

A Polycentric Alternative to Hierarchical Church Leadership

MA 202 Transformational Leadership Dissertation Research Project

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Required word count: 16,000

Actual word count: 17,489

Date submitted: June 9, 2022

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Unless noted, all Scripture used in this dissertation is from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA).

Citations using a series of numbers are books accessed on Perlego.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my wife, **Elizabeth**, for the incredible encouragement and support you have given me these past few years as I considered and then pursued working towards a Masters' Degree. Like so much in my life, you believing in me means everything!

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to **Méabh**, who has been so conscientious as I have worked on this dissertation and has heard too many times, "I just need to finish this one thing". Here is to a summer full of doing fun stuff together!

I wish to thank everyone who has been part of **the Table** these past few years, listened to my ideas and willingly jumped in. It is a joy to be on this journey with you. Thank you.

I appreciate the efforts of **Andrew Perriman**, who proofread the final paper and offered encouragement. Of course, any errors that remain in this dissertation are my responsibility.

To everyone at **IBI**, "thank you". Especially **Dr Alan Wilson** (no relation :), who always encouraged, challenged and asked great questions. This dissertation is a better work, thanks to you.

Finally, I have no conception of where I would be without the love of Jesus, the King who has continually pursued me, healed me and showered me with his grace and mercy!

Introduction

The church's first two millennia provide ample evidence that Jesus' teaching in Luke 22:24-30 to lead differently from the Gentiles has been largely disregarded. Rather than eschewing hierarchical paradigms, the church has established and embraced the leadership models of "the Gentiles" for most of its history.

Church history is replete with examples of leaders actively accumulating, protecting, and abusing power, frequently at the expense of those with less status and influence.¹ This abuse has occurred locally, regionally, and globally on large and small scales and has led to the church actively participating in torture, execution, and the blessing of war against Christians of other nations.

This dissertation will explore the teachings of Jesus regarding leadership within Luke's Gospel and related New Testament passages to discern an understanding of Jesus' intention regarding church leadership. Additionally, an examination of the history and impact of hierarchy, specifically related to the era of Christendom, will be addressed. Finally, this essay will propose a model where leadership is dispersed among a community of leaders rather than concentrated within a hierarchical structure.

Six key concepts, *Hierarchy*, *Christendom*, *Polycentric Leadership*, *APEST*, *Servant Leadership*, and *Mutuality*, are introduced and explored in the first chapter. The second chapter will

¹ The report released in May 2022 concerning the Southern Baptist Convention's history of abuse is sadly only the most recent example.

examine the leadership teachings of Jesus, New Testament writers, and leaders within the early church, exploring the leadership paradigm they envisioned. This chapter will likewise discuss the church's history of structuring itself hierarchically over the past two thousand years. The third chapter will propose a theoretical leadership model utilising a polycentric leadership structure incorporating the APEST model advocated by Alan Hirsch and others.

Chapter 1: Key Terms and Concepts

If the church is to remain faithful to the teachings of Jesus, its leadership philosophy must reject hierarchical structures and systems and contend for a leadership model characterised by mutuality, trust, and cruciformity. The topics of hierarchy, Christendom, polycentrism, APEST, Servant Leadership, and mutuality are explored below to understand the origins of hierarchy within the church and present an alternative leadership model.

CHRISTENDOM

Christendom is the customary way to refer to the relationship between the Christian church and the Roman Empire and, afterwards, the church's relationship with the nation-states of Europe (Murray 2011, p. 51; Noll 2000, p. 110). The term Christendom describes a "civilization where society and culture are profoundly informed by the Christian faith" and where the intended "goal was to provide a common religious home for the whole of society" (Taylor 2007, 1147769.25). In Europe, Christendom was "a continent-wide and millennium-long project to incarnate the gospel" (Murray 2010, p. 23).

The term came into use in England in the 800s; however, its origin is closely connected to the fourth century and Emperor Constantine (MacCulloch 2009, pp. 187-188). Under Constantine, Christianity shifted from an often-persecuted minority sect to becoming the empire's official religion (Murray 2018, 882225.10). In this process, "Europe became a self-proclaimed Christian society" (MacCulloch, 2009, p. 188).

Christendom's reach into every aspect of life presents challenges in describing it with specificity. Murray (2011, p. 51) illustrates this challenge by offering that Christendom was a "geographical region", a "historical era", a "civilisation", a "political arrangement", and "an ideology". An additional challenge to a succinct definition is that circumstances and history have created multiple variations of Christendom over time and across vast and diverse areas and cultures (Murray 2018, 882225.10).

The Impact of Christendom

Christendom's legacy is profound, both positively and negatively. While acknowledging multiple blessings of Christendom, Kreider and Kreider (2011, 887219.9) consider it "an impediment to the mission of God". Murray (2018, 882225.13), whose writing "celebrates the end of Christendom" and its "distorting influence of power, wealth, and status on the Christian story", adds that "the transition from Late Antiquity through the "Dark Ages" to the medieval world is incomprehensible without the contribution of Christendom. Its achievements were remarkable, as is its cultural, literary, and religious heritage".

Positive Impacts of Christendom

The early church's compassion and benevolence toward *the least of these* was a vital attribute which was institutionalised by and benefited under Christendom. Any serious discussion of Christendom's legacy must include the charitable and service-oriented organisations such as the hospitals, schools, and universities it created and maintained (Murray 2018, 882225.13; Taylor 2007, 1147769.25). Although many of these institutions have seen their control and oversight shift to secular, commonly governmental organisations, "the present-day welfare state can be understood as the long-term heir to

the early Christian church” (Taylor 2007, 1147769.25). Additionally, under Christendom, the church performed diplomacy, served as a lending institution, and “provided the intellectual life of the medieval West” as a source of art, music, publishing, and science (Stark 2014, 2391771.10).

Negative Impacts of Christendom

The Crusades, Inquisitions, and issues which led directly to the Reformation, such as simony, are commonly named when discussing the dark side of Christendom (MacCulloch 2009, p. 8; González 2010, pp. 367, 418-419). Christendom not only shaped Europe and the Roman Empire but also transformed the church (Taylor 2007, 1147769.25). Noll (2000, p 122) summarises the impact of Christendom by stating that it “affected the practice of the Christian faith in every way”. Alongside Murray’s (2018, 882225.13) comment concerning Christendom’s “distorting influence of power, wealth, and status on the Christian story”, Stark (2014, 2391771.10) adds that the “immense favoritism the Roman emperor Constantine showed toward Christianity did it substantial harm”. He adds that Christendom “destroyed [*Christianity’s*] most attractive and dynamic aspects, turning a high-intensity, grassroots movement into an arrogant institution controlled by an elite who often managed to be both brutal and lax” (Stark 2015, 738064.9). Clapp (1996, p. 30) concludes that the effect of the conflation of the church and the nation-state under Christendom was devastating.

As the history and impact of Christendom are too broad to address in-depth here, the focus will centre on the effect Christendom had and continues to have on the church’s hierarchical leadership structures. Emphasis will be placed on the division it created

between clergy and laity, the loss of community within the church and issues of status and power.

Post-Christendom

The era of Christendom has ended (MacCulloch 2009, p. 188; Murray 2011, p. 50). Noll (2000, pp. 125-126) states that Christendom was “fatally wounded—by the Renaissance, by Protestantism, by the modern nation-state, by Western atheism, and most recently by the vigorous spread of Christianity far beyond the borders of Europe”. While Christendom has lost its position at the centre of Western society, Taylor (2007, 1147769.25) correctly adds that “societies in the West will forever remain historically informed by Christianity”.

