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## The Soul of a Leader: A Case Study in the Theory and Development of a Reflective Instrument

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## **The Soul of a Leader:**

### **A Case Study in the Theory and Development of a Reflective Instrument**

*Shelby Coble and Carson Reed*

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*Abstract: This case study details the authors' work to fulfill a consultative request from an elder group to do significant self-reflection about their spiritual life and their practice of being good leaders. In response, the authors developed a rationale for considering resilience and spiritual vitality while exploring congregational leadership as vision work, relational work, and administrative work. With this theological grounding, the authors prepared an instrument that measures the capacity for resilience and spiritual vitality in the life of lay leaders. The instrument also creates reflection around three dimensions of leadership. The survey categories included: spiritual and personal life, a leader's life with others, and the three dimensions of leadership, including vision, pastoral, and administrative. The development of the assessment explores distinct leadership categories that hold promise for constructive maturation of a leadership team.*

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The Siburt Institute for Church Ministry often receives requests for consulting in matters of leadership. In November of 2021, an elder group from a large West Texas church asked for consulting help. In the initial meeting, the elder group identified their desire to do significant self-reflection about their spiritual life and their practice of being good leaders. Since the church has a long and stable history but is preparing for several significant transitions, the elders' request demonstrated wisdom and proactivity in preparing for a new and emerging chapter in the church's life.

Since the study of resilience had emerged for the Siburt Institute as a critical dimension for spiritual vitality in ministers and leaders in congregations, the request from this elder group to develop an assessment prompted us to conceptualize how a survey might measure capacity for resilience and spiritual vitality. Already, we were looking at a variety of contexts, including resilience in the medical community, business world,

and church leadership. Paying attention to spiritual vitality as it is expressed in one's own spiritual practices, as well as how it is expressed in relationships with others, are clear indicators of a person's well-being. Could we develop a simple inventory that might give participants some way to reflect on these elements that are critical to resilience?

Likewise, the request from the elder group to reflect on their leadership practices resonated with other initiatives within the Siburt Institute. Over the past six years—in consultation with elder groups and leadership teams in churches and non-profit organizations—Carson Reed, executive director of the Siburt Institute, had been working out an emerging theoretical approach to the practice of leadership that rests on a set of theological frames. This case study presents the current state of that work.

The primary frame is the assertion that leadership is predominantly an action; leadership is something one does. Of course, one's being and doing are deeply related. The witness of Scripture certainly demonstrates coherence to God's being and God's doing. That is why to speak to Christian leadership it is appropriate to begin with the question of being – who am I? And how am I attending to my life with God? Exploring one's identity through the lens of spiritual practices can then give an opportunity to explore the second and related questions of action, of doing.

Working from the fundamental assumption that spiritual practices are primary and identity-forming and that leadership practices are secondary, emerging from one's being, then the study of leadership focuses on things that leaders do. The promise of developing an assessment tool that would measure key aspects of what leaders do in congregations was full of potential. In consultative work with over a dozen churches on specific leadership development, Reed theorized three distinctive leadership practices that are needful for vibrant congregational mission and life. As we will demonstrate in this essay, the development of an assessment to explore those distinct leadership practices holds promise for constructive maturation of a leadership team.

In light of the request for consultative help to attend to both the spiritual life of the leader and what leaders do, we drew from various sources to build an instrument that could be useful to the elder group's learning and maturation. What follows is an introduction to the theoretical and theological frameworks for the instrument and our intervention with this elder group.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### Resilience and Spiritual Vitality

