Polycentric Leadership for Kingdom Movements (Part I)

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2022

Abstract

One of the simplest definitions for a Kingdom Movement is that proposed by David Garrison in looking at Church Planting Movements: "a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment" (Garrison 2004, 21). Over the years, the terminology has changed but in essence Garrison's definition captures the basic construct of these types of movements. The growth of literature about how these movements flourish is remarkable (Cole 2020; Lim 2017). While leadership approaches are reflected in these studies, the focus could be strengthened. In addition, while general missional leadership theories relate, they do not necessarily bring full attention to leading these types of multiplying movements. Perhaps the closest approach would be Mike Breen's book *Leading Kingdom Movements*. He posits a biblical framework for disciple making encouraging leaders to invest in others by expanding their scope of influence—but still more can be explored (Breen 2015).

This article draws on recent research on Polycentric Mission Leadership highlighting an approach worth further contemplation and study (Handley 2018; 2020). The research conveyed in the article unfolds with movement theory, a "team of teams" construct, collaboration and partnership, CUBE theory and systems leadership, and targeted interviews. Ultimately, polycentric leadership is offered as a new theoretical model for leadership. Polycentric leadership is a collaborative, communal approach to leadership that empowers multiple centers of influence as well as a diverse array of leaders. The article claims that polycentric leadership is well suited to addressing contemporary issues and to leading Kingdom Movements during this era of a globalization.

Key Words: collaboration, Lausanne Movement, leadership, movements, partnership, polycentricity

Introduction

This issue of *Global Missiology* highlights the importance of Kingdom Movements in mission today. Leadership within these movements is something that increasingly will need to be reviewed. This article, after considering a wide variety of relevant material, points to a new theoretical model of leading mission movements. While Mike Breen does an admirable job, perhaps the best so far, of constructing a biblical framework for disciple making (Breen 2015), this article highlights elements of a "Polycentric Mission Leadership" model that gives further dimension to the concept of leadership within mission movements (Handley 2018; 2020).

Movement Theory

To discern leadership for Kingdom Movements, a better understanding of movement theory is important. Esler posited a "General Integrated Movement Attribute Model" which focused on resource mobilization (Esler 2012):

> Resource mobilization theory suggests that movement organization is a dominant feature of a movement. Evaluation of a movement must therefore include and broaden the scope

> of our study to include organizational culture. Understanding the missionary agency as an organization bent on forming religious movements opens up the possibility that organizational theory can be applied to the study of movements (Esler 2012, 65).

In coming to this model of movement theory, Esler surveyed studies from "New Social Movements" and "Social Movement Organizations." He sought wisdom from these models and theories to better understand how church planting movements could be effective. According to Blumer,

> Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes of a new system of living. The career of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life (Blumer 1969, 99).

Hanciles noted that "[Movements] do not have a commander and chief. There is no one person who can claim to speak for the movement as a whole, any more than there is one group that represents the movement. Movements are actually 'polycentric' or 'polycephalous' with multiple leaders" (Hanciles 2009, 40-47). Thus leadership in flourishing movements is shared or collaborative.

Esler added, though, that religious movements do not necessarily form from a position of unrest (Esler 2012, 23). As Bainbridge states, "A religious movement is a relatively organized attempt by a number of people to cause or prevent change in a religious organization or in religious aspects of life. Religious movements have some similarities with political, cultural, and social movements, in that they are collective human attempts to create or to block change" (Bainbridge 1996, 3).

Esler's particular interest was reviewing sodality movements, leaning on missiologists like Roland Allen, Donald McGavran, and David Garrison. In relation to leadership and the suggestion by Hanciles above about collaborative leadership, Esler discovered an interesting conflict. While such observations as those cited earlier point to a multiplicity of leaders for a movement, Paul Pierson suggested that "breakthroughs, expansion, renewal movements and the like are almost always triggered by a key person" (Pierson 2009, 135-149). Esler surmises that a reconciliation may be in the form of the leader purely as a "catalyst or lightening rod" rather than as the sole leader of the movement (Esler 2012, 52). Hesselgrave, McGavran, and Reed, on the other hand, seem to be more in line with the idea flowing from Social Movement Theory. They suggest that the role of the leader is not as important as the people within the movement (Hesselgrave et al. 1978, 318).

