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Author(s): Cory L. Seibel.

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Coming Together or Coming Apart: Fostering Multicultural Communities of Christian Leaders in an Urban Context

CORY L. SEIBEL

In the early 1990s, the city of Fresno was experiencing deep crisis. As Barbara Elliot describes, “Fresno was dubbed the car theft capital of the world, with 13,000 vehicles stolen every year...Poverty was rampant, murder became common, unemployment was in double digits, and teen pregnancy soared. The schools struggled to teach kids who spoke ninety different languages.”¹ Fearing that Fresno was at risk of experiencing riots like those that had broken out in Los Angeles, a group of Christian leaders came together from across racial and denominational lines to pray and to contemplate the city’s future together. Christian Community Development Association founder John Perkins visited Fresno and delivered “a hard-hitting challenge” to Christian leaders in the community to work together.²

From these origins emerged a broadly shared conviction that Christian leaders from throughout the city needed to come together “to seek the peace of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7). Several new initiatives were developed to channel this momentum, including the No Name Fellowship and the Pastor Clusters.³ The No Name Fellowship brought leaders from diverse sectors together to exchange ideas about how to address the city’s challenges. The fellowship’s commitment to breaking down barriers was expressed in its purpose statement: “Releasing God’s Resources to Rebuild Our City through Reconciled Relationships.”⁴ The Pastor Clusters, which were organized in eight geographic regions of the city, also aimed to transcend barriers in the community by bringing together “groups of pastors of all races and denominations for fellowship, prayer, and unity.”⁵

Roughly twenty years have passed since this movement began. Over the course of these two decades, the collaborative efforts of Christian leaders within the community have accomplished many good things. Nonetheless, many steep challenges remain. The city’s struggles in the areas of concentrated poverty, unemployment, educational achievement, crime, and homelessness have been widely publicized and have been compounded by a persistent municipal

budgetary crisis. Meanwhile, the complexity of bringing together a multicultural group of Christian leaders is perhaps as pronounced as ever. According to 2010 US Census figures, Fresno's population is 46.9 percent Hispanic (including Hispanics of all races), 49.6 percent Caucasian, 12.6 percent Asian, 8.3 percent African-American, and 1.7 percent Native American.⁶ The landscape of the city's roughly 400 churches mirrors the full spectrum of this diversity.

In the face of such complexity, groups like the No Name Fellowship and Pastor Clusters continue to gather. These entities remain committed to bridging divisions within the community by bringing together Christian leaders of diverse backgrounds to seek the peace of the city. They continue to evidence some effectiveness in this regard. However, these groups face considerable challenges in transcending the tendency toward suspicion, fragmentation, and isolation between different ethnic and cultural groups within the city's Christian community. Indeed, some longstanding Christian leaders within the community express concern toward what they perceive as a lack of investment in the fostering of reconciled relationships among pastors today.

I have served on the No Name Fellowship steering committee for the last several years and will begin to serve as chair of this group in January 2012. This leadership responsibility has given me occasion to reflect upon the legacy and ongoing work of No Name and similar community groups. This article is rooted in my conviction that helping Christian leaders transcend ethnic and cultural boundaries to work together in unity remains an important priority today. This aim has value from a purely pragmatic perspective: the momentum, insight, and resources that can be generated by working together are surely greater than what can be achieved apart. As Swanson and Williams express, "[E]very community has huge problems that the church united could lead in alleviating."⁷ Even more significantly, this aim has a theological basis: Scripture leaves little doubt as to the imperative nature of the call to unity. Reflecting upon Jesus' prayer in John 17, White suggests that the Lord "taught that the world's attention would be arrested if His followers would maintain relational unity."⁸ The coming together of a multicultural community of Christian leaders can offer a powerful testimony within a city in need. However, in order for this

prospect to be realized, Christian leaders must work at fostering relationships that transcend human boundaries.

In this article, I will explore several of the factors that undermine the likelihood of Christian leaders coming together to engage in reconciled relationships. I then will respond to these realities by advancing a theological vision rooted in the kingdom values of reconciliation, unity in diversity, and mutuality.

Factors Hindering Solidarity Among Christian Leaders

As we consider the challenges associated with Christian leaders of diverse cultural backgrounds coming together, the concept of group “solidarity” can offer a helpful framework. Social scientists have advanced the concept of “solidarity” to describe the “glue” by which “group cohesiveness” is maintained within a given society or community.⁹ One study identifies several key dynamics of interaction that contribute to the level of solidarity within a group:

1. **Norms:** shared standards regarding membership and interaction
2. **Interaction and Activity:** the degree of contact and interconnectedness between group members, as well as the breadth of activities in which group members engage together.
3. **Sentiment:** the degree of mutual affection between group members.¹⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, this study also found that, in groups in which commonly held normative commitments, frequent interaction, and shared fondness are present, group cohesion also is higher.

I would assert that Christian leaders within the Fresno community today share weakened bonds of solidarity. This issue is by no means tied uniquely to the multicultural diversity of the church community. Other forms of diversity (e.g., age, socio-economic status, denominational, and political affiliation) also pose challenges to the coming together of Christian leaders. However, barriers created by ethnic and cultural identity do present one of the greatest and most enduring hindrances to Christian unity. While the complexities of this challenge are too immense to investigate exhaustively here, I would like to explore three crucial factors that hinder Christian leaders of diverse cultural backgrounds from developing bonds of solidarity.

The Impact of Cultural Tradition

First, as I noted above, the strength of solidarity within any group is dependent in part upon the presence of shared norms. This being said, even though they may confess a common faith in Christ, the degree to which Christian leaders of differing cultural backgrounds are guided by shared norms is impacted greatly by the shaping influence of their respective cultures. Even when the discomfort or disconnect that sometimes arises between leaders of two or more cultures strikes us as subtle, the underlying reality of the disparate norms operative within the situation can actually be quite profound. That being the case, it will be helpful to explore the formative influence of culture briefly here. Christian leaders are subject to these cultural forces, as are all members of the human community. In turn, they are sometimes unaware of the ways in which their cultural formation impacts their perceptions, attitudes, and interactions in relation to peers from other cultures.