How do ministerial leaders pursue growth and fruitfulness while staying connected to God and others? Although there are numerous theoretical paradigms, our research utilized three sources from various perspectives of ministers, caregivers, and workplace leaders. First, the existing research provided by Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie alongside the Pastors Summit and Lilly Endowment provided access to over seven years of data from conversations with those in vocational ministry.<sup>1</sup> Their book, *Resilient Ministry*, laid a foundation for naming the pathways to resilience and spiritual vitality. Their aim was to explore the challenges of vocational ministry, learning what it takes to survive and thrive in ministry. The five themes they found to be necessary for leadership resilience and fruitful ministry—spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and leadership and management, became a starting point for our assessment to gauge the ways leaders attend to God’s grace in their own lives and the lives of others. Secondly, Gallup’s CEO and Chief Workplace Scientist, Jim Clifton and Jim Harter, through their book, *Wellbeing at Work*, explore key elements to wellbeing rooted in the belief that “Combining strengths and wellbeing at work is potentially the most transformational treatment yet in the urgent pursuit of resiliency, mental health and ultimately, net thriving.”<sup>2</sup> Lastly, the medical community has seen a rise in secondary stress and burnout among caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Robert J. Wicks and Gloria F. Donnelly revisit these themes in their second edition of *Overcoming Secondary Stress in Medical and Nursing Practice* by exploring tangible ways to enhance the resilience of body, mind, and spirit while acknowledging the ways navigating stress and attending to self-care can limit the effects of stress in one’s life.<sup>3</sup> These three sources built a foundation of assessment categories to determine a leader’s capacity for resilience and spiritual vitality.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Clifton, and James K. Harter, *Wellbeing at Work: How to Build Resilient and Thriving Teams* (New York: Gallup Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Wicks and Gloria F. Donnelly, *Overcoming Secondary Stress in Medical and Nursing Practice: A Guide to Professional Resilience and Personal Well-being* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6-7.

### Frameworks to Build Resilience and Spiritual Vitality

Before leaders deploy the action and practice of oversight, they need to be proactive in laying foundations in their spiritual life with God and personal relationship with others. The overflow of healthy leadership will emerge from a leader's ability to maintain a healthy equilibrium of spiritual formation, learn through hardships, practice self-care, and create meaningful rhythms. The equilibrium of a leader's personal life can find accountability, support, and guidance through their relationship with others.

Resilient leaders are formed through the intentional pursuit of caring for and feeding their souls. As Christians, we believe this cannot be separated from a relationship with God and others. A leader's spiritual life and relationships are central to the practice of leaders. Prioritization of these responsibilities in a leader's life is vital to their ongoing calling and service. As leaders manage the responsibility of nurturing and stewarding themselves for the glory of God, they will hold responsible boundaries required for leadership practices.<sup>4</sup> The inventory we created begins with the assessment of a leader's spiritual and personal life. To distinguish spiritual vitality and leadership, a priority needs to be placed on a leader's spiritual formation and relational dynamic with those around them. Through the process of maturing, both personally and interpersonally, spiritual formation is a pursuit for ministerial leaders. No one ever "arrives" spiritually as it is an ongoing process. We are all on a journey of spiritual growth. Spiritual formation involves a growth in spiritual maturity that is generally reflected in lifestyle behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, hardships will occur throughout ministry, and a person's ability to navigate hardships can better shape one's understanding of God's agenda by gaining deeper insight into God's plans over time. Adversity and hardships are pathways to refinement, often revealing blind spots in one's self-awareness.<sup>6</sup> The ability to endure, develop and maintain passion and perseverance requires grit. Often, grit can only be attained through enduring hardship and allowing one's character to be shaped by God.<sup>7</sup> During troubled times, it can be difficult to see hardships as opportunities for growth. However, by positioning oneself under the authority of God's agenda, hardships can be an experience that propels one

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<sup>4</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 250-251.

<sup>5</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Ells, *The Resilient Leader: How Adversity Can Change You and Your Ministry for the Better* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2020), 204-205.

<sup>7</sup> Ells, *The Resilient Leader*, 207.

into relationship and community instead of isolation and shame.<sup>8</sup> Finally, leaders have to pursue emotional and spiritual self-care displayed through the maintenance of their own relationships with Christ as distinct from their responsibilities.<sup>9</sup>

### Key Elements to Wellbeing

A leader's life with others is where the intentional work of their spiritual and personal life is revealed as either healthy or unhealthy. It is not new information that social isolation and chronic loneliness have a devastating effect on physical and mental health. People who have at least three or four very close relationships are healthier, have higher well-being, and are more engaged in their jobs. In contrast, the absence of close friendships can lead to loneliness and depression.<sup>10</sup> Leaders do not have to be lonely. Seeking caring, supportive, and trusting relationships not only builds resilience and reveals blind spots but improves one's overall health.<sup>11</sup> Ministerial leaders need to be in relationships with others, whether their spouses, children, fellow elders, or congregants. If leaders prioritize the intentional work of maintaining a relationship with God and a healthy relationship with themselves, they will more easily navigate relationships with others. Ministry leaders should fully embrace their limits, which will allow them to accept what God is doing in their lives and ministry. Limits are linked to life rhythms. Rhythms—like sabbath, exercise, friendship, and contentment in calling—create patterns of healthy living, and a community of others can often help these behaviors become habits in the life of a leader.<sup>12</sup>