Steve Addison added new dimension to understanding movements in his *Pioneering Movements: Leadership that Multiplies Disciples and Churches*. He highlights the important role that movements play in bringing about change: "For better or for worse, movements create and remake the world we live in. If we want to change the world, we must understand movements. In simple terms, a movement is a group of people committed to changing the world. The spheres of politics, science, culture and faith are shaped and remade by movements" (Addison 2015, 15). He goes on to identify five levels of leadership in multiplying movements. These are "seed sellers, church planters, church multipliers, multiplication trainers, and movement catalysts" (Addison 2015, 95). In other words, leaders start, build, multiply, train, and catalyze for growth to foster a

movement. Addison then defines the key roles for movement leaders: "Their job is to 1) seed discontent with the status quo, 2) cast a vision of what God could do, and 3) provide simple but profound methods to get people started and help them remain on track" (Addison 2015, 141).

These same traits can be found in Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright's book *Tribal Leadership*. They posit that there is synergy between leaders and their tribe. The stronger the bonds between them, the stronger the movement. "This is how Tribal Leadership works: the leader upgrades the tribe as the tribe embraces the leader. Tribes and leaders create each other" (Logan et al. 2011,184). These authors' observation affirms Esler's research that key to catalyzing Kingdom Movements is resource mobilization. These movements begin with mobilization of people toward a common cause and strengthen when a community forms to achieve that same purpose.

Esler elaborates on the structures necessary to foster movements. He highlights the importance of developing a *bricolage*—referring to innovation and improvisation when building something new—as a fresh way to form cooperatives. He suggests that a "coalition pools resources and coordinates plans, while keeping distinct organizational identities" (Esler 2012, 93-95). Kingdom Movements thus draw from a variety of groups or networks and work collectively to achieve more together than they could alone. Social Movement theorist Schein provides further dimensions emphasizing the importance of drawing from multiple people within networks to foster momentum for a movement:

> For diversity to be a resource… the subculturals must be connected and must learn to value each other enough to learn something of each other's culture and language. A central task for the learning leader, then, is to ensure good cross-cultural communication and understanding throughout the organization. Creating diversity does not mean letting diverse parts of the system run on their own without coordination. Laissez-faire leadership does not work, because it is in the nature of subgroups and subcultures to protect their own interests. To optimize diversity therefore requires some higher-order coordination mechanisms in mutual cultural understanding (Schein 1985, 143-144).

Cultural acuity is also critical in leading across global platforms. Esler points out: "In a bricolage organization, in which numerous cultures are cooperating for the same objective, the context becomes much more important. It is the very 'richness' of this context that makes diversity desirable. It also may lead to insider-outside dynamics because only those who understand the context are able to participate effectively" (Esler 2012, 220).

In sum, Esler notes the crucial nature of resource mobilization, hints at the importance of structures to facilitate that movement, and finally highlights the need for cultural acumen to lead these movements and structures well. These structures and approaches are key parts to a polycentric approach to leadership. They highlight the themes of collaboration among diverse agents and from a variety of places (Handley 2021, 231) that are vital to leading well within Kingdom Movements. Implied within the mobilization construct is the importance of charisma to rally the troops, though that charism is not exclusively motivational in nature from the research. More importantly, it is the value of trustworthiness or strength of character that polycentric leadership draws upon that inspires people to follow (Handley 2021, 230).

Team of Teams

In 2015, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal partnered with researchers from Yale University to uncover some of the key aspects of leadership in the current era of global complexity. He used the fight against the Al Qaeda network as a key case study. McChrystal argued that "to succeed, maybe even to survive, in the new environment, organizations and leaders must fundamentally change. Efficiency, once the sole icon on the hill, must make room for adaptability in structures, processes, and mindsets that is often uncomfortable" (McChrystal 2015, loc 218).