Culture, suggests Newbigin, consists of “the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings.”¹¹ In essence, it is an integrated system of learned behaviors.¹² Hiebert posits that any culture can be dissected into three layers, which he views as addressing “ideas, feelings, and values,” respectively.¹³ The uppermost stratum, which is most readily available to conscious and critical reflection, consists of the cognitive dimension (knowledge, logic, and wisdom) of a cultural framework. The middle stratum involves the affective dimensions (feelings, aesthetics) native to a culture. The deepest layer, that which is often least subject to the conscious faculties of a society, is composed of the evaluative dimension (values, allegiances). On the “surface,” a particular culture can be distinguished from others by the behaviors (thinking and acting) and products (art, law, custom, roles, etc.) it generates.¹⁴

Underlying this, however, there is much more at work than readily meets the eye. The “deeper” layers of culture constitute the “worldview” that a group of people creates and shares, and through which the members of that group see, cope with, and understand the world.¹⁵ Kraft offers a helpful description of the concept of worldview: “The worldview of a cultural entity is seen as both the repository and the patterning in terms of which people generate the conceptual models through which they perceive of and interact with reality.”¹⁶ As the “cen-

tral control box” of a culture, worldview guides the organization and behavior of that culture.¹⁷ However, as I have noted above, members of a cultural group may not even be conscious of the various ways in which their worldview impacts them. Indeed, the presuppositions inherent within a given worldview are “generally unquestioned” by their adherents.¹⁸

From birth, each of us is formed within the cultural tradition of our respective cultural communities. As Westerhoff and Neville express, “By the time a person has reached adulthood, he or she has internalized a whole package of cultural meanings, signals, and symbols which indicate ‘right’ ways of doing things and ‘appropriate’ ways to behave.”¹⁹ As rising members of a cultural group learn from and observe the behavior of their elders, the cultural tradition into which they are being inducted serves three primary functions: 1) it provides self-identity, or the ability to “locate oneself in the larger narrative of family, tribe, or community;” 2) it clarifies values, or “the basic frames or perspectives through which we view the world;” and 3) it defines roles, or “what is expected of us, in a general sense, both in day-to-day routines and in relationships with others.”²⁰ In essence, as Kraft notes, “each youngster reared in a given society is conditioned to interpret reality in terms of the conceptual system of that culture.”²¹ Indeed, individuals come to bear and transmit culture precisely because they have participated *in* culture.

Within a complex urban space, leaders within the Christian community reflect the imprint of the various cultural traditions in which they are rooted. The influence of these disparate cultural traditions presents significant practical challenges to Christian leaders’ ability to communicate or work with one another. The presence of multiple culture-specific approaches to self-expression, the exercise of authority, decision-making processes, managing time, behaving formally and informally, or handling conflict can make it difficult for Christian leaders of differing cultural backgrounds to understand or appreciate one another. Underlying these challenges, profound differences in cultural attitudes and values often are at work. Even when outright conflict does not occur, these disconnects in cultural norms can foster ambivalence within those who have endeavored to engage one another, thereby undermining the development of bonds of solidarity.

Rather than helping to strengthen solidarity, Christian leaders' religious traditions may simply complicate matters. The nature of the Christian faith calls for it to be translated faithfully into every cultural context.²² However, as the gospel is introduced within a given cultural framework, over time the faith communities formed within that culture tend to *reduce* their understanding of the Gospel to that which has resulted from the particular contextual interface of gospel and culture in that setting. Guder suggests that this reduction should not be viewed as a problem, but rather can be understood as “a necessary aspect of our humanness.”²³ Within a multicultural urban environment like Fresno, however, the landscape of church life is marked by complexity because of the presence of a multiplicity of culture-specific expressions of this reductionistic dynamic.

Guder cautions that this reductionistic tendency poses problems when we begin to fall prey to the temptation “to assert that our way of understanding the Christian faith is a final version of Christian truth,” and thereby to “enshrine one cultural articulation of the gospel as the normative statement for all cultures.”²⁴ In reality, this may be motivated by noble intentions, such as a group's desire to be faithful guardians of what it sees as the essence of its faith tradition. However, it also has the potential to hinder the ability of Christian leaders to embrace peers whose faith is embodied in symbols, phraseology, rituals, and modes of expression that have been formed within another cultural community. Not only can Christian leaders experience discomfort with the seeming foreignness of others' culturally formed religious norms, they also might be concerned that engaging with leaders from other traditions threatens to compromise their commitment to the integrity of their own traditions' norms. Thus, even the relationship between faith and culture, when improperly conceived, has the potential to hinder solidarity among Christian leaders within the multicultural city.

The Impact of Affinity Grouping

Second, I have noted that strength of solidarity within any group is influenced by the level of interaction and range of shared activity that participants experience. For those concerned to foster relational unity among a diverse group of

Christian leaders within the city, this poses a significant challenge. Emerson and Smith's *Divided by Faith* provides compelling evidence that American Christians of differing races and cultures continue largely to inhabit and move in distinct, rarely intersecting, social-psychological domains.²⁵ In this environment, faith experience rooted in separation has become quite common, while unity that transcends cultural differences is now an exceptional occurrence.²⁶ This trend tends to be reflected in the choices that Christian leaders make regarding peer-group affiliation and, as a result, adversely impacts the likelihood of these leaders interacting and sharing in significant activities with peers representing other cultural groups.

The German theologian Moltmann insists that human communities demonstrate an innate tendency for “birds of a feather” to “flock together.”²⁷ Evidence of this claim has been displayed vividly throughout American religious history. In recent decades, however, this propensity has been reinforced through the influence of the Church Growth Movement (CGM). Founded by missiologist Donald McGavran and fostered through the influence of theorists like C. Peter Wagner, this movement bore heavily the imprint of modernity. As its name suggests, the CGM's focus has centered upon the priority of “growth.” This movement was founded in the conviction that “growth was a sign of life and was anticipated and even expected by God.”²⁸ In support of the pursuit of growth and progress, the CGM placed a pragmatic emphasis on technique and strategy. As Olson suggests, this entailed a “mechanistic” mindset: “If the church could engineer itself a machine that would serve individuals perfectly, this would provide salvation and a full and happy life.”²⁹

The Homogeneous Unit Principle is a core philosophical concept of the CGM. This principle was born out of McGavran's experiences as a missionary working within the context of India's caste system. McGavran explains that the homogeneous unit (HU) “is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristics in common.”³⁰ He further explains this concept:

Human beings do build barriers around their own societies. More exactly we may say that the ways in which each society lives and speaks,

dresses and works, of necessity set it off from other societies. Mankind is a mosaic and each piece has a separate life of its own which seems strange and often unlovely to men and women of other pieces.³¹

This concept is rooted in the assumption that individuals need a social identity if they are to develop and function in society. Thus, explains Gibbs, “They therefore form themselves into various groups in which they identify themselves as ‘we’, as distinct from those who are outside and described as ‘they’.”³² Each such group cultivates “a particular life-style, language, and assumptions,” “develops its own behavior pattern” and is composed of individuals who “feel at home with one another.”