### Enhancing Resilience Through Self-Care

In relationships with others, ministerial leaders often become the “helpers.” They can be confronted with the negativity and sadness others hold, which creates the tendency to absorb the sadness, anxiety, and negativity of those around them. The “helpers” are not immune to the psychological and spiritual dangers that arise in living with relational involvement in the lives of other people.<sup>13</sup> In leading others, leaders should strive to maintain a proper and healthy perspective by choosing to reflect

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<sup>8</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 203-205.

<sup>9</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Clifton, *Wellbeing at Work*, 47, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ells, *The Resilient Leader*, 190-192.

<sup>12</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 38.

on their thoughts and behaviors—being honest with themselves and how their relationship with others is affecting their ability to thrive.<sup>14</sup> Self-care becomes a means by which pastors actually care for others in order to remain effective in the work God has given leaders.<sup>15</sup> Psychiatrist James Gill has written about burnout, utilizing several terms to describe how those in caring positions are affected by relationships through the onset of compassion fatigue and secondary stress disorder. He noted how helping people can be extremely hazardous to leaders' physical and mental health. Those most vulnerable to the effects of burnout, compassion fatigue and secondary stress disorder are those who work with distressed or demanding people, those who are charged with too much responsibility, those who need to save people from their undesirable situations, and more. Greater attention to self-care—along with an awareness of the causes, forms, and manifestations of stress—are ways to limit the effects of secondary stress and compassion fatigue, ultimately reducing the likelihood of burnout. It is not surprising, then, that ministerial and lay leaders are susceptible to burnout since these stressful realities are common in their environments.<sup>16</sup> While there are multiple causes of burnout, the overarching themes that perpetuate the onset of burnout are linked to one's personal, relational, and spiritual life being overlooked or overwhelmed. In continually caring for and carrying the stress of others, one is less likely to attend to their own personal problems when under stress.<sup>17</sup> While counter-intuitive, the best way to serve others is to serve all aspects of one's health first.

### Assessing the Spiritual and Relational Life of a Leader

The assessment had two sections dedicated to probing the leader's spiritual and personal life along with their life with others. The category of a leader's spiritual and personal life seeks to assess the ongoing relationship with God and self as the best foundation in which to lead others. The instrument's questions pertaining to the relational life of a leader will allow assessments to be made regarding the current depiction of relational equilibrium. As leaders, healthy relationships with their fellow elders, senior minister, church staff, and congregation are important. Not only are specific relationships important in the life of a leader, but their posture in

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<sup>14</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 62-63.

<sup>16</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 18-19, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 20-21.

those relationships is necessary to assess. A leader's ability to navigate conflict, maintain a non-anxious presence, welcome interruptions, and navigate the needs and expectations of their family are all ways in which to discern a healthy equilibrium within relationships. The assessment of a leader's life with others should gauge whether a leader can pursue an ongoing healthy life equilibrium while demonstrating the ability to make small but necessary adjustments without waiting until their balance is overwhelmingly off-kilter.<sup>18</sup>

### Three Sources for Framing a Leadership Theory

The theoretical foundations for exploring constructive leadership emerge from three areas: Complexity Leadership Theory, insights from Mark Lau Branson, and biblical sources. We introduce these sources, and then utilize the sources to develop three categories of leadership that help congregations flourish.

#### Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) sounds, well, complex!<sup>19</sup> CLT assumes that the environment that humans inhabit has so many variables and possibilities that a person cannot discern a specific path forward with any degree of certitude.<sup>20</sup> Most people are conscious of uncertainty—they are generally aware that there are unknowns among the things they know. What CLT is suggesting aligns well with the reality of ministerial and congregational contexts. So many factors are in play that tried-and-true practices from a generation ago no longer are effective. Multiple dilemmas stack up on each other, and it makes things—complex. Jumping to a theological frame, what CLT can remind the leader is that the world and congregations are actually in God's hands. Leaders cannot figure everything out to lead well. Leading from knowledge or experience from some other time will not be adequate, and that is perfectly acceptable. God

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<sup>18</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> The material that follows was adapted and expanded from Carson E. Reed. Carson E. Reed, "Leadership In Complex Times," *Mosaic* (blog), February 23, 2022, <https://www.mosaicsite.org/main/2022/2/23/leadership-in-complex-times>; also, Carson E. Reed, "Three Circles of Leadership," *Mosaic* (blog), November 18, 2015, <https://www.mosaicsite.org/main/2015/11/18/three-circles-of-leadership>.