Post-Christendom has become a common way to express the new status that the church occupies (Kreider and Kreider 2011; Murray 2018; Bolger 2012). Under Christendom, the church operated from a position of power and influence it no longer holds. While some mourn what the church has lost as Christendom fades, many believe this post-Christendom era provides an opportunity for the church (Bolsinger 2015, pp. 34-35; Murray 2018, 882225.9; Taylor 2007, 1147769.25). The recognition that the church is living through an era described as post-Christendom requires it to reassess its structures, relationship to power and place in the world.

Hierarchical Leadership

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022) defines *hierarchy* as “a group that controls an organization and is divided into different levels” and “a system in which people or things are placed in a series of levels with different importance or status”. Purpura (2018, 535977.7)

writes, 'hierarchy is a combination of the Greek words *ἱερός* (meaning "sacred") and *ἀρχή* (meaning "beginning," "principle," or "sovereignty")'.

Greenleaf (2002, p. 74) posits that the origin of hierarchical structures, where a single individual sits atop a leadership pyramid, was derived from the biblical example of Moses. Most organisations in which people participate today, whether places of employment or social and religious institutions are hierarchical (Greenleaf 2002, p. 74; Fitch 2015).

Fitch (2015) states, "hierarchy has been overcome in Christ", adding that Jesus' instruction regarding Gentile leadership eliminated hierarchical structures as a model the church may employ. Despite this, hierarchy has been the predominant leadership model utilised throughout the church's existence.

The second chapter will explore hierarchy in depth, including factors which cause it to be incompatible within a community of Christians. The subsequent term discussed here, mutuality, is presented as a cruciform alternative to hierarchy.

Mutuality

Kouzes and Posner (1995, p. 155) affirm that for relationships to remain efficacious over an extended period, there must be a "sense of mutuality", which they describe as a "norm of reciprocity within teams and among partners". They contend that the capacity to work together towards common goals will be almost unachievable if one party always seems to give while the other consistently takes (Kouzes and Posner 1995, p. 155). Zscheile (2007, p.

55) contends that church leadership should be modelled on the Trinity, and if it is, mutuality will be at its core.

In discussing mutuality, two concepts, mutual accountability and mutual submission, are in mind. Mutual accountability contrasts the one-way model of responsibility found in hierarchical structures. Gunderson (2006, p. 111) states that when accountability is one-way rather than mutual, it is “the single most dangerous element found in many leadership structures of today”. He proposes that a lack of accountability places the leader “in a godlike role that only God is able to fill righteously” and that calling others to accountability while avoiding being accountable oneself often leads to self-deception and duplicitousness (p. 111). He adds that “one-way accountability invariably leads to authoritarian abuses of power” even among those well-intentioned because of the deleterious impact “unilateral power” has on the human heart (p. 111).

MacMillan (2001, pp. 147-148) presents mutual accountability as a crucial ingredient for building what he calls “High Performance Teams” and claims that when done well, it serves to free teams and team members, creating a culture imbued with the idea “that we are all in this together and will succeed or fail as a team”. Rothschild (2012, 1013546.15) remarks that without exception, “Every nonprofit must practice mutual accountability to achieve its purpose and mission”, and lack of mutual accountability produces entitlement which does not “produce the long-term, sustainable change in people’s lives”.

MacMillan (2001, p. 148) emphasises that mutual accountability occurs among peers in an organisation, not simply between a boss and a subordinate. When individuals trust that they

have permission to be open about their struggles and ask for help without judgement or negative consequences, there is a more significant potential for helping one another, sharing ideas, and a desire to see the entire team succeed (pp. 148-149). Challenges to implementing mutual accountability include the reality that it is a vastly different model from the hierarchical ones most individuals have worked in and may feel intrusive and constraining rather than natural (p. 148). Due to this, mutual accountability is frequently discussed; however, "it is seldom defined and rarely practiced" (p. 148).

The second aspect of mutuality is mutual submission. Fitch (2016, p. 37) claims that "mutual submission is a founding principle of the kingdom" and that submission must be "mutual, never unilateral". Snodgrass (1996, 558754.24) says plainly, "Christians are called to live in mutual submission, and *without mutual submission they cannot fulfill their destiny*".

Parkinson (2020, p. 80) adds that "authentic Christian leadership involves a willingness to lay down our own lives for the sake of others". Leadership which is not cruciform cannot be considered authentically Christlike.

Fitch (2016, p. 52) points to the Last Supper and claims that "the issue of mutual submission rushes to the forefront". He illustrates this by detailing Jesus' verbal response to the disciples' argument regarding their status in the kingdom in Luke 22 and the physical demonstration of his words in John 13:1-7, where he washes their feet and concludes that Jesus "could not be more explicit about the way we will relate to one another in this kingdom, about the way authority will be exercised" (Fitch 2016 p. 52).

There are passages within the New Testament that, taken on their own, have been used to invalidate mutual submission and only require specific individuals to submit themselves. For example, Hebrews 13:17 calls those in the church to submit to their leader's authority, and Ephesians 5:22 (NIVUK) instructs, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord." While these passages are frequently emphasised, scripture likewise encourages husbands to lay down their lives for their wives and leaders to lay down their lives for the flock they lead (Ephesians, 5:25; John 10:11-12).

Exegeting passages such as these must be viewed within the broader scope of New Testament scripture. Ephesians 5:22 cannot be understood except within the context of the clear statement Paul makes in the previous verse, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21 NIVUK). The Greek word Paul uses in verses 21 and 22 is *hypotassō*, and it is the word most frequently translated submit in the New Testament (Gunderson 2006, p. 114). Crucially, however, rather than submission rooted in "domination and control", Paul was inviting all into a new type of relationship founded on "the mutual and voluntary choice to love" (Gunderson 2006, p. 114).

Liefeld (1997, p. 140) argues that while the Ephesians passage could be understood to state that one group must submit to those of a higher status, such as in the military, viewing this passage as applying "to interpersonal relationships among individuals, with each deferring at appropriate times" is more in line with the larger context of the passage. He likewise points to the parallel verses regarding children and slaves, noting that the word used to describe their relationships with parents and masters respectively is the word for "obey",

not submit (p. 140). While Paul could have written the Ephesians 5:22 passage and included the word “obey”, which would have made it unambiguous, he did not (p. 140).

In addressing the Hebrews 13 passage, Parkinson (2020, p. 84) points out that the Greek word for leaders, which the writer of Hebrews used three times in that chapter, “was used primarily of one who acted as a guide in showing the way or setting an example to follow”. He suggests that Jesus’ choice to employ this same word in Luke 22, when commending his disciples to express their leadership through service, was due to its ability to convey the idea of holding a position of responsibility while simultaneously serving those being led (p. 84). Hebrews 13 encourages its recipients to imitate the faith of their leaders and “obey and submit to them” because their leaders are responsible to God for their leadership (p. 85). Parkinson (p. 85) concludes that “leadership is never to be equated with ruling over others, in an overbearing manner” and notes that leaders will at times persuade but never coerce their followers.

Although mutual submission is rooted in scripture, submission is and has been frequently utilised by those in power to abuse and control those with less or no power (Fitch 2016, p. 37). Likewise, submission is often viewed with suspicion as it seems to call for “a passive, weak life dominated by a negative self-image, a giving up of control and free will” (Snodgrass 1996, 558754.24). The submission described in this and other New Testament passages should be seen as a decision made from a position of strength based on love, a recognition of the other person’s worth and a sharing in the cruciform death and resurrection of the Messiah (Snodgrass 1996, 558754.24). Following the example of Jesus, it

should be the individual viewed as the leader who models cruciform leadership by always being the first to submit (Fitch 2016, p. 37).