I found the synthesis provided by McChrystal and his fellow authors to be the most comprehensive among the material I reviewed. The transitions the U.S. military must address in fighting terrorist movements like Al Qaeda contain many parallels to leading in the context of our globally connected, diverse missional world today. Leading Kingdom Movements has much to learn from McChrystal.

According to McChrystal, the U.S. military has been the single most efficient, prepared, and powerful force in the world. Yet, with all their power and proficiency, they could not defeat Al Qaeda: "We were stronger, more efficient, more robust. But AQI was agile and resilient. In complex environments, resilience often spells success, while even the most brilliantly engineered fixed solutions are often insufficient or counterproductive" (McChrystal 2015, loc 1423-1424).

McChrystal and his team point out that the United States' military framework was built on the successes of the Industrial Revolution, particularly the influence of Frederick Taylor. Taylor set in motion many of the innovations of what some may call America's greatest century. By honing the science of management to the greatest possible efficiencies, industry was never again the same. Peter Drucker argued that "without Taylor's innovations, America would have been unable to defeat the Nazis" (McChrystal 2015, loc 852). And historian Jeremy Rifkin noted, "[Taylor] probably had a greater effect on the private and public lives of the men and women of the twentieth century than any other single individual" (McChrystal 2015, loc 917).

The top-down, fixed-solution style of leadership was prominent in the past. Many leadership books highlighted the role of the CEO, the Senior Pastor, or General Manager. McChrystal offered that this type of leadership had strengths and weaknesses. It led to more goods being produced in a faster time for less cost. However, "This new world [of conflict with Al-Qaeda] required a fundamental rewriting of the rules of the game. In order to win, we would have to set aside many of the lessons that millennia of military procedure and a century of optimized efficiencies had taught us" (McChrystal 2015, loc 971). He continued, "These events and actors were not only more interdependent than in previous wars, they were also faster. The environment was not just complicated, it was complex" (McChrystal 2015, loc 1127).

Leadership in this complex environment is needed to adapt and empower local teams to take ownership of the local context. Information must be shared more broadly rather than held among a few at the top of the command chain. The dynamics that created the most powerful and devastating military force in the world became hindrances to the success of the mission! McChrystal states, "Frederick Taylor's managerial solutions were unequivocally designed for complicated problems rather than complex ones" (McChrystal 2015, loc 1287). The world of warfare had become more than just complicated—it was becoming exponentially complex.

Wei-Skillern, Ehrlichman, and Sawyer capture the essence of McChrystal's ideas well in their *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article, "The Most Impactful Leaders You've Never Heard Of":

> Rather than leading with a top-down approach, network entrepreneurs focus on creating authentic relationships and building deep trust from the bottom up. This focus on relationship-building costs relatively little yet ultimately makes a tremendous difference in impact. Network entrepreneurs ensure that the power of others grows while their own power fades, thereby developing capacity in the field and a culture of distributed leadership that dramatically increases the collaboration's efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. These individuals foster unique cultures and values among their networks that enable those networks to sustain and scale impact (Wei-Skillern, Ehrlichman, and Sawyer 2015, 1-2).

McChrystal realized that the U.S. military's leadership needed a new approach—hence his essay, "It Takes a Network to Defeat a Network" (McChrystal 2015, loc 1581). He later suggested, "cooperative adaptability is essential to high-performing teams" (McChrystal 2015, loc 1702). He argued that a decentralized structure is better designed for this type of environment: "Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' of the market—the notion that order best arises not from centralized design but through the decentralized interactivity of buyers and sellers—is an example of 'emergence'. In other words, order can emerge from the bottom up, as opposed to being directed, with a plan, from the top down" (McChrystal 2015, loc 1948-1955).