<sup>20</sup> For a brief introduction to Complexity Theory see David Snowden and Mary Boone, "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making," *Harvard Business Review* 85 11 (November 2007): 68-76.



is the one who is leading—and leadership will need to take a different shape.

Complexity Theory presents leaders with a compelling narrative to attend to adaptivity—to move in new ways on the dance floor. CLT offers “a view of leadership as an emergent, interactive dynamic that is productive of adaptive outcomes.”<sup>21</sup> Such a posture suits Christian leadership well in several foundational ways.

First, Christian leaders happen to believe that God is really the leader, not humans. Adaptivity is central to our self-understanding. Christian leaders assume the posture of learning and flexibility because God is a God who does surprising things. Second, to faithfully respond to God’s action and the messy realities of our churches and of the human predicament, Christian leaders know and practice a certain responsive—or dancing—way of being in the world. Detailed planning five years out makes little sense in light of God’s action. Of course, this does not mean that leaders cease planning. Rather, it means that work is much more tentative and responsive to what is actually happening in the contexts of ministry. So rather than assuming mastery of all factors, effective leaders live looser and lighter with where things might be moving. A looser hold on things assumes that change is always present. Yet from a Christian point of view, this is not a particular concern – because Christians assert that God is always faithful in God’s work in the world. CLT reminds Christian leaders to live nimbly and adaptively. Churches are usually better served to try small experiments; exploring and probing new possibilities and learning from those probes will give hope and courage for the future. New initiatives and ways of being in the world make a difference. Though the Christian leader cannot predict what will happen, she knows that God is always faithful!

Another aspect of CLT is particularly helpful for the development of the instrument. CLT asserts three dimensions for the practice of leadership. These three dimensions provide elasticity and structure, vitality, and relationality that sits well in the complex environments of organization and churches today. Indeed CLT, “frames leadership as a complex interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g., learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge,”<sup>22</sup> rather than as a top-down,

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, “Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting Leadership from the Industrial Age to the Knowledge Era.” *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18 4 (2007): 299.

<sup>22</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 298.

hierarchical function that relies on position and authority. Here are the three types of leadership that CLT theorists propose.<sup>23</sup>

First, administrative leadership is concerned with organizational tasks, such as planning, establishing vision, setting goals, acquiring resources, implementing programs, and managing conflicts. Administrative leadership attends to the bureaucratic structures and needs that allow the organization to function on a day-to-day basis while at the same time not suppressing entrepreneurialism and innovation.

Second, adaptive leadership describes an informal “collaborative change movement”<sup>24</sup> that produces new, creative knowledge and ideas. As such, adaptive leadership is often the primary source of change within an organization. While adaptive leadership can be associated with a person, it most often “originates in struggles among agents and groups over conflicting needs, ideas, or preferences.”<sup>25</sup> Adaptive leaders create and manage the spaces for innovation to emerge.

Third, enabling leadership serves as a bridge between the administrative and adaptive functions. Enabling leadership fosters the conditions that allow adaptive leadership to flourish and spearheads the incorporation of the products of adaptive leadership into the structure and function of the organization. It pays particular attention to matters of relationality within the organization.

#### Mark Lau Branson<sup>26</sup>

Mark Lau Branson, along with his co-author Juan Martínez, asserts three forms of leadership necessary for healthy congregations.<sup>27</sup> First is the work of *interpretive* leadership. Leaders are persons who seek to understand what is going on and why it is happening—in light of the gospel. Leaders

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<sup>23</sup> For the description of the three types of leadership within the complexity leadership model, see Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 306–309.

<sup>24</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 306.

<sup>25</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 306.

<sup>26</sup> Material adapted and expanded from Carson E. Reed, “Three Circles of Leadership.”