As Snodgrass (1996, 558754.24) states regarding Ephesians 5:21, “It is important to note that this text does not ask some Christians to submit to other Christians. It asks all Christians to submit to each other. No privileged group is in view”.

While there may be agreement that mutual submission is a crucial and central aspect of the church’s life, the issues mentioned above have kept it a challenging and infrequently utilised practice. The third chapter of this essay will present a practical model of what healthy mutual submission could be.

Polycentric Leadership

Three individuals are essential in the discussion of polycentric leadership. Suzanne Morse Moomaw is an associate professor of Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia, focused on empowering healthy and sustainable communities. Writing for the Drucker Foundation in the late 1990s and envisioning community leadership in the future, Morse (1998, p. 234) presented a “polycentric view of community leadership”, which would have multiple centres of leadership that relate to each other. The topic of polycentric leadership was picked up in JR Woodward’s (2012) book, *Creating a Missional Culture*, which is frequently cited as introducing the topic to the discussion of church leadership.² Finally, Joseph Handley, the President of Asian Access, entitled his 2020 PhD

² Hirsch 2017, p. 215; Handley 2020, p. 17; Franklin 2021, p. 5 each notes Woodward’s contribution.

dissertation for Fuller Theological Seminary “*Polycentric Mission Leadership*”. Handley’s (2020; 2021a) thesis and subsequent writing have involved polycentric leadership within the Lausanne Movement.

A polycentric model arises from within an existing community and is collaborative by its very nature (Handley 2021b, p. 3). Rather than a hierarchical leadership model with a priest or pastor as the head of the church, a polycentric leadership structure involves multiple centres of leadership. Franklin and Niemandt (2016, p. 2) define polycentric leadership as “the concept of allowing for self-regulating centres of influence within a singular structure”. They add, “This occurs when there are many centres of power or importance within a political, cultural, or socio-economic system” (Franklin and Niemandt 2016, p. 2).

Although a group of individuals could lead using a polycentric model, this dissertation explores polycentrism operating as what Handley (2021b, p. 7) calls “a team of teams”. To clarify, each leadership centre will consist of a group rather than a single individual.

What Polycentric Leadership is Not

Polycentric leadership is neither centralised nor decentralised but exists with multiple interconnected centres and is “guided by a common vision held by the community” (Morse 1998, p. 234). Morse (1998, p. 234) asserts that in a polycentric model, leadership and decision-making must continue to occur; however, they will no longer be the domain of a few, nor will they occur at a distance from the larger community.

In contrast to flat leadership, which is a popular response to a hierarchical model and typically results in an abdication of leadership, the polycentric model acknowledges the importance of leadership (Woodward and White 2016, p. 57). Within a polycentric model, leadership is shared, permitting specific individuals the opportunity to lead when the situation matches their giftings and abilities while allowing them to move into a support role as the circumstances call for those with different expertise to assume leadership (Goldsmith 2010).

Although polycentrism will widen the scope of leadership within a community, that does not mean everyone will have leadership responsibility. Hirsch and Catchim (2012, p. 179) argue that only those with a stake in the community should participate in significant decisions, as they are the ones who must deal with the results of those decisions.

Benefits of a Polycentric Leadership Model

Successfully implementing a polycentric model presents multiple potential benefits.

Polycentrism allows leaders to focus on their areas of strength rather than becoming generalists (Goldsmith 2010). Critical decisions will involve multiple centres and viewpoints; therefore, decisions would not be subject to the blind spots of a single decision-maker and would naturally draw upon the diverse wisdom and giftings latent within the organisation (Handley 2020, p. 80).

A Christian's defining aspect of life is as a follower of Jesus. However, demonstrating how to be a follower and providing the training and empowerment necessary to follow is a neglected aspect of Christian leadership and leadership in general (Parkinson 2020, p. 78).

That the individual at the top of the church leadership structure is in a constant mode of leading and fails to model for the community how to be a follower is a significant concern (Woodward and White 2016, pp. 58). A polycentric model addresses the issue of followership because, at its heart, it involves “a relational group of people who learn to share responsibility, engaging in both leading and following” (Woodward and White 2016, pp. 58).

Handley (2021a, p. 2) proposes that polycentric models aid in developing long-term sustainable organisations and effectively address the tribalism rampant in today’s world. Polycentrism reflects the biblical idea from Romans 12:4-5 that we are all members of the body, yet with different gifts and functions and therefore emphasises the need for all to contribute (Handley 2021a, p. 2).

A benefit for a network of churches in diverse locations or even distinct neighbourhoods within a city-wide congregation is that a polycentric model brings local knowledge and understanding to the decision-making process (Franklin 2021, p. 15).

What is Necessary for Polycentric Leadership to Function?

Several factors must exist for polycentric leadership to function. Leading polycentrically will be a paradigm shift for most. Since leading within hierarchical structures will be what seems normal, those attempting to lead in a new way will need to unlearn familiar habits and patterns and relearn new ones.

Handley (2021a, p. 5), advocates for a polycentric model, claiming that “for a leader to be effective today, we must be collaborative in our approach, willing to work in a team-centred manner where no one is above another, and all serve together toward the goals of their particular mission”. While Handley is speaking of a global organisation, the principle would apply to a network of local churches or a single congregation.

Fitch (2015) states that within a church community, rather than a single leader in charge, leadership must be polycentric, which requires each leader to practise mutual submission. Leading polycentrically is a recognition that one individual cannot adequately address all matters within the community and models how leaders relate and work together for the common good (Fitch 2015). Polycentric leadership is birthed within an organisation because this type of leadership must be “built on enduring relationships and grounded in a foundation of deep trust” and requires leaders with the capacity and willingness “to empower others more than themselves” (Handley 2021a, p. 7).

The chart below lists six themes that Handley (2021a, p. 4) states are necessary for polycentric leadership and, when discharged collaboratively, “result in a stronger approach to leading mission movements”.

Theme	Components of The Theme
Charisma	Charismatic Value-based Spiritual
Collaborative	Collaboration Network Participate Shared Collective
Communal	Community Contractual or Cooperative Own Ecosystem Mutual Visual Team
Relational	Empowerment Encouragement Relational
Freedom	Entrepreneurial Freedom to Structure
Diverse	Diversity Cross-cultural

Handley's use of "charisma" deserves comment. He describes charisma, which he sees as crucial for leading in a polycentric setting, differently than is typically understood when discussing leaders (Handley 2021a, p. 4). When conceived of in a leader, charisma conjures images of the *larger than life* individual with a strong personality and a compelling vision (Collins 2001, pp. 72-73; Senge 1990, p. 355).³ Handley (2021a, p. 4) does not provide a specific definition for charisma in his writing but states that it "is more than just having charismatic personality" as it includes "strength of character, trustworthiness, and a faithful presence". He also emphasises that charisma requires a solid "spiritual foundation" and "core values" (2021a, p. 4). Handley (2020, p. 85) cites House (1976, p. 268) to add that "charismatic leadership embodies the leadership characteristics of vision, inspiration, performance-oriented, decisive, and high integrity".