Given these realities, the U.S. military instituted a systems approach where information was shared broadly. It was less efficient, but it created a more holistic awareness and allowed them to operate as a "team of teams." McChrystal cites the research of Sandy Pentland from MIT, who found that "sharing information and creating strong horizontal relationships improves the effectiveness" (McChrystal 2015, loc 3576).

McChrystal also notes that speed in decision making is crucial in the field of contemporary warfare, where situations are too complex to wait for decisions from above:

> We found that, even as speed increased and we pushed authority further down, the quality of decisions actually went up. We had decentralized on the belief that the 70 percent solution today would be better than the 90 percent solution tomorrow. But we found our estimates were backward—we were getting the 90 percent solution today instead of the 70 percent solution tomorrow (McChrystal 2015, loc 3889).

Before considering McChrystal's conclusions, it is important to note the research conducted by J. Richard Hackman, the Edgar Pierce Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University and one of the world's leading experts on teamwork. Hackman observed, "Research consistently shows that teams underperform, despite all the extra resources they have. That's because problems with coordination and motivation typically chip away at the benefits of collaboration." To counteract this reality, Hackman suggested five conditions for effective teamwork:

> *1: Teams must be real.* People have to know who is on the team and who is not. It's the leader's job to make that clear.
>
> *2: Teams need a compelling direction.* Members need to know, and agree on, what they're supposed to be doing together. Unless a leader articulates a clear direction, there is a real risk that different members will pursue different agendas.
>
> *3: Teams need enabling structures.* Teams that have poorly designed tasks, the wrong number or mix of members, or fuzzy and unenforced norms of conduct invariably get into

trouble.

4: Teams need a supportive organization. The organizational context—including the reward system, the human resource system, and the information system—must facilitate teamwork.

5: Teams need expert coaching. Most executive coaches focus on individual performance, which does not significantly improve teamwork. Teams need coaching as a group in team processes—especially at the beginning, midpoint, and end of a team project (Coutu 2009).

Hackman's suggestions regarding teamwork help to frame how McChrystal concludes his book with insightful nuggets of wisdom for leadership in a modern complex era:

> Effective adaptation to emerging threats and opportunities requires the disciplined practice of empowered execution. Individuals and teams closest to the problem, armed with unprecedented levels of insights from across the network, offer the best ability to decide and act decisively… The doctrine of empowered execution may at first glance seem to suggest that leaders are no longer needed. That is certainly the connection made by many who have described networks such as AQI as "leaderless." But this is wrong. Without Zarqawi, AQI would have been an entirely different organization. In fact, due to the leverage leaders can harness through technology and managerial practices like shared consciousness and empowered execution, senior leaders are now more important than ever, but the role is very different from that of the traditional heroic decision maker (McChrystal 2015, loc 3980, 4030).

These insights are pertinent for leading Kingdom Movements. Adaptability, collaboration, and empowerment are central themes in the research findings. Beyond collaboration, the formation of movements and teams requires a communal and relational form of leadership that is core to polycentric leadership (Handley 2021, 231, 233). Building on these "team of teams" themes, in dynamic interplay with the insights from movement theory, can provide a roadmap for leading Kingdom Movements.

Collaboration and Partnership

In looking at the history of the Lausanne Movement, Doug Birdsall made an interesting observation: "Consensus on a common goal is perhaps the most obvious ingredient for both intra- and inter-organizational collaboration. Individuals and organizations are unlikely to work in partnership if their goals are not in alignment and mutually beneficial" (Birdsall 2012, 75). This insight highlights the importance of collaboration and partnership for leading a movement.

Before delving into the nuances of how groups can work together, it is important to understand why we should consider working together. Simon Sinek makes this point clear in his *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (originally a TED Talk. He notes that when leaders start with the *how* or the *what*, they lose most of their audience; but, when a leader starts with the *why*, people follow (Sinek 2011).