<sup>27</sup> Mark Lau Branson, and Juan F Martinez, *Churches, Cultures & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011); Mark Lau Branson has offered this three-fold understanding of leadership in multiple places including, Mark Lau Branson, and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021); see also Branson’s essay, “Ecclesiology and Leadership” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed., Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 118-123.

shape and define reality by the way they view what is happening in their context. The particular challenge is to define what is happening in one's context by consistently asking God-focused questions. What do these happenings mean in light of our call to bear witness to God's work in the world?

Second, leaders engage in *relational* leadership. Effective leaders recognize that leadership fosters the liveliness of human dynamics. People need to be cared for, relationships need to be developed, new connections need to be created, and networks need to be established. The essential human dynamic of community life must be proactively shepherded.

Third, leaders practice *implemental* leadership. Framing and reforming structures and systems that allow for ministry and work to flourish serve the church's mission. Leaders seek to remove obstacles and create opportunities for ministry, worship, and discipleship. In so doing, God's transforming work is unleashed.

Branson's three dimensions of leadership—interpretive, relational, and implemental – resonate with the three dimensions that emerge from complexity theory. Branson does not explicitly posit a source from his own understanding of leadership practices; rather, for Branson, they emerge from his long observations of congregations.

### New Testament Sources

The witness of Scripture does not offer tidy principles or explicit directions about the practices of leadership. Nonetheless, within Scripture, certain concepts emerge that offer direction and insight into healthy forms of leadership. For the work of this project, three distinctive terms present themselves as indicators of what is useful and needed for congregational life and vitality. These terms demonstrate different and necessary aspects of leadership for the early church: elder, shepherd, and bishop.<sup>28</sup> Often conflated and typically turned into titles, these terms become opaque in most contemporary contexts. However, these terms actually speak to a certain practice of leadership that serves community life. In Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian contexts, these three terms denoted various forms of leadership (elder), oversight (shepherd), and administration (bishop).

For example, the term elder designated an older person—a person who had experience and had gained wisdom through those experiences to

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<sup>28</sup> See Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 146ff; David Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1993).

judicially lead the Christian communities. The elders in the early church were influenced in both name and function from Judaism. Jewish elders were older men with age and experience. In the Gospels, Jewish elders, who are mentioned, were most often members of the Great Sanhedrin. The elders disputed cases, interpreted the Law, and preserved the traditions. The early Christian elders within congregations demonstrated similar functions as influenced by Jewish communities. In early Christianity, a shift regarding the semantics of the term elder broadened from its initial emphasis on biological age to include seniority and experience within church structures.<sup>29</sup> That wisdom and the ability to discern God's movement and action serve the community by their capacity to pay attention to God.

The term shepherd connotes the relational and pastoral dimensions of nurture, care, and discipleship that the community needs to mature. The practical work of a shepherd is to keep vigilant attention of their flock to protect sheep, care for their injuries, lead them to water, and seek after them when lost. In close proximity to the sheep, careful shepherding and oversight are required.<sup>30</sup> In use before early Christianity, both Hellenistic and Jewish contexts used the imagery of shepherding to describe leadership in both political and religious spheres to imply benevolence.<sup>31</sup>

And the term bishop—perhaps a bit off-putting in some contexts today—was actually a term to speak about the active management of affairs, guardianship, and direction over activities. The term, used in both Jewish and Greek cultures, denotes an overseer or guardian. This oversight could have been through an array of areas including, but not limited to, financial settings, temple administration, construction foreman, and even tutors in an educational setting. Jewish people were aware of the Greek usage and adapted it for their leaders, as seen in the LXX.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps we might speak of logistics today. To “bishop” (using it as a verb for a moment) was to manage and provide and monitor work in order for things to be done well. This too, is necessary work for the people of God to thrive.

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<sup>29</sup> Albert Henrichs, *Greek Myth and Religion: Collected Papers II* (ed. Harvey Yunis; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 177-78.

<sup>30</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), 321; see also Jeremy M. Kimble, “The Steward of God: Exploring the Role and Function of Elders,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 6 1 (Sum 2015): 104-105.

<sup>31</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3033.

<sup>32</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 3032; see also Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 322.

Thus these three terms—elder, shepherd, bishop—speak into three different but necessary elements of leadership that are essential for a community’s well-being. Both Jewish and Christian communities saw the value of multiple practices of leadership over singular leadership with the goal of spiritual growth over efficiency. A leadership model which takes advantage of the numerous experiences and examples of others beyond a singular perspective.<sup>33</sup> Paying attention to God’s action, pastoral care, and discipleship, and administrative and empowering leadership all play a role in congregational life.