Polycentrism Reflects the Relationship of the Trinity

A critical theological framework to understand when examining leadership within the church is the nature of the Trinity.⁴ Woodward and White (2016, pp. 58-59) present polycentrism as a leadership model for the church and contend it reflects "the interrelations of the Trinity, an interdependent, communal, relational, participatory, self-surrendering and self-giving approach to leadership". Hjalmarson (2013, p. 19) believes that if leadership within the church is viewed through the lens of the Trinity, hierarchical leadership will be rejected.

³ It should be noted that Collins and Senge present the standard view of a charismatic leader as a potential liability for the leader and the organisation.

⁴ There is currently a debate within the Evangelical church regarding Eternal Submission, which deals specifically with the relationship between Jesus and the Father (Holsclaw 2016). This paper's viewpoint is that the members of the Trinity share in glory and authority and exist without hierarchy.

In describing the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Volf (1998, p. 361) writes, “within a community of perfect love between persons who share all the divine attributes, a notion of hierarchy and subordination is inconceivable”. He adds that the relationship within the Trinity is characterised not by a hierarchy or “pyramidal dominance” but instead by “a polycentric and symmetrical reciprocity” (Volf 1998, p. 361). This concept from Volf adds essential context to Jesus’ teaching on hierarchy discussed previously. Franklin (2021, p. 4) refers to Volf’s latter quote and claims he is hinting “at a Trinitarian premise for polycentrism through his description of subordination within the triune God”.

Handley (2021, pp. 2-3) likewise contends that the members of the Trinity lead polycentrically and model trust, mutuality, respect, and shared life, which are essential for a polycentric form of leadership. He concludes, “It is in their Trinitarian example that this polycentric model draws its greatest strength” (Handley 2020, p. 205).

Challenges to Leading Polycentrically

A fundamental challenge to leading polycentrically is, as referenced previously, that it is a paradigm shift in how most perceive leadership. When unlearning one practice and learning a new one, it is natural to revert to what is known and comfortable when encountering pressure or stress. This fact of human nature makes leading in a polycentric manner challenging because when difficult or stressful situations arise, people will revert to hierarchical leadership models (Hjalmarson 2013, p. 3). Bolsinger (2015, pp. 38-39) remarks that the world is changing, requiring new thinking and new models; however, most of today’s church leaders learned under a Christendom worldview, where hierarchical leadership has been institutionalised. Leadership has inherent stress and challenging

situations, and certainty is desired at those moments. Polycentric leadership is uncharted territory for most, and as such, there will be a tendency to jettison it for the familiarity of hierarchy when under stress.

In chapter three, the paper will present a theoretical model for a polycentric leadership model within a network of local churches. The model will endeavour to address these challenges.

APEST

The acronym APEST, which was called APEPT when first developed by Frost and Hirsch in their 2003 book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, is a methodology based on Ephesians chapter four, where Paul writes;

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ”. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

The five letters in APEST represent the five gifts Paul recounts Jesus giving to the church in Ephesians 4:11: Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd/Pastor, and Teacher. While Frost and Hirsch (2003, p. 166) were not the first to focus on these five gifts collectively, they present their APEST model as a more practical and less ponderous means of discussing what has typically been referred to as the “fivefold ministry”. In his third major work on

APEST, *The Permanent Revolution*, Hirsch and Catchim (2012, p. xix) began using the word Shepherd rather than Pastor, and APEPT became APEST.⁵

A foundational principle of the APEST methodology is that the church must rediscover and reintegrate the roles of apostle, prophet and evangelist. Although all five roles are gifts from Jesus and necessary for the church to accomplish its mission, since Christendom, the church has adopted a hierarchical leadership structure with pastor and teacher occupying the predominant role (Fitch 2016, p. 153; Frost and Hirsch 2003, pp. 178-179; Murray 2018, 882225.17). Within Christendom, apostles, prophets and evangelists were no longer viewed as necessary because everyone was already “Christian”, and the mission of the church was now “accomplished by top-down methods, including coercion and offering inducements” (Murray 2018, 882225.17). Murray (2018, 882225.13) contends that within Christendom, the church’s orientation shifted from mission to maintenance, dramatically impacting church leadership. If everyone was already Christian, evangelists became superfluous, and prophets “challenging the status quo” or apostles threatening the established boundaries of the church were not welcome (Murray 2018, 882225.13). By effectively exiling apostles, prophets and evangelists, “all ministry has been forced to fit into the predetermined formats of shepherd and teacher, pastor and theologian, and nothing else has legitimacy” (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, p. 17).

⁵ This dissertation will exclusively utilise the more recent APEST unless directly quoting a source. When referring to these five gifts in literature prior to *The Shaping of Things to Come*, the phrase “fivefold ministry” will typically be used.

APEST and Hierarchy

Frost and Hirsch (2003, p. 225) present the APEST model of leadership as a remedy for hierarchical models, which have created sharp boundaries between clergy and laity, empowering the former and confining much of the latter to inaction and disengagement. Fitch (2016, pp. 152-153) asks the question, “How could a people of God function without hierarchy?” and proposes these five gifts, practised in “mutual submission to one another”, under the authority of the Lord as the answer. Hirsch (2017, 183) adds that leadership in the New Testament “is based on the cruciform model of Jesus and is therefore meant to be radically non-hierarchical and polycentric.”

Despite explicitly declaring APEST a non-hierarchical model, these ministry gifts have frequently been exercised through a hierarchical lens (Hirsch 2017, p. 181). Churches with unbiblical leadership philosophies, specifically those where power and authority rest with a few, tend to use APEST “to bolster hierarchical religious authority”, and the consequences are nearly always disastrous (Hirsch 2017, pp. 182-183). Churches, where the leader is viewed as “God’s anointed” or the pastor functions as a CEO, tend to use APEST to reinforce rather than remove hierarchy (Hirsch 2017, p. 182). These five gifts should be viewed as “functions” carried out by those in the church and not “offices” held (Frost and Hirsch 2003, p. 168; Wimber 1997, p. 11). Hirsch (2017, p. 183) contends that APEST should be viewed considering the ministry of the entire church body rather than simply the ministry of leaders because when Ephesians 4 is approached as primarily a leadership text, it inescapably leads to disputes and dysfunction.

Hirsch (2017, p. 183) believes that the ease with which APEST can become a tool for the misuse of religious power is a crucial reason why many churches have rejected it. The examples of churches that have used APEST to empower their leaders at the congregation's expense have created straw men providing ample targets, allowing the wider church to write the concept off with little consideration (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, p. 5).

Ephesians 4

A crucial and reasonable question that must be addressed when considering APEST is whether this one verse in Ephesians should receive the importance APEST requires. While Hirsch and his co-authors have developed an extensive methodology around APEST, the fact is that these five gifts are found together only in the Ephesians 4:11 passage. Apostle, prophet and teacher are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11, but all five are mentioned together only here.

Hirsch provides the following arguments as to why the lack of APEST elsewhere in scripture does not diminish its importance and why Ephesians, and this section specifically, should receive considerable weight when considering how the church functions and how it should be structured.

Ephesians is a General Epistle

Although there are scholars who dispute Paul's authorship, there is a widespread consensus affirming both Paul's authorship and that Ephesians should be considered a general letter relevant to the broader church (Liefeld 1997, p. 20; Snodgrass 1996, 558754.10; Roberts

2016, 561617.12).⁶ The letter to the Ephesians is a general letter intended to be read by multiple congregations (Frost and Hirsch 2003, pp. 165-166). Hirsch and Catchim (2012, p. 10) contrast Ephesians to Galatians and Second Corinthians, which, although containing material that can be extrapolated to the broader church, were written to address specific issues within single congregations.