In his book *Well Connected*, Phill Butler points out that what attracts people and keeps them committed to a partnership are 1) great vision and 2) seeing results (Butler 2006, 41). According to Butler, once potential partners have a compelling reason to work together and a desire for strong results, they must build trust: "All durable, effective partnerships are built on trust and whole

relationships" (Butler 2006, 51). There must be trust between the people, the processes, and the plans for effective partnership to develop. The involvement of multiple parties highlights the value of a leader who can galvanize support and build strong relational equity across multiple sectors of an alliance. Leading a movement is significantly different from leading a company that does not have many stakeholders. It *is* similar, perhaps, to leading a modern university.

I was once in a meeting with a key stakeholder and the president of a particular Christian university. As the stakeholder pushed the president to move the university toward a particular cause, the president wisely mentioned that leading a university was not like leading this stakeholder's company. Vision could not be pushed from the top but rather needed to bubble up through the faculty and various departments of the university. In a similar fashion, leading a movement requires the skills to mobilize people—as Esler has noted as well as the teamwork that McChrystal has advocated.

Jopling and Crandall's research, conducted through the U.K. *National College for School Leadership,* supplements these ideas about collaboration and leadership by highlighting the importance for leaders to listen. "Perhaps the most critical thing for leaders to do is listen well to their followers, for it is they who will carry the burden of bringing the network to life and realizing its intent. Structuring meaningful dialogue and framing questions that elicit felt concerns and make explicit the perspectives of the followers are essential to successful network leadership" (Jopling and Crandall 2006, 5). To listening skills they add the value of facilitation: "Network leaders act as cross-cultural brokers, drawing on expertise, evidence and knowledge from outside and, increasingly, inside the network. I think as a facilitator you just help things to happen, to take place, where I think as a leader, you have to drive them much more, and there are times when you do both" (Jopling and Crandall 2006, 11).

More important than these various traits for missional partnerships, however, is what Butler emphasizes:

> Spiritual breakthroughs are not a game of guns and money. No human effort, expenditure of resources, or brilliant strategy will alone produce lasting spiritual change. Our partnerships must be informed and empowered by God's Holy Spirit in order to be effective. The challenges of relationships, cultural and theological differences, technical and strategic issues, and sustainability can only be dealt with in a process rooted in prayer (Butler 2006, 101).

This emphasis on prayer and God's necessary role resonates with Esler's perspective. As Esler reviewed Kingdom Movements and the effort to lead them, he noted that church planting movements are distinctly different from other social movements. Far more than just human agency is involved. God is the One moving in history. It is in following his lead that people can be effective at building the type of collaboration that will foster authentic partnership.

Butler's point also relates to the roles of a facilitator that Jopling and Crandall note above. These roles include:

- Demonstrate a heart and spirit of maturity, clearly committed to Christ and his Kingdom.

- Demonstrate a sense of urgency about the vision on the leader's heart—whether it is a neighborhood, a special sector of people in your city, or an unreached people group in a distant location.

• Demonstrate knowledge about what is involved in successful collaboration.

• The leader's organization, if the leader is attached to one, has a good reputation.

• Remain neutral and committed to everyone's success, together, rather than to a private, one-person or one-organization agenda.

• Show genuine interest in other ministry leaders and their visions.

• Be consistent in speech and conduct.

• Handle confidential or sensitive information responsibly—remembering that both what one says and does not say about other ministries and their leaders are important.

• Keep one's promises. Do what one says one will do as well as when one says it will be done. If one finds that the promises cannot be kept, be honest and indicate realistically what one is going to do (Butler 2006, 211).

Butler also highlights several practical considerations for managing partnerships: develop clear and measurable goals, set a realistic time frame for action, put in place sustainable personnel to see the project through, and foster ownership of the vision that grows over time (Butler 2006, 288). These are key considerations in leading Kingdom Movements.