### **Emerging Theory**

In light of these biblical and theoretical frameworks, we identify the three categories of leadership as vision, pastoral, and administrative.

*Vision Leadership*—CLT names this as adaptive leadership; the biblical framework uses elder. Within non-faith-based organizations, leaders seek to adapt by paying close attention to the multiple emerging dynamics in play. For those leading in congregations, the adaptive attention is focused on God’s activity as well as the work needed within contexts. A leader might ask, “What are we seeing through our time with Scripture, prayer, and our context?” Leaders are looking for glimpses of God’s presence in our world, identifying that presence, and declaring it to others. If God is constantly present and at work within our contexts, then congregations need wise, prayerful leaders attending to God’s action and naming it for the congregation. Such work extends the ancient tradition of eldering—persons with long experience of paying attention to God.

*Pastoral Leadership*—CLT would call this enabling leadership, the biblical word is shepherd. However, for our purposes, we retain the language that connects with historic practices of care and formation. Churches have always needed leadership who empower believers to grow and mature in the faith. So pastoral leadership is indispensable to our work. Sadly, pastoral work is often reduced to hospital visits or sitting with folk who are in rocky places in their life. Certainly, pastoral care is needful and important! Yet what is often neglected is the hard pastoral work of teaching and forming Christian people. The best pastors are those who empower others to pastor! Or, perhaps the old phrase might be useful here. “Are we making disciples—or are we making disciple-makers?”

*Administrative Leadership*—CLT uses this term—and we initially elected to keep the term; the biblical term is bishop. Our communities of

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<sup>33</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 322.

faith need structure and support. Rather than run from this sort of work—leaders need to embrace it and then delegate it appropriately. Often leaders can get stuck in this space, and leadership teams need to avoid this dilemma at all costs. However, churches need administration, especially as administration is understood as a way of empowering and equipping them in ministry and action.<sup>34</sup> Simply look at the word administration for a moment. It has the word “ministry” right in the middle. Simply put, administration is “bringing people to ministry.” Effective administrative leaders invite, enable, and empower others to take up the work of ministry. Likewise, administrative leaders attend to structural and support matters so that the vision of the church moves forward.

### **Instrument Development**

The instrument made for the elder group was administered using Qualtrics<sup>35</sup> with five sections related to the themes previously discussed—spiritual and personal life, a leader’s life with others, vision leadership, pastoral leadership, and administrative leadership. Examples of statements within the category of spiritual and person life include: this person has created rhythms to strengthen their spiritual life, this person has an active relationship with a mentor, and this person is typically non-reactive, allowing hardships to develop them spiritually. A leader’s life with others included a section of statements pertaining to both work and family life relational dynamics. Examples of these statements include: this person feels undue pressure to please people and deny their own priorities and values, this person can manage their emotions without them dominating their behavior, and this person makes decisions after considering the different interests and people involved.

Moving into the sections pertaining to the varied types of leadership, the aspects of a person’s vision, pastoral, and administrative leadership were assessed. Under the category of vision leadership included statements which include: this person is comfortable with ambiguity in difficult conversations and this person has the capacity to reflect about the past, present, and future. Examples of pastoral leadership statements include: this person is an empathic listener, and this person is a non-anxious presence even in difficult situations. Ending with administrative

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<sup>34</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Qualtrics XM is an experience management operating system which allows for survey research, evaluations, data collection, and reporting.

leadership, examples of these statements include: this person is excited to foster environments for other people to grow and this person demonstrates the ability to coordinate disparate pieces as a cohesive whole.

The sections had between eight to ten statements to answer on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with the following descriptions of each number: 1—poorly demonstrates this statement, 2—occasionally demonstrates this statement, 3—usually demonstrates this statement, 4—almost always demonstrates this statement, 5—exceptional, extraordinary demonstration of this statement. Participants were reminded that a 3 score is the usual, accepted standard for this type of inventory, with most scores as twos, threes, and fours. An assessment was made for each of the ten elders. To gain more objective and useful data, the decision was made to ask the senior ministry to complete the form for each elder and to randomly and anonymously ask two other elders to complete an instrument on each elder.

