

Untold Stories: The Latinx Leadership Experience in Higher Education

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PETER RIOS

Untold Stories: The Latinx Leadership Experience in Higher Education is a timely, accessible, yet rigorous, exploration of the experiences of Latinx leaders in Christian Higher Education (CHE), by Dr. Peter Rios, a former vice president and other high-level administrator in CHE as well as the founder of Peter Rios Consulting, a Spanish-English bilingual firm that focuses on leadership development, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and innovation. It is a volume that is simultaneously qualitative and quantitative in its methodology and holds storytelling at its center to humanize what Rios refers to as a crisis in CHE. Drawing on questions raised in Leonard Savala's "The Experiences of Latina/o Executives in Higher Education," Rios' research seeks to explore these questions within the framework of CHE. Rios' primary research employs ethnographic interviewing that is attentive and empathetic to the perspectives of current and former Latinx leaders in CHE while being scathing in its criticism of CHE's refusal to respond to demographic shifts, address injustice, and condemn white supremacist, colonialist and patriarchal theology and praxis, all of which, Rios argues, undermine the Christian mission of CHE. Despite these critiques, Rios is cautiously optimistic about CHE's potential for transformation, which he asserts must come from the highest levels of its leadership.

Untold Stories uses macro and micro approaches to analysis in order to examine CHE and to call attention to racial, ethnic and gender disparities that exist within CHE institutions, particularly within the highest levels of leadership. Rios begins the book by recounting his own experiences as a child of immigrants and a first-generation college student, tracing his trajectory from a student within CHE into the highest levels of leadership. Rios emphasizes the importance of his faith in his personal and professional life trajectory. His love for CHE and his belief in its potential to transform the lives of students and the world around them is apparent. Without this personal investment and an unshakeable belief in the power of a Christian faith that is rooted in liberation, Rios might write off CHE as a lost cause.

Using a woven structure that simultaneously provides a historical, socio-cultural and theological context alongside Latinx CHE leadership narratives that

were collected over the course of several years, Rios offers a holistic framework for understanding the current state of CHE, which he argues embodies the values of white dominance rather than the teachings of Jesus. In addition, he presents a framework for celebrating and advocating for Latinx theologies, denominational backgrounds, and leadership values of service, relationship building, and collaboration that are ignored and diminished within the majority culture of CHE. Rios argues that in this socio-political moment that many CHE institutions are not just ambivalent to the value of DEI, but are actively hostile to it because they view it as secularization. He argues that a lack of diversity in CHE can be attributed to this hostility to DEI as well as to the lack of Latinx representation in the staff, faculty and administration. Institutions that mean well and give lip service to the value of DEI, but do not take any meaningful corrective and reparative action, are not let off the hook.

Rios' engagement with existing scholarship is robust and provides CHE practitioners seeking to take corrective and reparative action with ample resources for theory and praxis. Throughout the book, Rios draws from scholars and theologians like Miguel de la Torre, Paul Ortiz, Michael Bastedo and highlights important praxis like Juana Borda's ten Latino leadership principles. This curation of Latinx scholarship, theology and praxis, is one of the most valuable takeaways from his work.

While Rios and the interview participants provide theological grounding and on-the-ground strategies for recruiting and retaining Latinx leaders, only one of the participants that was interviewed for *Untold Stories* still holds a leadership position within CHE. The remainder of the participants chose to take positions in non-religious higher education institutions or to work outside academia all together. They cited lack of support and mentorship, denominational discrimination, gaslighting, and diminishment of micro-aggressions and overt expressions of racism. Rios himself left CHE for industry and non-religious institutions, perhaps believing that he would have a greater influence on CHE leadership, providing practical strategies for lasting change from the outside.

Untold Stories is a cautionary tale, a celebration of the value of Latinx leadership, an example of ground-breaking research, and a prophetic call to action. *Untold Stories* maintains that nothing less than the fate of CHE is at stake and that its survival depends on not just an acknowledgement of the value and importance of DEI or even a willingness to admit wrongdoing, but on a divine

mandate to dismantle systems of oppression and to create new ones through reparative action undertaken by committed, diverse, and spiritually led coalitions of CHE leadership.

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Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community Without Judgmentalism

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Some books leave the reader wondering “Does this really work?” Not so with Mark Baker’s *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community Without Judgmentalism*. The book leaves little room for doubt. As demonstrated in Baker’s experience and research across the Americas – North, South, and Central, the centered-set model of congregational life has yielded abundant fruit over time and in a wide variety of settings. If more robust Christian discipleship and more vital congregations are the goal, then *Centered-Set Church* offers an inviting, even compelling, vision for church renewal.