The HU Principle recognizes these “units” as playing an integral role within the process of church growth. This is reflected in McGavran’s notable assertion: “Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”³³ He insists that the Christian faith “can be communicated across the barriers, over the ditches, and thus built into the other societies, classes, castes, tongues, and segments of humanity.”³⁴ However, by his account, asking people to cross these barriers in coming to Christ constitutes a “stumbling block.”³⁵ He asserts that nothing in Scripture “requires that in becoming a Christian a believer must cross linguistic, racial, and class barriers.”³⁶ “One-people” churches, thus, are not inconsistent with God’s intentions.³⁷ In fact, when judged through the pragmatic lenses of the CGM, if the homogenous church provides a more expedient means to growth than churches committed to bridging cultural divisions can, this approach is actually more desirable.

Through the decades of the 1970s through 1990s, the influence of the CGM in North America continued to expand. With time the homogeneity-based approach came to be applied with narrower and narrower focus, a reality reflected in Wagner’s concept of the “ethclass”.³⁸ The focus on narrow niches was seen as helping to promote growth. Indeed, the dust cover of Wagner’s book praises his work as promising to transform “the statement that ‘11 A.M. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America’ from a millstone around Christian necks into a dynamic tool for assuring Christian growth.”³⁹ In essence, the HU Princi-

ple has provided a philosophical justification for Christians to remain separate from one another on the basis of cultural affinity.

It cannot be emphasized enough how significantly this theoretical perspective has shaped the imagination of many contemporary Christian leaders. Van Gelder notes that, though CGM thinking was largely discredited in the academy by the early 1980s, “Within much of the broader church in the United States today, the ethos of church growth is still very much present.”⁴⁰ As a result, as Roxburgh expresses, many pastors tend to reflect “the cultural values of instrumental rationality, expressed in ‘if it works and is successful then it is true.’”⁴¹

Unfortunately, this philosophical orientation also can discourage pastors from crossing cultural lines to fellowship with other Christian leaders. If one maintains a pragmatic, technique-oriented preoccupation with achieving growth, and if one feels justified in limiting one’s ministry to a culturally homogeneous group, it is perhaps understandable that one would also choose to fellowship with others who are seeking after techniques that will be effective in relation to similar demographic groups. Thus, the influence of the CGM has reinforced, even sanctified, the innate tendency for leaders to limit their interactions mainly to peers with whom they share a cultural affinity.⁴² As Elliot notes, as it encourages Christian leaders to develop a tribal consciousness, the CGM also invites them to shirk ecumenical interactions that will surely “drain away” their energies.⁴³ As a result, the development of solidarity among Christian leaders within a multicultural urban context is undermined.

The Impact of intergroup Dynamics

Third, we have observed above that the strength of solidarity within any group is influenced by the sentiment that exists between its participants. However, it is essential to note that the sentiments that arise between Christian leaders of differing cultures and ethnicities cannot be reduced merely to individual feelings and attitudes. Rather, they are inescapably situated within a larger societal context. This illustrates the distinction that sociologists make between *macrosociological* and *microsociological* perspectives. The macrosociological perspective is concerned with a generalized analysis of the relations between groups on a societal scale. The microsociological perspective involves an ex-

amination of these relationships within particular social groupings of society. An unavoidable interplay exists between the macrosociological and microsociological domains of experience. Even when interactants within group settings strive to depart from patterns of interaction prevalent within society at large, they cannot fully break free from the existence of these patterns.

The No Name Fellowship, the Pastor Clusters, and other groups within the city that exist to bring Christian leaders together constitute microsociological settings. As such, their efforts are complicated by the dynamics of race and culture within the community at large. Thus, even despite their best intentions to foster unity in diversity, these entities cannot escape the implications of the reality that ours remains a highly “racialized society.”⁴⁴ Indeed, many pastors within our community have personally experienced the disappointing and painful impact of these broader macrosociological dynamics of race and culture. This background can influence leaders’ attitudes, feelings, and perceptions toward peers from other cultures even before they have a chance to interact.

Intergroup theory can provide a helpful means for us to consider how our society’s macrosociological reality influences interactions between leaders of differing races and cultures within group settings.⁴⁵ This theory, born out of the European social-psychological tradition, “places a central importance on social identity and accounts for the way that people behave as members of different groups.”⁴⁶ Williams and Nussbaum suggest that “we have an inherent tendency to divide our social world into groups and social categories” and that we “are aware of our own and others’ membership of particular social groups.”⁴⁷ They note that, as soon as we recognize ourselves and others as belonging to distinct groups, we tend to favor those that we see as being part of our own group, regardless of how trivial the perceived distinctions between groups happen to be. At times, this causes individuals to behave as stereotypical “ingroup” members, “emphasizing the attributes that we believe portray who we are and where we belong.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, this tendency to think in terms of group identity causes individuals to categorize those we perceive as different in terms of their “outgroup” membership.

When thinking of ourselves as group members, we tend often to engage in social comparisons in an attempt to assess the standing of our group relative to

others.⁴⁹ This might be motivated by the pursuit of self-esteem, by the desire for a coherent sense of identity, or by a need to establish the meaningfulness of one's experience. The intent in comparing "us" and "them" is to draw conclusions and to achieve a sense of distinctiveness favorable to one's own group; thus, this process tends to result in favoritism toward the ingroup and the denigration of the outgroup. It also can lead to the treatment of others in light of the stereotypes and prejudices associated with their social groups, which often results in negative evaluations, misunderstandings, and conflicts. The tendency to be influenced by such stereotypes is especially strong when interactants have limited personal information about one another. Suggests DeYoung,

When our perceptions do not intersect with those of others through dialogue and shared experiences, we are isolated. When we experience life from an isolated perspective, we have no real knowledge of others. A lack of dialogue and honest sharing with others can result in a de facto segregation. Often isolation is based on a simple lack of information about the lives of others, and this ignorance, if left unaddressed, can reinforce stereotypes and insensitivity.⁵⁰

Sadly, as our perceptions of another group become reduced to the stereotypes we associate with that group, we can fail to view the members of that group in terms of their individuality.