The May-June 2015 issue of *Mission Frontiers* highlighted the similarities between the *Transform World* movement and what can be called the *Starfish* approach. Perhaps most insightful to understanding movement leadership is their description of "catalysts" from the book *The Starfish and the Spider* (Brafman and Beckstrom 2006):

The book identifies a set of people the authors call "catalysts" who tend to be skilled at creating decentralized organizations. The authors list several abilities and behaviors (called "The Catalyst's Tools") that "catalysts" have in common, including:

1. Genuine interest in others.
2. Numerous loose connections, rather than a small number of close connections.
3. Skill at social mapping.
4. Desire to help everyone they meet.
5. The ability to help people help themselves by listening and understanding, rather than giving advice ("Meet people where they are").
6. Emotional Intelligence.
7. Trust in others and in the decentralized network.
8. Inspiration (to others).
9. Tolerance for ambiguity.
10. A hands-off approach. Catalysts do not interfere with, or try to control the behavior of, the contributing members of the decentralized organization.
11. Ability to let go. After building up a decentralized organization, catalysts move on, rather than trying to take control.

'A leader is best when people barely know that he exists; not so good when people obey and acclaim him; worst when they despise him.' (p. 115) (Lao-tzu).

'As a catalyst, it's all about letting go and trusting the community.' (p. 111) (Transform World Staff 2015).

Building on Roembke's and Elmer's research on multi-cultural teams, Mark Oxbrow, in a paper for the Edinburgh 2010 Conference, adds pertinent insights to what Butler presented pertinent. The first is that "multi-cultural partnerships need multi-cultural objectives: we need to understand what is valued as 'success' or 'achievement' in each culture." He also speaks to "contextual relevance [where] great ideas can be a real success in the right context; [however] in the wrong context, they can be a complete flop" (Oxbrow 2010, 7).

Mary Lederleitner adds the challenge to the development of trusting, cross-cultural partnerships when neo-colonialist wealth disparity is involved:

> A concern in missiology is how there can be effective cross-cultural partnerships, with vast sums of wealth coming from affluent donors and nations, without fostering a new form of colonialism now known as "neo-colonialism." Neo-colonialism implies that although there is no physical occupation by a foreign power, wealth and resources are given in ways that still dominate others. Some on the receiving end of mission funding feel demeaned and controlled by the process. For these partners there is a sense that they are losing their right to make their own decisions and they are losing their voice. Because of this there is a concern whether true partnership, the kind that models genuine mutuality, can ever take place given such a vast disparity of wealth (Lederleitner 2009).

Despite whatever challenges there are to developing trusting cross-cultural partnerships, Kärin Primuth points to movements in the Muslim world that began with Western leaders that are now being led by indigenous leaders. She notes that multi-cultural networks are a great demonstration of biblical unity: "Networks offer a context to build trust across cultures and to genuinely listen and learn from our partners in the Majority World. They provide a platform for dialogue with our brothers and sisters in the Global South to mutually define what the North American Church can contribute to today's mission movement" (Primuth 2015).

Primuth's insights dovetail with research from global business. For example, Caligiuri stated that the present and future global environment and workplace "need leaders who are able to effectively manage in complex global environments, who are able to negotiate cultural challenges and conflicts, and who understand seemingly conflicting regulatory requirements, unexpected costs, and diverse stakeholders in foreign countries" (Caligiuri 2013, 176). It is critical for global leaders to understand how their behaviors appear in the eyes of their followers. To do that there is an urgent need to understand cross-cultural differences. She also mentioned that those global leaders who have available cultural responses can work effectively with colleagues from different cultures. Alire also supported the idea of being effective in diverse organizations "...is largely dependent on the extent to which they have the respect of those they seek to lead" (Alire 2001, 101). Global leadership is about leading diverse people in complex environments. To deal with people global leaders need to know about their background, including their beliefs, values, religions, and sensitivities. To do that global leadership requires cultural understanding. Culture develops as people understand the importance of interacting with their environment over a period of time. People carry their own culture to their workplace. Thus, cultivating harmony among cultures in a multicultural organization is the art of global leaders (Caligiuri 2013, 175-182).

The ability to navigate across a variety of cultures, stakeholders, and global scenarios is a vital trait for empowered leadership in a globalized era. This study is unaware of any comprehensive collection of these important insights for leading Kingdom Movements.

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