The book’s central image is derived from the late missionary anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert’s creative work with bounded and centered-set churches, a concept borrowed from mathematical set theory. In brief, bounded churches have clear boundaries which determine who is in and out; fuzzy churches have less clear boundaries and emphasize tolerance; centered-set churches define their center, but instead of focusing on boundaries, they rely on directional and relational clues to ascertain who is oriented toward or away from the center.

Baker gives generous credit to Hiebert, whose work offered him a fresh way to understand the dynamics of Christian transformation. He also credits his own lifelong journey through a variety of faith communities – evangelical, charismatic, anabaptist, as well as in academia, for alerting him to the potential of centered-set churches for creating healthy environments for growth. He wrote the book for practitioners because he has “seen and experienced the shame and alienation produced by bounded churches, the blandness of fuzzy churches, and the liberating transformation through Jesus Christ of centered churches” (15).

A notable contribution of the book is its artful blend of theory and practice. Baker develops a sturdy biblical-theological foundation for centered-set congregational life and goes on to discuss a variety of practical implications for leadership, teaching and preaching, Christian formation, and church discipline. He argues that a congregation’s vision and images of God are crucial for shaping its model of ministry and asserts that centered-set churches have a

radically different theology of God, rooted in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' story of the prodigal in Luke 15 and Pauline writings regarding the church are the centerpiece of his grace-filled ecclesial theology. Rather than a God of judgment whose love we must earn (bounded churches) or a God with few expectations (fuzzy churches), the God of centered churches is a God of love who is always at work bringing about a new creation.

Baker also describes a different role for belief and ethics in the centered-set paradigm. Doctrine is described as "life-giving well water" (81) that provides sustenance and refreshment for the journey to the center and ethics as a gift that "enables love to thrive" (84). By contrast, a bounded church tends to focus on maintaining fences around the well, making sure everyone stays on the ride side of the fence. The essential difference is that bounded paradigms emphasize separation; centered paradigms emphasize connection.

Because the pulsing center of the book is how centered-set congregations nurture active transformation into Christlikeness, the largest section of the book is Part Three: "Discipleship in Community." Baker mines his research to offer excerpts from interviews and observations derived from his visits to centered-set churches. Readers will appreciate his emphasis that there is not one "right" way of being a centered church; rather, a variety of centered responses to similar situations is possible. Among the topics he addresses are the use of directional, rather than bounded, language; developing character traits of compassion, curiosity, trust, humility and vulnerability; practicing loving and affirmative intervention; and proactive formation of disciples.

A couple of chapters focus on aspects of congregational life, such as membership, evangelism, addiction recovery, ministry with the homeless, children's ministry, or leadership requirements, that seem inherently bounded. While not ignoring the potential tensions involved, Baker charts a creative, relational path that is firm, yet not bounded, with explicit expectations and clear communication. He acknowledges that leaders must be prepared to engage their own fuzzy or bounded tendencies in order to successfully guide others on the journey to the center with its gift of unconditional love.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the centered-set paradigm is not congregations but leaders themselves. Unless leaders have been transformed by the love of Christ and have the capacity to imagine alternatives to both bounded and

fuzzy models, they will not be able to lead others on the journey to the center. Leaders will need accountability structures of their own, such as spiritual friendship or spiritual direction, to support them on their own journeys amidst the distractions and temptations of power or hectic schedules or external expectations. Remaining aligned with the center means living with growing trust in God's Spirit to bring about the congregational renewal God desires, not a shallow or anemic substitute.

Baker identifies several areas of congregational life which he did not address, such as worship, rituals, pastoral care, conflict resolution, fundraising, and community service. He affirms, "Everything that any church or ministry does merits the question, 'How can we do this in a more centered way?'" (193). Perhaps he or others will continue these explorations to offer a more complete vision.

For leaders who want to understand the centered-set church better or to guide their congregations toward such a vision, Baker has produced a set of five teaching videos available at <https://www.centeredsetchurch.com/>. These resources encourage churches to turn from bounded or fuzzy approaches to a Jesus-centered approach bearing the fruits of justice, righteousness and peace.

In a time of diminished significance for organized religion, Baker's book offers a way forward. With passion and clarity, he succeeds in articulating a generous, inclusive, transforming vision of congregational life that is faithful to the way of Jesus. The compassionate spirituality and authentic community of the centered-set paradigm could herald a new day for the church of the 21st century.

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