The relevance of intergroup theory for understanding interactions between Christian leaders representing different cultural groups should not be difficult to recognize. Racial and cultural identities are certainly "categorization devices" that Christian leaders might employ when encountering one another. When leaders employ such categories, there is a tendency to associate particular traits and stereotypes with different cultural groups and to amplify our perception of the differences between these groups and our own.⁵¹ These stereotypes tend to be simplified, undifferentiated portrayals of ethnic or cultural groups and are "often erroneous, unrepresentative of reality, and resistant to modification."⁵² In the various contexts in which Christian leaders come together, there is always great potential that interpersonal interactions will actually function as

intergroup in nature and consequences. This can have a detrimental effect on the perceptions and attitudes leaders develop in relation to one another.

When members of a particular group feel threatened by differences between themselves and other groups, this may actually cause them to “shore up” the boundaries between themselves and competing groups “by emphasizing differences.”⁵³ It can motivate the members of a group to employ speech patterns that accentuate the differences (“divergence”) between themselves and the members of other groups, thus rendering productive interaction difficult.⁵⁴ This accentuation of cultural difference and distance can cause the stereotypes that exist between interactants of different cultural or ethnic groups essentially to constitute “depersonalized ‘thing’ categories,” which may result in “I-Thou” relations being subverted by “I-It” dynamics.⁵⁵ When this occurs among Christian leaders of different cultures, it is profoundly injurious to the development of bonds of solidarity.

It is important to recognize that interaction between groups is not guided so much by objective reality as by the attitudes and beliefs influencing people’s subjective perceptions. The real issue is “perceived” differences.⁵⁶ These subjective perceptions may in fact *preinteractionally* influence one’s assumptions about what is possible in interaction across cultural or racial lines. Furthermore, an individual’s subjective perceptions of his or her group’s *vitality*, or social strength, relative to outgroups is another factor that can impact intercultural interaction.⁵⁷ Perceptions of relative vitality can result from comparisons of two or more groups’ influence, demographic force, or status. As Williams and Nussbaum assert, “Subjective vitality is important because it can directly affect intergroup perceptions and intergroup communication regardless of any objective state of affairs.”⁵⁸ Thus, the perception that Christian leaders representing a particular cultural or ethnic group are being disrespected, marginalized, or subjected to inequality can foster competition or conflict that disrupts the solidarity among Christian leaders of diverse cultures.

Clearly, the presence of intergroup dynamics can hinder the development of strong positive sentiments among the members of a multicultural community of Christian leaders. Together with the influence of multiple cultural traditions and the tendency toward affinity grouping, this can undermine solidarity among

Christian leaders of diverse cultures. In turn, this can discourage leaders from coming together to cultivate reconciled relationships and to develop a unified vision for impacting the city.

The Priority of Reconciliation

Up to this point, I have rather exclusively employed socio-cultural categories to describe the sort of dynamics that hinder solidarity among Christian leaders within a complex multicultural environment like Fresno. In addition to this, however, it is essential to acknowledge that these struggles have a theological dimension. In part, they bear the imprint of our fallenness. As Hines and DeYoung assert, “Sin causes polarization and alienation and estranges people from one another. Sin is spiritual apartheid that forces us apart from God and from one another.”⁵⁹ While the presence of alienation and brokenness within the human race may indeed be rooted in ancient origins, Woodley suggests that “Satan has few tools,” and thus recycles them in every generation.⁶⁰ Human brokenness has a way of repeatedly being manifested in hatred, prejudice, and exclusion. Against the backdrop of the challenge presented by our alienation from God and one another, Scripture introduces the theme of reconciliation. Hines and DeYoung note that the term most frequently translated “reconciliation” in the New Testament literally means “to change completely, thoroughly, or radically.”⁶¹ This is made possible by the initiative of God through the redeeming work of Christ at the cross. As Nalunnakkal explains, reconciliation “is a process of God’s Spirit through Jesus Christ...putting an end to enmity of all sorts. In other words, reconciliation is a restoration of relationships that had been lost. It refers to a new relationship between God, humanity and nature, and affected and effected by Christ’s redemptive work on the cross.”⁶² Viewed at the broadest level, this reconciliation is cosmic in scope. It entails “the moral transformation of the world.”⁶³

The New Testament indicates that this cosmic work of God reconciling all things to himself in Christ will not be complete until the final consummation of all things. Nonetheless, Scripture also teaches clearly that reconciliation is a present reality because of what God has done through Christ. Therefore, reconciliation is not merely a future state to be anticipated, but something to be

expressed and experienced within the realm of human relationships. DeGruchy emphasizes “the interpersonal character” of reconciliation and its relationship to “our understanding of both human and social existence.”⁶⁴ He adds that reconciliation “always has to do with personal relationships.”

In Pauline theology, reconciliation refers to the way in which the love of God in Jesus Christ turns enemies into friends, thereby creating peace.⁶⁵ It entails the breaking down of barriers of exclusion and the establishment of peace between individuals or groups of people. It liberates humankind from broken patterns and structures and enables interactants to be made new in accordance with God’s new creation (II Cor. 5:17). In essence, reconciliation is closely linked with the *shalom* that God desires for all of creation.