### **Deploying the Instrument**

The assessment was distributed via an email link to the ten elders to take individually for personal engagement. We then paired each elder with two anonymously chosen peer elders who would take the assessment, answering questions based on their knowledge and perception of the elder. Finally, we sent the senior minister the link to each elder's assessment for him to provide feedback. All participants had a week to complete the assessments. Qualtrics sent out email updates when completed assessments had been submitted, and we were then able to view the data of each assessment. Once all of the assessments were completed, we had a week to sort each elder's results and discern the best data visualization offered to display the reports. We desired to compile a visualization of each elder's results from their personal assessment, peer assessment and an overall cumulative result. Qualtrics offers several data visualization options, and we chose the bar chart as the best option to share compiled data with the elder group for upcoming discussions. Each report was categorized by our five sections, displaying three scores side-by-side for comparison—a personal, peer, and cumulative score. We were able to compile data reports for each elder and for the elder group's overall scores as it pertains to the five sections.

### **Initial Observations**

Our initial assessments of the data showed which elders had the highest overall scores and the leading strength among the group as it

pertained to leadership as administration. We were curious if the strength of administration was due to the congregation's organizational structure. For example, this church has a long-standing senior minister, who is highly regarded, along with a large staff. The elder group is content to trust the ministry staff with a high percentage of the vision work. Additionally, would they be surprised by the peer score compared to their personal scores? How would they relate their peer score with their personal score? We desired the scores to facilitate a means by which further reflection and conversation could take place among the group.

### **Presenting Material in Light of Initial Observations**

In preparation for our meeting with the elder group, it was necessary to formulate a plan to share three main ideas. First, we reminded the elders of the reason they had taken the assessment. Namely, this body of elders sought a way to engage in self-reflection regarding their spiritual maturity as leaders of the congregation. Next, the printed reports given to each elder of their assessment scores would need to be explained in detail. We had been working with the data and were familiar with the format of the report, but the elder group would be seeing their reports for the first time. Our intention was to outline significant observations, drawing their attention to both the strengths and discrepancies seen in each report. Finally, we knew presenting the reports would bring feedback, and we needed to maintain a posture that welcomed their insights and questions to make the assessment a better tool. There would be areas of improvement brought to light through our presentation, and we desired to receive constructive feedback from their unique perspectives.

Additionally, in keeping with the characteristics of a learning community, we began to strategize on how to effectively serve the elder group in fostering discovery, engaging with new insights, and eventually adapting new practices for spiritual vitality. Likewise, knowing that this learning would likely lead to new ways and structures for the congregation, we were sensitive to listen closely to the room.<sup>36</sup>

### **Engagement with Elder Group**

On a Tuesday evening in early February, we met with the elder group and senior minister in one of their church classrooms. After sharing a meal together, we participated in *Lectio Divina* centered around Psalm

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<sup>36</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).



139. There was an intention to remind the elders of God's nature displayed in them uniquely. As a united body of elders, they are to lead out of their strengths while acknowledging the areas necessary for growth. Not only does one's personal vantage point hold weight to an assessment, but the vantage point of the similar others in proximity to the same role and environment. By allowing each elder to assess themselves, we had a starting point to compare to the average of other's assessment – bringing about a comparison worth discussing. One of the hopes in providing an assessment is to bring awareness to patterns—not to enhance feelings of guilt or notions toward narcissism. The elder's attitude toward the assessment was held in tension with how effectively they would be able to glean its information. Each elder received a printed copy of their report. The elders were encouraged to maintain a posture of curiosity over defensiveness, self-condemnation or discouragement.<sup>37</sup> Reviewing the results together allowed themes to emerge, which then offered a springboard for further understanding and insight. Which questions produced similar answers? Are there areas of answers which show a pattern of strength or weakness? Is there congruence between how an elder sees himself and how he is perceived by his peers? Were some answers surprising, if so, why? An assessment has limitations, and the elder group noted word choice, misunderstanding or lack of clarity as several ways in which the assessment could be improved. The elders were randomly assigned to assess one another, and each relationship has varying degrees of familiarity which can limit the accuracy of the assessment. However, by having the results in front of each elder, they were provided with the opportunity to not only reflect in the present moment but go back to it again and again throughout the phases of consulting and while navigating the upcoming elder selection process.<sup>38</sup>

Several weeks later, we rejoined the elder group on a Saturday morning to more fully unpack the categories of leadership. God is the ultimate leader of the church, and the elder's role is to pay attention to God and discern what God might be putting on their hearts. Vision leadership is the capacity to see the bigger picture. Another aspect of leadership is pastoral or relational, to guide and help sustain people. Pastoral leadership is displayed not only through care and nurture but through discipleship and intentionally strategic mentoring. Finally, empowering leadership is accountable for the community, delegating and engaging in the work of

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<sup>37</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 101-102.