Ephesians Contains Paul's Best Thinking on the Church.

Ephesians is one of the later letters Paul wrote and therefore contains his most developed and mature thinking on the nature of the church (Hirsch 2012, pp. 10-11; Woodward 2012, pp. 55-56). Hirsch (2012, p. 10) bolsters his argument by citing Barth (1974), who refers to this section of Ephesians as “The Constitution of the Church” and who “considers verses 11 and 12 the means of operationalizing it”. Snodgrass (1996, 558754.10) affirms this view of Ephesians, which he describes as “one of the most essential works for understanding the church” and adds, “Ephesians tells us how to be the church”. Liefeld (1997, p. 13) writes, “More than any other book in the Bible, Ephesians displays the great purpose and plan of God for the church”. Snyder (2004, 2986797.13) presents this passage as evidence that “spiritual gifts form the connecting link between God’s cosmic plan for the church and the description of normal local church life” and adds that the church carries out the work God has given it through the exercising of the gifts he has provided.

Brisco (2021), when commenting on the importance given to Ephesians 4, says this chapter has the distinction of being the lone passage of scripture promising both maturity and unity.

⁶ Snodgrass (1996, 558754.10) cites C. Leslie Mitton’s, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (1951), as a leading work against Pauline authorship.

Critique of APEST

The church has few ideas that do not have detractors and proponents. APEST is no different. Some who are favourable toward the concept of APEST still question whether Hirsch and others take the methodology beyond where scripture does. Fitch states he is “an advocate of APEST but suspects it has been taken too far at times” (Fitch and Grigg 2013). Roberts (2016, 561617.21) comments on the Ephesians 4 passage noting that there have been “elaborate missional models based on the five-fold schema”. He considers these efforts sincere but pushes back that this passage does not provide the required detail (Roberts 2016, 561617.21). Although he does not reference APEST or Hirsch in the text, he footnotes this section and describes *The Permanent Revolution* by Hirsch and Catchim (2012) as “a creative discussion of this passage and its implications for today’s church” (Roberts 2016, 561617.21).

An additional criticism involves a debate concerning whether “apostle” refers only to the original carriers of that designation and would no longer be active within the church or whether it was a gift bestowed for the ongoing sustaining of the church (Fitch 2016, p. 154; Hirsch and Catchim 2012, pp. 98-99). In response, it must be clarified that the original twelve Apostles had a unique, never to be replicated role (Hirsch 2012, pp. 98-99; Wimber 1997, p. 11). There are precise functions, such as authoring scripture, which the original twelve Apostles performed that are not within the purview of what some refer to as ‘little “a” apostles’ (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, p. 98; Wimber 1997, p. 11). As with each APEST role, contemporary apostles should “draw their vocation from the biblical archetypes that precede, inform, and inspire them” (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, p. 98). For example, “Apostles

were authorized and sent to preach the gospel and to plant, nurture, and oversee churches” (Roberts 2016, 561617.21). These appear to be roles that those functioning as little “a” apostles should continue to perform.

Regarding whether these five APEST roles were only for a certain point in history, Roberts (2016, 561617.21) states that the Ephesians 4:11 passage presents the five gifts as people who will serve the church throughout its history, not simply during its foundation. Fitch (2016, p. 154) concurs that he is “convinced “apostle” is an ongoing gift in the church”. There is no biblical support for the idea that spiritual gifts would cease following the early church, and arguments to the contrary tend to rely on secondary, non-biblical sources (Snyder 2004, 2986797.13).⁷

A Brief Description of the Five APEST Functions

Hirsch and his co-authors develop the five functions extensively in their writings, and a brief description of each role is provided here. It is essential to recognise that the descriptions provided “are not mutually exclusive”, and individuals may function in multiple roles (Frost and Hirsch 2003, p 169). Roberts (2016, 561617.21) points out that Paul “was an apostle (Eph 1:1). Yet he also evangelized (1 Cor 1:17), taught (Col 1:28), and exercised pastoral oversight of his churches (1 Thess 1–5). Moreover, it’s likely that Paul prophesied (1 Cor 13:2: 14:3–6, 37)”. Patzia (2001, p. 182) contends that leadership promoted by the early church should be viewed more as “overlapping circles than a row of separate entities”. The

⁷ This dissertation recognises that Cessationism holds that spiritual gifts only existed to assist in establishing the church and are no longer active; however, it does not find that viewpoint compelling.

five APEST functions should likewise be understood as overlapping circles rather than roles with clearly defined boundaries.

Apostle: The word apostle means “sent one” (Patzia 2001, p. 155). Apostles call people to live in God’s kingdom and move the church to begin works in new locations (Fitch 2016, p. 153). Apostles are catalysts who move the church beyond its current boundaries and cultures (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, p. xxxviii; Snyder 2004, 2986797.13).

Prophet: The critical function of the prophet is to call the church to live lives of covenant faithfulness, and they are “passionately concerned with living a life morally consistent with the covenant—a simple and authentic life of justice, holiness and righteousness” (Hirsch 2017, p. xxxiii). Prophets bring God’s truth into various situations, especially dealing with issues of injustice, and direct the church to be present with the poor and the marginalised (Fitch 2016, p. 153).

Evangelist: Hirsch and Catchim (2012, p. 35) describe evangelists as those who “are always looking to create a positive encounter between people and the core messages of the church, especially the gospel. Their main role is proclaiming the gospel in ways that draw people in (Brisco, 2021; Snyder 2004, 2986796.13). Evangelists are gospel storytellers who recruit and enlist “others to what God is doing in and through the church” (Hirsch 2017, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv). Evangelists foster an ethos of hospitality within the church so that it is a welcoming community (Woodward and White 2016, p. 44).

Shepherd/Pastor: This role is concerned with developing and maintaining life-giving community and relationships (Hirsch 2017, p. xxxiv.). Pastors watch over individuals and the community, providing protection from those who would cause harm and creating an environment where people are encouraged to seek reconciliation and healing of previous hurts (Brisco 2021; Woodward and White 2016, p. 44). Shepherds likewise have a responsibility to promote spiritual formation within the community (Hirsch and Catchim 2017, p. 8).

Teacher: The teacher is responsible for communicating and explaining what God has revealed to the church, thereby deepening faith (Fitch 2016, p. 154; Hirsch and Catchim 2017, p. 8). Teachers immerse “people into God’s story and instruct how to dwell faithfully” within that story (Woodward and White 2016, p. 45). Hirsch (2017, p. xxxiv) adds that the teacher is “concerned with the mediation and appropriation of wisdom and understanding” and embedding its truth within the community so that it will be bequeathed to future generations.

In addition to shepherd and teacher becoming the predominant roles since Christendom, there is a debate whether Pastor/Shepherd and Teacher should be considered one gift or two distinct gifts. Liefeld (1997, pp. 104-105) explains the foundation of the debate by pointing out that in the original Greek, the two words are combined using a lone article rather than each having their own. He argues that while the gifts are closely related, and pastors must provide for the sheep, without question, some individuals are more gifted at teaching and others at shepherding (Liefeld 1997, pp 104-105). APEST proponents view these as two distinct roles. However, whether they are one or two, the more significant

concern remains the dominant role they have played in the church under Christendom.

Whether pastor and teacher should be considered one gift or two, as Snyder (2004, 2986797.13) offers, this issue is not crucial as each gift is fluid and overlapping.