The interpersonal nature of reconciliation means that it must be embodied within “a community of restored relations.”⁶⁶ Thus, the relationships that exist between Christians factor prominently and powerfully in the biblical vision of reconciliation. The church, having been reconciled to God, is called to be a community of reconciled persons who are actively engaged in the ministry of reconciliation. Through the life of the Christian community, God desires to demonstrate the reconciliation he intends for the world. The church is to exemplify a manner of relating to one another that stands in striking contrast from the patterns of brokenness and alienation native to the world. Within the ranks of this community, worldly divisions are meant to be healed and unity is to be experienced as normative. As Hines and DeYoung express, “Divisions, inequities, and injustice based on age, race, culture, gender, social status, or economic position were removed in Christ.”⁶⁷

Reconciliation, then, constitutes an essential component of what it means for Christians to live in faithfulness to God’s call. To be a Christian, insists DeYoung, “by definition, is to be involved in the ministry of reconciliation.”⁶⁸ It is “God’s priority.”⁶⁹ Thus, in seeing reconciliation as an integral facet of their vision for “seeking the peace of the city,” community groups like the No Name Fellowship and Pastor Clusters truly are aiming to practice the values of the Gospel. The power of this message is displayed when Christian leaders endeavor to come together in reconciled relationships.

The Problems with Homogeneity

Despite God's compelling call to reconciliation, this vision remains largely unrealized among Christian leaders within the complex urban context. Some observers question whether it is truly essential to pursue reconciled relationships across cultural lines as a priority today. For example, Schaller questions whether it is necessary to base our efforts on "how the world should be" when adopting an approach based upon "the trend toward separation as a fact of life" proves more efficient and effective.⁷⁰ McGavran saw the tearing down of dividing walls and the promotion of oneness as part of God's agenda; however, he understood these objectives as subordinate to other more pressing priorities.⁷¹ Perhaps we would do well to share this perspective. Perhaps the pursuit of solidarity among leaders representing diverse cultures is simply too impractical or inefficient. In reality, when we resist God's call to come together to foster reconciled relationships that transcend cultural lines, and choose rather to remain exclusively within our homogeneous affinity groups, several crucial things are at stake. While there are a number of risks that could be named, I will explore three briefly here.

First, the caliber of transformational leadership that is needed in the face of the realities of the urban context can only really be developed when leaders allow themselves to be stretched beyond their comfort zones. Contrary to this, suggests Woodley, the gravitation toward those who are "just like us" invites us to enjoy an experience of faith characterized by comfort.⁷² Frost and Hirsch insist that, when we surround ourselves with people "who are like us, who think the same thoughts, who have the same things, and who want the same things," this "confirms us... It is a form of self-justification."⁷³ Thus, we may be tempted to select affiliations that reflect us without transforming us. As Volf asserts, the "self" is prone to put boundaries around its soul in its effort "to guard the integrity of its territory."⁷⁴ However, this may in fact significantly limit the scope of Christian leaders' personal readiness to engage in God's transformative work of reconciliation amid the challenging realities of urban life.

Second, the tendency to remain within our own cultural affinity groups presents great potential to perpetuate prejudice and reinforce exclusivity. While proponents of the HU Principle insist that it is not intended as a justification

for exclusion or prejudice,⁷⁵ we may be compelled to question whether its assumptions sufficiently challenge the innate tendency toward ethnocentrism. Van Gelder suggests that an inherent flaw in church growth thinking is the assumption of the neutrality of culture.⁷⁶ As a result of this flaw, he suggests, the brokenness evident within society can be seen as normative for the Christian community, as well. As he expresses, the condition of the church being “divided and conflictive in its historical expressions” is “accepted as inevitable, and, for the most part, unresolvable.”⁷⁷

As I have noted above, even apart from the justification that the HU Principle provides, the relationships between Christian leaders of diverse cultures may bear the influence of the “inter-communal antipathies present in the society at large.”⁷⁸ As DeYoung expresses, the church’s experience of community can be limited by “the same walls we construct in society.”⁷⁹ Gustin asserts that “the inherent human tendency to exclusiveness and ethnocentrism” poses a challenge to unity and harmony; it inevitably fosters “distrust, prejudice, and interpersonal division in all its forms.”⁸⁰ Thus, when members of the Christian community consciously follow the lines of division drawn within the broader urban environment, there is great potential that they will simply reinforce rather than heal the city’s wounds.

Some critics insist that prejudice is not only a potential problem for the homogeneous fellowship, but inherent to the very concept. Writing from an indigenous Native American perspective, Woodley assesses the focus on homogeneity as constituting a sophisticated form of “-isms.”⁸¹ Woodley further insists that community established on the basis of division cannot produce true unity.⁸² Rather, participants are forced to seek uniformity. However, uniformity as a means of achieving unity is not only unrealistic, but unhealthy.

Regardless of our intentions, overt rejection or discrimination toward others may not be necessary for homogeneity to cause those from outside of our cultural group to experience exclusion. Simple neglect and insensitivity toward others’ cultural orientations may adequately achieve this. Indeed, a homogeneous experience of the faith has the potential to legitimize the human tendency to be friendly to “our kind of people.” In turn, our circles of relationship can inadvertently become “closed systems.” Moltmann suggests that, when

“birds of a feather flock together... this seems to be the most natural thing in the world” for those who are on the inside. However, he adds, “those on the ‘outside’ feel excluded, degraded, and wounded.”⁸³ Thus, as McNeal asserts, monoculturalism does not reflect the values of God’s kingdom “because it insists that people conform to a cultural standard in order to gain admittance to the religious club.”⁸⁴

Third, the narrowness of perspective that this approach generates may actually hinder the capacity of Christian leaders to negotiate the cultural complexities of the urban context. Homogeneity limits one’s worldview. Frost and Hirsch see this limited perspective evident among Christians whose experience of the faith is characterized by “bland middle-class conformity” and a “stifling monoculture.”⁸⁵ When groups of Christians are composed exclusively of “a nice crowd of saved ‘look-alike, smell-alike, sound-alike’ people,” suggest Hines and DeYoung, “they will not be ready or able to impact the society around them and bring about the kind of change God desires to see in this world.”⁸⁶ This has significant implications for Christian leaders’ capacity to “seek the peace of the city.” If we are going to endeavor to have an impact in a culturally complex environment, maintaining a homogeneous “ghetto mentality” simply cannot be adequate.⁸⁷

The Path of Unity in Diversity

Clearly, it is not sufficient for Christian leaders to remain exclusively within their own cultural affinity groups. The priority of reconciliation remains essential among Christians in today’s urban context. Recognizing this, we may wonder what it will actually take for Christian leaders within a complex multicultural environment to pursue reconciliation and to embody unity. The challenges that hinder solidarity clearly are considerable. Are reconciled relationships truly a practical possibility in today’s city? Can unity truly be achieved in such an environment?