<sup>38</sup> Wicks, *Overcoming Secondary Stress*, 100-101.

ministry life. After unpacking more fully the three categories of leadership, we asked the elder group to participate in theological reflection. Several questions, formulated in light of the assessments, were placed in front of them for personal reflection before moving to shared reflection through group discussion. These questions included – What do you see as the “heart of the matter” for discernment within the elder group? What patterns do you notice about God’s work to shape the leadership at this church? Within the current framework of leadership, who has benefited and who has been burdened? As a community of elders, what feelings need to be named as the elders move forward in conversation? What hopes, desires, doubts, or questions are beginning to emerge from this reflection on the future of the church? Is there a new discernment or a call to ongoing conversation from this reflection? What is God offering to the congregation in this season about participation in God’s preferred future? The desire to incorporate theological reflection into their gathering was to more fully engage in reflection of both their being and doing as leaders of the church. To lead their congregation through transition, reflection will be an ongoing necessity, both personally and corporately. Overwhelmingly, their reflections shared the need to maintain an unhurried, non-anxious posture that listens and pays attention to God in order to hear the call God is placing before them. Additionally, the need became evident to position their church as outward-facing toward the community they serve. Several elders pointed out the need to maintain the priorities of leadership as they seek to fulfill their church’s mission. While their first response as an elder group is prayer, a greater awareness was realized in how their framing of vision in communicating to the congregation impacts the future. The elder group was able to name the ways God had been at work; even with the pandemic causing challenges, there were also great avenues of opportunity. Through theological reflection, the elder group was able to name aloud things that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

We reminded them that the leadership of the church does not rest solely on them as an elder group. There are aspects of leadership as elders which are unrelinquishable, yet the senior minister, ministry staff and ministry leaders also hold aspects of the church’s leadership. While the elders took the assessment, we could have also probed the church’s ministry staff to gauge their leadership practices. Several questions were presented to the elder group for reflection: How are the three forms of leadership currently practiced at this church? What percentage of each of these three forms of leadership must the elders retain to be faithful to God’s purposes for this church? To define the percentage of leadership, the elders

should retain shed light on their specific role to prioritize vision and pastoral care. To name the realities of who they are and how they work gives clarity for the leadership structures at church while also communicating expectations to prospective elder candidates. We also discussed the organization and optimal size the elder group needs to do their work effectively. Several themes which emerged as priorities for the elders moving forward were to ignite and foster vision, endorsing and affirming the ways God is moving among the congregation. The contribution of vision comes from the senior minister and the ministry staff. As the elder group postures themselves to hear from God through prayer, Scripture, and life contexts, they can lead well through both known and unforeseen circumstances. The assessment became a point of reference throughout the meeting as a common source of language and purpose in deciding their next steps.

Overall, we believe this instrument is useful for elder groups, ministry teams, and other cohorts of leaders to assess themselves to seek self-awareness and clarity on an individual and corporate level. As we rework the instrument, we aim for three areas of change. First, we will utilize negative statements more fully throughout the five sections. This will allow the participant to be alerted at various times throughout the assessment, paying attention to specific word choice before giving an answer. Next, we will rework some of our language that caused confusion among the participants depending on their personal relationship with the elder. Finally, based on the ongoing dialogue with the elder group we will change the category of administrative leadership to empowering leadership. The word change here denotes a clearer meaning as this category of leadership is more closely related to bringing others along in ministry than simply ensuring ministry takes place.

The elder group in West Texas has utilized this assessment to better understand themselves, specifically in regard to leadership for the sake of spiritual vitality within their church. As this church aims to facilitate an elder selection process this Fall, the assessment provides a framework for the missing pieces of leadership they should look for in new elder candidates. To be a full-equipped group of elders under God's authority and design of leadership, we believe this instrument provided a posture of reflection to better lead their church through its upcoming transitions. Additionally, this exercise has served as a case study for the Siburt Institute as we continue to support healthy leadership systems among congregations.

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