The Central Function and Focus of APEST

Although the diversity and distinctiveness of the five gifts are essential, Roberts (2016, 561617.21) emphasises that when examining these five roles, what they have in common is that they are each a “gift from Christ to the church”.

Hirsch and Catchim (2012, p. 21) contend that interpretations that see Ephesians 4 as a leadership text are informed more by the hierarchical structures of the modern church than by a proper reading of the passage. Ephesians 4:7, which introduces the section regarding Christ’s giving of gifts, reads: “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it”. Hirsch and Catchim (2012, p. 21) contend that Paul’s intention is to be understood as applying to all people, both now and at the time it was written. Liefeld (1997, pp. 105-106) adds that viewing this passage as “every believer is gifted and contributes to the building up of the body” is the most likely understanding (Liefeld 1997, pp. 105-106). This understanding sees APEST gifts as given to everyone in the church to benefit all rather than “an elite few” (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, p. 21).

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf developed the idea of servant leadership in his seminal 1977 book entitled *Servant Leadership*, and although the book was written for business leaders, the concept has been popular among church leaders. While Jesus unquestionably embodied

what both servanthood and leadership should be, valid concerns regarding the term *Servant Leadership* and its usage have been raised (Elmer 2009, location 1562; Ford 2012, p. 86; Yung 2021, 2998283.4; Zscheile 2007, pp. 54-55).

Concerns Regarding Servant Leadership

Qualms regarding servant leadership begin with the words themselves. Leader and servant do not carry the same importance in scripture or Jesus' teaching specifically. The word servant appears far more frequently in the New Testament than the word leader (Ford 2012, p. 94; Elmer 2009, location 1562-1566). When Jesus was asked questions about leadership, his answers consistently addressed servanthood rather than leadership (Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 22:24-27).

A second concern regarding servant and leader is that they appear to contradict one another (Ford 2012, p. 85; Gunderson 2006, p. 16). Greenleaf (2002, p. 27) acknowledges this issue when he writes, "The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types". Yung (2021, 2998283.4) points out a tension that exists for one who wishes to be a servant first and a leader by asking an important question, 'Is it possible for sinful humans consciously to aspire to lead and still prioritize "servant first" over "leader first"?' Elmer (2009, location 1562) likewise notes that the term *servant-leader* is unhelpful, noting that "we don't create similar hybrids when discussing other gifts in the church: servant teacher, servant pray-er, servant encourager, servant helper and so on". He hypothesizes that merging these terms was meant to address abuse within the church, yet it has had a minimal effect (Elmer 2009, location 1562). Although Greenleaf's primary audience was business leaders, not church leaders, Elmer's point raises an important question; has

servant been readily conjoined to leader and not other roles within the church due to the inherent challenge of being a leader and a servant?

A final objection regarding the words is that the order is wrong as servant is modifying the word leadership, despite the clear evidence of scripture that servant, not leader, is the central theme (Ledbetter, Banks, and Greenhalgh, 2004, pp. 110-111; Yung 2021, 2998283.4).

The unease regarding the usage of the wording of servant leadership is not simply semantic. While the concept of servant leadership is laudable, the reality is that the term is often used self-descriptively by leaders who are not servants and by some who intentionally manipulate the term to justify their controlling behaviour (Elmer 2009, location 1556; Ford 2012, p. 86).

Gunderson (2006, p. 16) adds that it is “tragic that those who most use the language of servanthood are often the greatest abusers and exploiters of other people”. This issue has led, at times, to servant leadership perpetuating “the abuse of historically marginalized people, such as women and racial minorities” (Zscheile 2007, pp. 54-55).

An “examination of Jesus’s personal example and teachings, the apostles’ self-understanding of their calling, and the vocabulary on leading and serving demonstrates clearly that the heart of the New Testament understanding of ministry is primarily about servanthood and not leadership” (Yung 2021, 2998283.4).

Characteristics of a Servant Leader

While the scrutiny servant leadership has faced is deserved, Greenleaf's (2002, p. 27) test to determine whether an individual is a servant leader, summarised in the question, "Do those served grow as persons?" remains a wise standard. Whether the servant leadership concept is accepted or rejected, being able to answer Greenleaf's (2002, p. 27) question, "Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?", affirmatively is a crucial goal.

Jesus was not simply a servant leader. He was a servant who called his followers to become servants. As Parkinson (2020, p. 79) notes, "the motif that most significantly shapes Jesus' self-understanding in leadership is that of servant". Any attempt to be seen as a servant will likely be viewed as contrived; alternatively, if "servanthood is seen as our deepest identification with Christ and inhabits our being, then serving others will be a natural, often unconscious, expression" (Elmer 2009, location 160). Elmer (2009, location 161) presents this point as the main idea behind the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46, where servants were not tracking their good deeds but doing what was natural.

This section is not meant to denigrate or downplay the role of leaders in the church and agrees wholeheartedly with Yung's (2021, 2998283.2) assessment that, "This does not mean that the church does not need leaders. In fact, we are in desperate need of such today. But true spiritual leadership is exercised or results only when we have learned genuine servanthood and submission."

This chapter has introduced themes which will be considered henceforth. Chapter two will examine the history and impact of Christendom and hierarchical leadership on the church. The final chapter will discuss how a polycentric leadership model, where mutuality is lived out and based upon the APEST paradigm, can empower the church to lead in the servant model Jesus demonstrated and modelled.

Chapter 2: Church Leadership and Hierarchy

Leadership and Hierarchy in the New Testament

Jesus' clear teaching regarding hierarchical leadership within his church has been disregarded for most of the church's history. Hierarchical structures and systems have become entrenched despite Jesus' desire that the leadership methods of the Gentile kings, leaders and benefactors were to have no place within his kingdom.

This chapter examines four gospel passages where Jesus discusses the leadership methods of the Gentiles. Afterwards, there will be an exploration of how New Testament writers understood Jesus' teaching, followed by an overview of various transitions in church leadership that occurred prior to and during Christendom. Finally, three crucial aspects of the church which were dramatically impacted by the continued employment of hierarchical systems and remain problematic, the clergy-laity division, the alignment with worldly power and status and the loss of community, will be critiqued.

Jesus Speaks to Leadership and Hierarchy

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:24-27).

All four gospel accounts detail Jesus' teaching on leadership in light of the Twelve's attempts to acquire power, status and position. The synoptic gospels record Jesus verbally addressing the topic, while John presents Jesus washing the disciples' feet and explaining, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).

The gospel passages referenced above occur during the final days of Jesus' life. The event recorded, with slightly different details in Matthew and Mark, occurs as Jesus approaches the city of Jerusalem. After Jesus informs the Twelve of his impending death, James and John request positions of power and status when he enters his glory. Specifically, they ask for the seats on his left and right hand to be granted to them. Matthew records the mother of James and John approaching Jesus with this request; however, Jesus' response is to the brothers, indicating the actual source of the appeal (Blomberg 1992, 2694390.13). Matthew and Mark record the remaining Apostles' indignation towards James and John. The anger of the Twelve was not at the callousness and timing of the sons of Zebedee's request but rather envy that they could lose access to the status and power the brothers sought (Garland 2015, 560631.12). Luke's passage describes a similar discussion during the Last Supper, leading to an argument among the Twelve regarding their status. John's account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet also occurs during the Last Supper and is potentially in response to the conversation Luke records (Bock 1998, 559238.83).

The three synoptic gospels record Jesus, rather than directly addressing the dispute, contrasting his hope for how his disciples will lead with how the Gentile rulers around them performed their leadership roles (Liefeld and Pao 2007, 558453.17; Bock 2012, 560066.23).

