening manifesto names a common frustration in contemporary leadership. Too often, change is framed as a problem to be solved quickly or a goal to be achieved efficiently. The authors suggest that this approach can leave leaders disconnected from their purpose and communities overwhelmed by constant initiatives. What is needed, they argue, is another way—one that is grounded in care for people, context, and calling.

Chapter one, "Creating Hospitable Space," establishes the

relational foundation of the book. Leadership begins, the authors contend, with cultivating environments where people feel safe to speak honestly and listen well. Attention to trust, power, and belonging is not peripheral but essential. Without this groundwork, efforts toward change are unlikely to take root.

Chapters two through four turn the reader's attention inward. These chapters explore purpose, vocation, and self-awareness, inviting leaders to reflect on the forces shaping their leadership. Rather than offering fixed answers, the authors pose questions that encourage ongoing reflection. Leadership, in this framing, is inseparable from formation. Leaders who are unclear about their own purpose may struggle to guide others through seasons of change.

The book then shifts from individual reflection to communal engagement. Chapter five focuses on reflecting theologically together, helping groups interpret their shared experiences and discern direction. Leadership here is less about providing solutions and more about facilitating meaning-making within the community. This chapter highlights the importance of listening deeply and allowing theology to emerge from lived experience.

The final chapters focus on action, though action understood as faithful response rather than rigid execution. Chapter six explores liberating leadership and challenges systems that restrict participation or imagination. Chapter seven introduces the idea of taking "the next most faithful step," resisting comprehensive plans in favor of attentiveness to what is possible in the present moment. The concluding chapter brings these practices together in the CARE framework—Create space, Ask questions, Reflect theologically, Enact the next step—presented as a rhythm leaders and communities can return to over time.

Throughout the book, several themes remain consistent. Leadership is portrayed as communal rather than individual, formative rather than purely functional. The authors repeatedly return to the importance of reflection, purpose, and shared discernment. Rather than offering quick solutions, *Another Way* invites leaders to cultivate practices that sustain long-term faithfulness.

Readers looking for detailed implementation strategies or measurable outcomes may find the book's open-ended approach challenging. However, for leaders willing to engage ambiguity and invest in reflective practice, the book offers language and tools that feel both realistic and hopeful.

Another Way will be particularly helpful for pastors, ministry leaders, and leadership cohorts navigating seasons of transition or reorientation. It is well suited for retreats, leadership teams, and graduate-level contexts where formation and discernment are valued. More than providing answers, the book offers a way of being with change—one that encourages leaders to remain attentive, grounded, and purposeful as they move forward.

Andrew Rutledge
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

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BOOK REVIEW

BECOMING A FUTURE-READY CHURCH: 8 SHIFTS TO ENCOURAGE AND EMPOWER THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

BY: DANIEL YANG, ADELLE BANKS, AND WARREN BIRD

Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan Reflective, 2024

234 Pp. Paperback

Isbn: 9-780-3101-6110-3

In an era of the graying of the North American Church, the authors of *Becoming a Future-Ready Church* cull significant research from multiple sources to identify eight generational shifts needed to attract and mentor emerging leaders for faith communities. The 1950's and 1960's "golden age" of Christian ministries, including churches, has long passed (9). The hopeful future of the Church belongs to her future leaders. Daniel Yang and Warren Bird, both highly respected researchers, are joined by award-winning journalist Adelle Banks as they invite church leaders to address the eight cultural changes "one degree of change" at a time (13).

Each chapter addresses a church culture transition with a cover page that describes and defines the move from the current value to the emerging value. The ensuing pages make the case for the new reality. For example, chapter two names the swing from church attendance to relational attachment. It names a dated question based on current preferences and suggests a better question for a rising generation of leaders.

The eight shifts laid out in chapters two through nine are:

From attendance to attachment

From nuclear families to forged families

From mind to soul

From church refugees to church as refuge

From silence to righteousness

From racial tension to community blessing
 From physical only to healthy hybrid
 From numbers to vitality

The authors invite the Church to exchange the self-contained, at times attractional, institutionalism of the past for a more vulnerable, hospitable, and diverse relationality. Institutional loyalty does not carry the same importance as relationships that help shape one's understanding of identity in Christ. Rather than a self-protective critique of society that defends the faith, the authors envision an unfolding confidence in a Christianity that can offer biblical integrity in an increasingly complex social narrative. The Gospel touches all nationalities and life situations as generously as the Sower of the seed in Matthew 13. Targeted efficiency gets eclipsed by extravagant invitation to experience God's love in Christ through the Spirit. Emerging leaders embody justice while compassionately engaging the messy, even hard, places around them.

The new wine of relational faith requires pliant holding spaces. An age of Crypto and ChatGPT calls for digital versatility plus unmediated person-to-person gatherings. The utilization of church buildings, homes, third places, Zoom, and virtual reality converges for the emerging generation. How will "church leaders leverage AI in the right ways to create God-honoring teaching, discipleship, and spiritual formation?" (161) What will incarnational ministry look like in the next fifty years? It will likely encompass both in-person and cyber mission.

Interestingly, this research-based book proposes different metrics for the emerging U.S. Church. Measuring vitality supersedes attendance and membership tallies. The biblically vital congregation will have a family feel, operate like a body, and adaptively structure itself to meet the needs around it. It will be both a plenary and a network of small meetups. This fractal existence will be led by leaders skilled in stewarding collaboration, wholeness, and a hopeful vision of God's redemptive work in the world.

The eight trends and contrasting questions are summarized nicely in a table on page 200. The notes section at the end of the book impresses immediately with its variety of sources. They include insights from scholars like Ryan Burge and George Gallup, as well as the use of numerous studies like the Pew Research Center's "Religious Landscape Study" and the Hartford Research Institute's "Faith Communities Today." There is also a helpful index of Scripture passages referenced throughout the chapters.

There may be a familiar reluctance in some readers to embrace a data-driven analysis of where the church needs to reform. Trends come and go. Theology can eat sociology for breakfast, to adapt an old truism. That tension may be why the authors offer discussion questions at the end of each chapter to create space for theological perspective-taking, "one degree of change" at a time. There are abundant reminders to evaluate the eight cultural changes in light of biblical principles and discerning prayer.

Charles Wesley's hymn, "A Charge to Keep I Have," reminds the Church of the iterative nature of serving the present age. Rather than mere nostalgic wistfulness, *Becoming a Future-Ready Church* shifts the reader's attention to current and forthcoming actualities. It also recalls the prophetic wisdom of Joel 2: Spirit-anointed, multigenerational, diverse leaders making God's righteousness and justice visible in every age. The parting challenge lingers: "Is the next generation reading this book with you?" (197ff)

Thomas Tumblin
Asbury Theological Seminary
Wilmore, KY



**Journal of
Religious Leadership
3216 Rankin Road
St. Anthony, MN 55418**
