

Book Review

Joseph W. Handley, Jr., *Polycentric Mission Leadership: Toward a New Theoretical Model for Global Leadership*

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Joseph W. Handley Jr. (2022). *Polycentric Mission Leadership: Toward a New Theoretical Model for Global Leadership*. Oxford, UK: Regnum Books, ISBN: 978-1-914454-56-1 (paperback) pp. 132. \$15.39.

Joseph W. Handley Jr.'s *Polycentric Mission Leadership: Toward a New Theoretical Model for Global Leadership* is a timely and thought-provoking exploration of leadership in a rapidly evolving, interconnected world. Handley, a seasoned leader in mission contexts and the current president of A3 (formerly Asian Access), draws from his rich practical experience and academic research to propose a polycentric leadership model. This approach challenges traditional hierarchical structures, advocating instead for collaborative, decentralized, and contextually adaptive leadership styles. Handley's work seeks to equip readers with a fresh framework that resonates with the complexities of global mission leadership today.

The book, structured into six chapters, unfolds with an introduction to the concept of polycentric leadership, emphasizing its necessity in addressing contemporary challenges. Handley critiques centralized models that struggle to adapt to the nuanced demands of different cultural and situational contexts. In contrast, polycentric leadership operates from multiple centers of influence, fostering a dynamic and participatory approach to decision-making. Chapter Two delves into the historical foundations of polycentrism, referencing Allen Yeh's polycentric missiology and the contributions of the Munich School of World Christianity (12, 16ff.). Handley highlights that missions historically has in fact followed a pattern of "everywhere to everywhere," challenging the misconception of a unidirectional flow from "the West to the rest." He further explores how polycentrism reshapes how to understand mission history, including movement from sub-Saharan Africa to Korea, underscoring the collaborative and multidirectional nature of mission efforts. Furthermore, Handley underscores that the model's roots are neither novel nor utopian but historically grounded and theologically resonant, particularly with the trinitarian concept of shared authority and interdependence (p. 22-25).

In Chapter Three, Handley bridges secular leadership studies with missiological applications. Drawing on Elinor Ostrom's work on polycentric governance and findings from the GLOBE study of effective leadership, he builds a robust case for decentralized models. J. R. Woodward's missional frameworks and Kirk Franklin's leadership approach within the Wycliffe Global Alliance further illustrate how polycentric leadership principles can be practically implemented. Handley identifies these contributions as critical stepping stones towards a new theoretical model for mission leadership. Chapter Four synthesizes these insights, unveiling the theoretical framework of Polycentric Mission Leadership. This model is characterized by six key themes: collaborative, communal, diverse, entrepreneurial, relational, and charismatic leadership (52). Each theme is explored in depth, connecting theoretical underpinnings to practical examples. For instance, entrepreneurial freedom empowers leaders to innovate locally, while relational dynamics foster trust and collective wisdom. The emphasis on diversity ensures that leadership reflects the rich mosaic of global Christianity, strengthening decision-making processes through varied perspectives.

Handley's research transitions into application in Chapter Five, where he evaluates these principles through qualitative interviews with 33 Lausanne Movement leaders. These interviews reveal a significant alignment between polycentric values and contemporary mission practices, affirming the relevance of the model in addressing global challenges. Notably, the themes of collaboration and community emerge as particularly impactful, highlighting the necessity of inclusive and participatory leadership structures. The final chapter consolidates these findings, presenting Polycentric Mission Leadership as both a theoretical construct and a practical roadmap for global mission contexts. Handley recognizes that polycentrism requires further research and underscores its potential to transform mission leadership by fostering decentralized, adaptive, and inclusive practices.

Handley's work excels in its interdisciplinary rigor and theological grounding. The integration of historical, sociological, and theological perspectives provides a robust foundation for his argument. His trinitarian analogy, emphasizing mutuality and co-participation, enriches the theoretical underpinnings of polycentric leadership. Additionally, qualitative research adds depth, grounding abstract concepts in tangible experiences. The book's greatest strength lies in its call to decentralize leadership, empowering marginalized voices and fostering collective wisdom—a much-needed shift in global mission dynamics.

However, the work is not without its limitations. The abstract nature of the polycentric model, while intellectually stimulating, can make it challenging for readers to translate theory into practice. Handley's focus on the Lausanne Movement, while insightful, may narrow the scope of his findings, leaving readers curious about applications in other contexts, such as local churches or smaller organizations. Furthermore, the model's adaptability in high-power-distance societies remains underexplored, raising questions about its universal applicability.

Despite these weaknesses, the book makes a significant contribution to the discourse on mission leadership. By emphasizing collaboration, contextual adaptability, and inclusivity, Handley's study aligns with contemporary shifts in global Christianity, where leadership is increasingly polycentric and grassroots-driven. The model's emphasis on shared authority resonates deeply with the biblical ethos of servant leadership, challenging leaders to reflect Christ's humility and openness to others.

Polycentric Mission Leadership is particularly suited for mission leaders, theological educators, and students seeking to navigate the complexities of globalized ministry. Its interdisciplinary approach and practical insights make it a valuable resource for those aiming to foster inclusive, adaptive, and context-sensitive leadership within diverse cultural and organizational settings. As churches and agencies continue to grapple with the challenges of leadership in a poly-crisis world, Handley's work serves as both a roadmap and a challenge to embrace a more participatory and collaborative future.