The unity that God desires for the Christian community encompasses a rich and complex diversity. This is evident in the life of the early church. Pentecost was marked by a diverse group of people being blessed by unity. Though the first conflict within the Christian community (Acts 6) was a cultural conflict,

this community remained together. Lohfink urges us to contemplate the improbability of the early church's experience of community:

We should try to imagine how such different people could sit at one table. They were like fire and water. But just there began the miracle of the eschatological people of God. If each one were to remain in his or her own corner and individual house nothing of the reign of God could be seen. Its fascination can only appear when people of different backgrounds, different gifts, different colors, men and women sit together at a single table.⁸⁸

Lohfink further insists that the Christian community in Jerusalem “did not see themselves as a group of like-minded friends and also not as a group of people who had joined because of particular interests; they were a gathering created by God.”⁸⁹ Truly, the unity evident among these first Christians could be described as nothing short of “miraculous” and “one of the most amazing things about the early church.”⁹⁰

The legacy of the early church also helps us to appreciate that the unity God desires for the Christian community is not dependent upon individuals being pressed toward conformity or uniformity. The Acts 15 account of the Jerusalem Council provides compelling evidence that God does not condemn or seek to eradicate cultural differences.⁹¹ This emphasis is reinforced in Galatians 3:26-28. As Eloia observes,

Paul does not envision a community in which differences disappear but one which affirms and celebrates differences...By affirming our differences as members of the human family, we can recognize others as members of the same family, though they may belong to distinct social and ethnic groups. The Galatians passage therefore calls us to affirm the wealth of human diversity; anything less is a violation of the good news.⁹²

Reflecting on the more than thirty occurrences of the metaphor of “the body” to describe the church within the Pauline epistles, Steinke insists that the presence of diversity within the Christian community actually is quite necessary: “When a group is diverse, it is more resourceful, having many ideas, gifts, and functions at work...The church is a gathering of dissimilar parts. It is not necessary that the parts be identical to one another. It is necessary that they be identified with one another.”⁹³ Thus, in the New Testament, we see evidence of a community that gained its strength not from uniformity, but from “unanimity.”⁹⁴

The work of God within the early church remains relevant in today’s complex multicultural urban context, as well. Clearly, cultural differences need not necessarily be barriers to human community. The fact that the goal of bringing Christian leaders together from across the urban environment is complicated by cross-cultural dynamics does not discount the possibility of achieving unity. Even the deepest differences rooted in culture and race do not pose too great a barrier to unity today. As Volf observes, within the body of Christ, “Bodily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed.”⁹⁵ Indeed, explains Volf, the body of Christ “lives as a complex interplay of differentiated bodies—Jewish and gentile, female and male, slave and free—of those who have partaken of Christ’s self-sacrifice.” The Spirit does not erase such “bodily inscribed differences,” but rather allows the people in possession of such differences to participate with joy in the one body of Christ on the same terms.

This recognition presents Christian leaders with an important choice: Will we strive to move toward greater faithfulness to God’s intent or away from it? In reflecting upon the challenges associated with diversity, Driscoll suggests that our choices about diversity will follow either the “Babel” path or the “Pentecost” path. The way that leads toward Babel is paved with “a false gospel that does not call me to love my neighbor and show hospitality toward those who are different from me. This gospel expects that I love only those who are like me and who share my same values and interests.”⁹⁶ The Pentecost path, by contrast, “is God’s attempt at kingdom unity through diversity—hanging out with people unlike me because God has been gracious to us all...This desire leads to the true gospel that calls me to love my neighbors who are unlike me.” Driscoll

insists that the real question for us is not whether we are pursuing diversity, but whether we genuinely are following the gospel of Christ. If we are living in accordance with the Gospel, he asserts, diversity will matter to us because it is meant to flow from the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ. Thus, leaders within our complex urban context should feel compelled not only to tolerate diversity, but also to seek and celebrate it; we should not only accept it, but appreciate it.

The Path of Mutuality

Recognizing this, how are the bonds of unity to be fostered among Christian leaders within a complex urban environment? Above, I introduced the concept of “solidarity” to describe the “glue” by which “group cohesiveness” is maintained within a given society or community.⁹⁷ In addition, I have outlined some of the profound differences that hinder the development of bonds of solidarity among leaders. Foster notes that some theologians have adopted the term solidarity to describe “the dynamics in communities that affirm and embrace these incomprehensible differences as gifts to our common life.”⁹⁸ However, he argues, an even more helpful term might be “mutuality.” As he explains,

In the experience of mutuality different peoples share similar feelings or ideas. It involves an action of reciprocity, of give and take. The goal of mutuality is to have the sense of belonging to one another—of having empathy for the other. The impetus in groups—including congregations—toward the experience of mutuality is powerful. It originates in our human quest to be connected to others, to share a sense of commitment to one another, to be on intimate terms with another. It draws on the persistent assumption that despite our differences we have something in common.

Consistent with the vision of unity articulated above, Foster insists that mutuality within the Christian community cannot be reduced to some cultural “common denominator.” However, if this is so, how can mutuality actually come to be experienced? What will it take to cultivate such mutuality? I would

like to suggest three key “turns” that must be negotiated in the interest of fostering mutuality.

First, amid the multicultural challenges that today’s complex urban context presents, the cultivation of a community of mutuality among Christian leaders is no small task. Indeed, because peace is not something that we work out with those we like or simply a matter of imposing our will on the other, it is not easy to achieve. As Lohfink asserts, the experience of community is not something that can be accomplished by means of human effort:

Where [community] exists it has a share in the great history through which God leads God’s people. Therefore it cannot be ‘made,’ but is created by God alone. Hence also the many disappointed people who came together to make something new for themselves, usually to meet their own needs, only to see the new thing slip through their fingers.⁹⁹

The experience of genuine Christian community can only occur when people are challenged toward an experience of reconciliation that they could not achieve “without God’s supernatural help.”¹⁰⁰ This reconciliation cannot be substituted by human “counterfeits,” such as the “lesser goals” of “integration, accommodation, and tolerance.”¹⁰¹ As Schreiter notes, “reconciliation is not a human achievement, but the work of God within us.”¹⁰² It is a ministry of the Spirit and takes place in the Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians endeavoring to live in faithfulness to God’s call to unity and reconciliation “are empowered to participate in God’s shattering of all barriers.”¹⁰³