Matthew 20:25 and Mark 10:42 record Jesus differentiating his kingdom from “rulers of the Gentiles” and “their high officials”. Luke 22:25 records Jesus using the terms “kings of the Gentiles” and “Benefactors”, which Green (1997, 2015731.24) claims to be relevant due to the Twelve’s desire to be lauded as benefactors.

In describing his hope for how his followers would lead, Jesus contrasted leadership in his kingdom with the leadership paradigm of his day (Guthrie 2015, 2039613.18). Jesus’ objection to the Gentile leaders is that they “lord it over” those they lead, which one of Jesus’ hearers, Peter, will later warn church elders against in 1 Peter 5:3 (Liefeld and Pao 2007, 558453.17). Garland (2011, 559312.150) notes that lording it over, ‘here means to “exercise power over them” and adds that the reasonable implication addresses the human “tendency towards compulsion or oppression which is immanent in all earthly power’.

Jesus’ teaching regarding how leadership would function within his kingdom is inclusive of leadership within the church.⁸ Bock (1996, 1285282.144) cites Marshall’s (1978, p. 813) commentary on the Luke 22 passage and states that Marshall “correctly sees that church leadership is in view, though it is initially the Apostles who are addressed; the point made ultimately applies to the full range of church leaders”.

While a substantial portion of the literature focuses on the phrase, “lord it over”, Fitch (2021) contends this is to be contrasted with Jesus’ hope that his followers would lead

⁸ There is not space here to address the relationship between the kingdom and the church, however, as Snyder (2001, p. 80) correctly notes, “the church is not the kingdom; neither is it unrelated to the kingdom. It is the witness to the kingdom and, when anointed and animated by the Holy Spirit, becomes in a partial though not unambiguous way the sign, prototype and pilot project of the kingdom on earth”.

“among you”. Jesus calls the Twelve to serve among those they lead as equals rather than distancing themselves, and this authority to lead is for the current era and the future (Bock 1996, 1285282.144).

Jesus’ warning in Luke 22:25, which addresses individuals he refers to as “Benefactors”, deserves an explanation. “Benefactor” was an honorary title given to a person who had contributed to the good of a community through the patronage system existing at that time, often through the construction of facilities meant for the benefit of the public (Green 1997, 2015731.16; Liefeld and Pao 2007, 558453.17). While benefactors contributed to the common good, their benevolence was given with an expectation that it would be repaid with gratitude (Winter 1988, pp. 90-91). Wealth was necessary to thrive as a benefactor in this system and, when present, allowed the benefactor to provide leadership and receive honour and status (Green 1997, 2015731.24).

The repayment the benefactor commonly sought was respect, status, and prestige, rather than financial remuneration. Dio Chrysostom (De lege 75.78; 1 Glor. 66.2), cited by Winter (1988, p. 91) and Garland (2011, 559312.150), claimed the honour and public recognition the benefactor received was considered “more precious than life itself for the benefactor”. Status and recognition are at the heart of Jesus’ interaction with his disciples in the four passages studied.

An example of the patronage system, showing a benefactor interacting with those in his debt, is seen in Luke 7:2-10 (Green 1997, 2015731.16; Seo 2015, 880013.9). Luke introduces a centurion, who had commissioned the construction of a synagogue in Capernaum, sending

Jewish elders to intercede with Jesus regarding an ailing servant (Green 1997, 2015731.16).

The Jewish elders approach Jesus on behalf of their benefactor, requesting Jesus heal this man's servant and claiming the centurion "is worthy of having you do this for him" (Luke 7:4). As the Jewish elders converse with Jesus, the words they employ illustrate their participation within the system of obligation to their benefactor (Green 1997, 2015731.16).

In the preceding chapter, Luke 6:34-36, Jesus commented on two economies existing in his day (Green 1997, 2015731.16). One was based upon kinship, where people gave without expectation of return, and the second was a patronage system based on an obligation to repay, where benefactors thrived (2015731.16). Jesus contrasted these two systems, instructing his followers to treat everyone as though they belonged to the former and to perform their giving with no expectation that their generosity would be repaid (2015731.16).

Although Jesus speaks negatively of leaders and benefactors, his comments above do not reject the role of a benefactor but rather "the interest in domination that is evidenced by many rulers who try to mask their tyranny with a flourish of public works" (Danker 1982, p. 324, cited by Garland 2012, 559312.150). However, like God, the generosity and service of his followers are to be given without expectation of return (Green 1997, 2015731.24; Seo 2015, 880013.9).

Jesus' words are not diminishing the role of leaders or benefactors. He is, however, creating a stark contrast between the examples the disciples see at present and how his followers

shall act. As Green (1997, 2015731.24) correctly states, “Jesus wants his disciples to lead, but in a wholly unconventional way”.

The New Testament’s Presentation of Jesus’ Leadership Model

A review of the literature regarding the governing structures the early church employed prior to the advent of Christendom reveals a significant level of ambiguity, allowing for a wide range of interpretations (Patzia 2001, p. 152). Patzia (pp. 152-153) described studying the leadership models of the early church as a project which tends to be subjective and “characterized more by *eisegesis* (reading *into* the text) than *exegesis* (discovering meaning *out* of the text)”. Beyond the fact that scholars generally approach the text with their own “presuppositions and methodologies”, there are additional reasons for this difficulty (p. 152).

In addition to the ambiguity mentioned above, the New Testament writers showed exceedingly more concern with how leadership was practised than presenting a specific leadership model (Parkinson 2020, p. 81). To illustrate an additional challenge, the book of Acts, while detailing events from the 30s CE, was likely written five decades later, which raises the question of whether Luke, in detailing how the church functioned previously, projected practices current in his day back into the text (Patzia 2001, p. 153).

Still, it remains beyond serious contention that Christendom dramatically transformed the church’s form and nature as it transitioned from a marginalised and often persecuted religious sect to its subsequent alignment with the Roman Empire (Murray 2018, 882225.10; Stark 2003, 738064.9). Despite the Christendom era having ended, several centuries of its

influence have resulted in an institutionalised church that continues to behave as if it still possessed the position of power and influence it no longer occupies (Clapp 1996, p. 23; Hirsch and Ferguson 2011, p. 87).

Peter and Paul, like Jesus, depict and model leadership that rejects hegemony and seeks mutuality. In 1 Peter 5:3, the Apostle writes to elders in the church and instructs them, “Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock”. McKnight (1996, 560812.26) offers that this passage is likely Peter’s reflection on Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:42. Despite being one of the Twelve, he presents himself in 1 Peter 5:1 as a “fellow elder” (NIV), which models the very humility he is calling forth in them (McKnight 1996, 560812.26).

Paul likewise contrasts leadership among those he leads to hierarchical models when he writes in 2 Corinthians 1:24, “I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, *we are workers with you* for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith” (emphasis mine). The Greek word Paul uses to express lording it over is the same one Jesus used in Luke 22 and is used as a contrast to how God rules (Guthrie 2015, 2039613.18).

The church was born in a world that was significantly hierarchical in nearly every aspect of life, and Graeco-Roman cities, Jewish synagogues and families each had a very similar way of comprehending and carrying out leadership (Clarke 2000, pp. 145-147). An individual’s honour and status played a role not only within official civil contexts but also within voluntary organisations (Clarke 2000, p. 146).