Thus, if Christian leaders of diverse cultures are to be formed into communities of mutuality, this will require a fresh turn toward *reliance* upon God. Schreiter believes that reconciliation “is more a matter of spirituality than strategy.”¹⁰⁴ As he explains, “Reconciliation is not mastered, but discovered...Reconciliation is more about attitude than skill, a stance before the broken world rather than a tool to repair that world.” This is not meant to suggest that the pursuit of reconciliation does not entail strategies. The key is for Christians involved in reconciliation “to understand how they interact with the work of God and how they become instruments of God’s work in all of this.”¹⁰⁵ In other

words, they must remain attentive to the relationship between spirituality and strategy:

There is, then, a balance between spirituality and strategy. A spirituality that does not lead to strategies does not fulfill its goal. A strategy that is not based in a spirituality will fall short of the mark. There must be this mutual interaction. In that interaction it is the spirituality that should guide the strategy.¹⁰⁶

Thus, asserts Schreiter “the cultivation of a relationship with God” becomes the basis by which reconciliation can happen.¹⁰⁷ This being so, a movement aimed at facilitating reconciliation among Christian leaders must be founded upon prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit. This has significant implications for groups like the No Name Fellowship and the Pastor Clusters.

Second, in addition to relying upon God, the pursuit of mutuality must entail leaders turning toward one another in *relationship*. This will necessitate that Christian leaders assume an “open” posture toward those they previously have deemed “others.” Indeed, leaders must be willing to open themselves to embrace those whose cultural identity is distinct from their own.¹⁰⁸ Against the backdrop of a history of “otherness,” these parties must turn toward one another for the purpose of “remaking” relationships.¹⁰⁹ If old relational patterns are not changed, the result will be unsatisfying. Reconciliation takes all parties to “a new place.”¹¹⁰

This cannot be merely a hasty peace, a superficial substitute for genuine Christian reconciliation. Hill asserts that the “business of the body of Christ is to build bridges” between diverse groups” and “the wood used for the bridge is the cross of Christ. It is the cross of Christ that brings us together, and it is the life of the cross that we are called to live.”¹¹¹ Thus, as DeGruchy insists, “There is nothing cheap about God’s reconciliation.”¹¹² The reconciliation we are called to pursue can be no less “cheap.” When Christian leaders commit to live in faithfulness to God’s call to bridge divisions, they must be willing to invest time, energy, and resources in unlearning old patterns and in learning the new ways of living that will help to build reconciled relationships. This, too,

has significant implications for how groups like the No Name Fellowship and the Pastor Clusters approach their work.

As leaders from different cultures turn to one another in relationship, they can come to recognize one another as divine agent of blessing or even of challenge. As Moltmann insists, as we accept one another “as Christ has accepted [us],” we are provided “a new orientation,” one that “opens us up for others as they really are so that we gain a longing for and an interest in them.”¹¹³ This moves us beyond friendship “within a closed circle of the faithful and pious,” toward “open friendship” with those who represent different cultural or ethnic backgrounds.¹¹⁴ Pastor Paul Binion, one of the founding members of the No Name Fellowship, illustrates this from his own experience: “I was a very Afrocentric kind of guy, born in a black community, living in a black church, all I wanted was black folk, black, black, black, black, black...And so what the Lord has done is put people in my life who have made me open my perspective.”¹¹⁵

Third, as leaders within the urban context turn afresh to God and one another, they also must strive to turn in *repentance* from those mindsets and behavior patterns that undermine mutuality. As Hines and DeYoung note, it is essential that we identify and address these barriers to reconciliation:

We must repent of everything in our local congregations that would nullify reconciliation and hinder the solidarity that God intends us to have. We must repent of everything that has developed in our communities and regions that cuts us off from this solidarity...We must renounce attitudes, traditions, customs, and structures that embarrass and compromise our testimony of reconciliation and solidarity.¹¹⁶

Unless local groups of Christian leaders are prepared to acknowledge and deal with these unpleasant realities, they will continue to subvert their best intentions to look and be like Christ. However, a commitment to repentance for the sake of rebuilding relationships across cultural and racial lines will come to express itself in a number of key “movements”. I will consider three of these

movements briefly here under the headings of structures, stereotypes, and stories.

First, the rebuilding of reconciled relationships between Christian leaders of diverse cultures will require movement away from *structures* that reinforce barriers between leaders and movement toward the development of new structures to help leaders come together. As Lohfink expresses, “The communion of believers thus is not something that is merely spiritual and intellectual. It must be embodied. It needs a place, a realm in which it can take shape.”¹¹⁷ It is in gathering together that Christians are able to experience reconciliation; it offers a context “where solutions allowing for a new beginning can be found.”¹¹⁸ Thus, in order for leaders to cultivate reconciled relationship that span cultural and racial lines, groups like the No Name Fellowship and the Pastor Clusters must be intentional about actually finding ways to get leaders from diverse communities to spend meaningful time together.

Second, as leaders from across the urban cultural landscape come together, the commitment to rebuilding reconciled relationships will call for movement away from all *stereotypes* that adversely impact community among God’s people and movement toward new ways of defining the “other.”¹¹⁹ This change in perspective is facilitated in part by leaders humbly coming to view themselves and one another in light of their shared human-ness. In essence, we are united in a solidarity of sin; there are no innocents.¹²⁰ As DeGruchy notes, as fallen humans, we share “an ‘ethical solidarity’, but it is one of ethical failure.”¹²¹ Thus, we cannot be divided into neat categories of victims and violators.

Furthermore, this change in perspective is facilitated by the recognition that we have been called to a renewed identity as one, new humanity in Christ. Old group identities are superseded by our new citizenship and new family identity. Our new identity in Christ calls us beyond “clean” identities that group “us” over against “them”.¹²² The reality that we bear this new identity makes it possible for Christian leaders within the complex urban environment to adopt both an evangelical personality, one that has been “brought to repentance and shaped by the Gospel,” and a catholic personality, one that is enriched rather than threatened by the culture of the other.¹²³

In turn, this also has the potential to transform the damaging intergroup dynamics that sometimes exist among Christians of different cultures. As I noted above, these dynamics can cause the members of differing cultural groups to develop an “I-It” posture in relating to one another. These dynamics are evident within the Christian community, just as they are within the community at large. However, observes Elolia, the “‘other’ is not to be an ‘it,’ which connotes both detachment and depersonalization, but rather a ‘thou,’ which expresses the dignity of human personhood for the other.”¹²⁴ Thus, the Gospel of reconciliation calls Christian leaders to discover one another, not as one-dimensional, impersonal stereotypes, but as unique persons of worth made in the image of God. In essence, it provides the “antidote to dehumanization.”¹²⁵

Third, the effort to rebuild relationships among Christian leaders within the complex urban context also must entail a movement away from bondage to *stories* of brokenness and the movement toward the creation of new stories. In part, this is a backward-looking task focused upon healing the memories of past disappointments and wounds. As Volf expresses, a memory of exclusion “is itself a form of exclusion...In my memory of the other’s transgression the other is locked in unredeemption and we are bound together in a relationship of nonreconciliation.”¹²⁶ Certainly, as has been suggested above, many Christian leaders have personally experienced the sting of prejudice and cultural division. This can be the source of lasting resentment and grief. Movement beyond these memories will not be accomplished through denying the particular history of what has occurred. Furthermore, it is not merely something that can be achieved “intrapsychically,” within oneself. Rather, it must be expressed “intersubjectively” in relationship with others.¹²⁷

In order for this to occur, however, groups like the No Name Fellowship and the Pastor Clusters must provide opportunity for leaders to come together to function as communities of memory. As Schreiter explains, a community of memory is “a place where a people can come to common memory of the past... For a past truly to be overcome, people must come to a common memory of it. Otherwise the divisions of the past are perpetuated in the present.”¹²⁸ Common memory is formed as participants retell the stories of what has happened in the past and how they have been impacted personally by this history. With time,

the community can experience healing as it discovers the connection between these narratives of brokenness and the redemptive narrative of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.¹²⁹

However, if groups of Christian leaders are to experience the rebuilding of reconciled relationships, they cannot remain oriented solely to the past. Rather, these multicultural communities of Christian leaders must strive to cooperate in writing a new story together. As the participants in these groups share in one another's lives, they can learn to listen to one another and care for each another. They can learn to value and share their differences. While these leaders have perhaps found it difficult to communicate meaningfully with one another in the past, they now will have the opportunity to "develop a new language that expresses both [their] diversity as well as [their] unity in order to build the kind of community that can rightly be called the Body of Christ."¹³⁰ Furthermore, they can learn to see life through one another's eyes. As Hines and DeYoung suggest, "We can use aspects of our own life in tandem with a disciplined listening ear to gain a sense of what others are experiencing. We must gain points of reference for understanding if we are going to create lasting, meaningful relationships."¹³¹

Joining together in mission will provide a powerful basis for Christian leaders of diverse cultures to write a new story together. Lohfink insists that unanimity is achieved when Christians "allow themselves to be united in favor of something that is beyond themselves: the will of God, God's work, God's gospel, the history that God has begun in the world."¹³² In reflecting upon the relationship between mission and unity in the New Testament, Lohfink observes that "Paul made the 'common work' (*ergon*) the 'core which guaranteed unity.'"¹³³ Thus, a commitment to shared mission can in fact be "a major method for maintaining unity."¹³⁴ As Gustin explains, by focusing on our shared mission,

[W]e find unity of purpose and action that ties us together in a very practical and deeply meaningful way....Mission unites people at a deep level that allows for an underlying unity that does not require some kind of outer uniformity...We come to realize that the things that unite us are greater than those that divide us.¹³⁵

Thus, the unifying impact of biblical mandates like the call to “seek the peace of the city” (Jer. 29:7) can enable Christian leaders to discover that they are indeed “brothers and sisters of those who are completely different from [themselves].”¹³⁶ In this regard, groups like No Name Fellowship and the Pastor Clusters potentially have a powerful contribution to make in bringing leaders together to develop shared vision, goals, and action.¹³⁷

At times, a commitment to relating and working together across cultural lines will be uncomfortable and challenging. It will require Christian leaders to learn to sacrifice their preferences for one another. However, this can be a profound expression of the freedom that each leader possesses as a follower of Christ. As Schmiechen expresses, “Freedom is always the freedom to be in Christ and with one another. Life with one another is not something added on to liberated persons; life together is the purpose of our liberation.”¹³⁸ Thus, rather than asserting their own cultural preferences, Christian leaders can learn to live in accordance with the “Titanium Rule”: “Do unto others, keeping their preferences in mind.”¹³⁹ Indeed, this commitment to submit to one another in diversity can be far more powerful than illegitimate unity.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

The challenges associated with cultivating mutuality within a diverse community of leaders can seem imposing. As John Perkins expresses, “As Christians come together to solve the problems of their community, the great challenge will be to partner and witness together across these barriers [of race and culture].”¹⁴¹ However, God can handle the risks associated with diversity.¹⁴² Thus, we should not fear it. When we are defined by our faith, rather than our fears, we will grow together: “Fear hardens lives and closes borders. Faith calls us to see the world through the eyes of God’s vision for the world—a vision of the goodness of creation, humanity created in God’s image, interdependent, praising God, and pursuing justice and peace.”¹⁴³ By finding the faith-filled courage to turn their hearts toward God, one another, and a shared future, Christian leaders within the family of faith can discover the depth of mutuality and breadth of impact that God intends. As Swanson and Williams express, we are able to contribute to the transformation of the city when “the church in the

city is intent on becoming exactly what God wants it to be—a visible, united presence that seeks the city’s good.”¹⁴⁴

NOTES

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- 4 For more information about the purpose and work of the No Name Fellowship, please visit www.nonamefellowship.com.
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- ²⁵ Michael O. Emerson & Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
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- ³² Eddie Gibbs. *I Believe in Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981:116).
- ³³ McGavran, 223.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 225.
- ³⁵ Ibid, 242.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 230.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 239.
- ³⁸ C. Peter Wagner. *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1979:61).
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- ⁴¹ Alan J. Roxburgh. *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997:20).
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- ⁴⁷ Ibid, 8.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
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