Paul's writings illustrate that leadership and structures were not uniform from church to church, yet he still addressed multiple churches regarding authority, status, and leadership (Clarke 2000, pp. 173-174). For example, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he addressed two issues, taking others to court (1 Corinthians 6:1-11) and table fellowship (1 Corinthians 11:17-34), where those of higher status were using their "social status as a tool with which to alienate or crush the poor" (pp. 181, 184-185). Although there is not space to detail each instance, Clarke (pp. 189-202) notes that Paul addresses issues of status, authority and leadership in other letters, including Romans, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians and Philemon. He summarises this survey by noting that the leaders of various churches continued to be "influenced by the patterns of leadership which prevailed around them", and some individuals preoccupied with status continued to find their way into church leadership (p. 207).

Although some scholars contend that Paul's "leadership was both authoritarian and manipulative", Clarke (2000, pp. 210-214, 232) argues that this view of Paul is incorrect and that it is Paul's opponents who are more correctly described as manipulative and authoritarian.⁹ He makes his case by stating that Paul consistently eschews "'worldly' ways of exercising authority" and instead assumes a place of weakness, adding that Paul's authority is not used for his benefit but is consistently utilised to see his followers living lives in accordance with the gospel (Clarke 2000, p. 232). Our modern discipleship methods tend to be structured within a hierarchy where those who follow submit to the decisions of those that lead, yet Paul invited the Corinthians to follow him in his foolishness and "demands

⁹ Clarke (2000, pp. 210-214) cites several who hold this view including G. Shaw, E. Castelli, S. Moore, and C. Kitteredge, among others.

that they do away with arrogance, self-acclaimed honor, and manipulative language” (Hertig 2007, pp. 291-292). Paul’s call to imitate him is a call to “an inverted leadership model” (Hertig 2007, pp. 291-292).

Modern conceptions of leadership often conflate power, authority, and hierarchy, making it difficult to grasp how leadership can occur outside hierarchical structures. In contrast, Paul rejects hierarchical forms of domination over the church yet does not see that as a limitation on his capacity to exercise his apostolic authority to hold those he leads accountable (Guthrie 2015, 2039613.18). Further, while Paul communicates that his apostleship grants him authority to provide church discipline, he never gives the impression that this role “sets him apart or exalts him above others in the church” (Patzia 2001, p. 158).

The Leadership of the Apostles

The Apostles play a crucial role in establishing the church following Pentecost, yet of the Twelve, only Peter has a substantial leadership role within the Book of Acts (Patzia 2001, p. 155). The Twelve did have substantive roles in the early church, including performing miracles, the ministry of the word, caring for the needy, which they eventually delegated in Acts 6:6, and they were involved in crucial decisions, such as providing authenticity to the church’s outreach to Samaria (Acts 14:8) and the Gentiles (Acts 11:1, 18), as well as participation in the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) (Patzia 2001, p. 156).

In Luke’s writing, the term apostle is reserved for the Twelve, with one exception found in Acts 14, where Paul and Barnabas are recognised as apostles as they commence their

mission to the Gentiles (Patzia 2001, pp. 156-157). Luke, in Acts 1:21-22, limits who may be considered an apostle to those who had seen the risen Lord (p. 156). However, that passage specifically addresses the issue of replacing one of the original Twelve. In contrast to Luke, Paul appears to have a more expansive view of apostles as he applies the term to Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7), Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6-9), as well as Timothy and Silas (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6) among others (pp. 156-158).

In addition to a more expansive view of who was an apostle, Paul places it first when writing about spiritual gifts (see Ephesians. 4:11; 1 Corinthians. 12:28) and states that apostles, together with prophets, are the foundation upon which the church is built (Ephesians 2:20). While this indicates that Paul viewed apostles as the highest ministry gift, there is no reason to believe that being first on a list implies hierarchical structures (Patzia 2001, p. 158). In each location in scripture where spiritual gifts are discussed, Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12-14, the stated purpose of the gifts, including apostle, is for the edification of the church towards unity and maturity and not any form of stratification (Patzia 2001, p. 158). Paul's emphasis that the gifts are not seen as creating division, or bestowing special honour or privilege, is evidenced clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:21-27, where he calls for no division within the body.

Although Luke does call Paul and Barnabas apostles, he undoubtedly considered the role of the Twelve to be unique (Patzia 2001, p. 156). While the Book of Acts records the death of two of the original Twelve, Judas and James, only Judas was replaced to keep the number at Twelve (p. 156). Additionally, there is no evidence of a transfer of authority to Paul and Barnabas, nor any indication that they were viewed as successors of the Twelve (p. 156).

Finally, the Twelve are not mentioned by Luke after Acts 16:4, indicating that “their identity as a special group ceases even though certain functions of their ministry continue” (p. 156).¹⁰ Regardless of how one views the role of apostle beyond the Twelve, it can be confidently stated that the early Church viewed “itself, and thus its leadership as apostolic in nature” (Parkinson 2020, p. 90).

Leadership from the Apostles to Christendom

In examining leadership in the early church, terms chosen and not chosen for leadership roles provide important insight (Clarke 2000, p. 250; Parkinson 2020, p. 81). Words chosen included bishop, presbyter or elder, and deacon (Clarke 2000, p. 249; González 2010, pp. 113-114). Although leader was a common term at that time, it included an understanding of leadership emphasising status, and privilege, which led to Paul and other church leaders conspicuously avoiding it (Clarke 2000, p. 250; Parkinson 2020, p. 82).

When examining these early leadership roles, an important question involves the concept of *office* and whether these offices constituted a type of hierarchy. Liefeld (2011, 560660.21) notes that the “difference between “office” and “function” is that office refers to a designated position that exists even if there is no incumbent at the moment”.

Holmberg (1975, p. 109) offers the view that the church in Thessalonika, circa 50 A.D., included a “circle of persons with the function of leaders who are distinct from the rest of

¹⁰ In the previous chapter, a distinction was made between “big A” and “little a” apostles. While this section distinguishes between Paul and the Twelve, his role was likewise unique, and he should not be considered a model for what the role of apostle looks like today.

the church” and that this is an example of “office characteristics” existing in Paul’s day.

Holmberg (1975, pp. 109) does acknowledge that the term “office” is a modern term without a corresponding New Testament term.

González (2010, pp. 113-114) disagrees and contends that although historians such as Holmberg believe the church’s hierarchical structures originated with the apostles, the evidence indicates this is not the case. Liefeld (1997, pp. 105-106) adds that no word for office exists in the New Testament. In the early years of the second century, the three distinguishable leadership positions of “bishop, presbyter—or elder—and deacon” did exist, and the New Testament acknowledges them; however, they are never listed together as if they were “clearly defined functions or offices that always existed together” (González 2010, p. 113).

Over time, these terms have been embellished by adding terms such as “arch”, which comes from a Greek word meaning leader, and have served to reinforce the use of titles and create “the appearance of a hierarchy” (Clarke 2000, pp. 249-250). The New Testament indicates variations in organisational structures in different locations, and for a time, bishop and elder, or presbyter, were used interchangeably (González 2010, p. 113). Many of the words that today function as titles were not “ecclesiastical titles” in the early church but rather descriptive of the functions they performed and “were more descriptive than prescriptive” (Snyder 2004, 2986797.13).¹¹

¹¹ Yoder has been an important voice in this debate and is quoted substantially by Snyder (2004). However, because of his history of abuse of power, a decision was made to exclude him from this discussion.

Liefeld (2011, 560660.21) contends that in 1 Timothy, 'Paul defines being an overseer in terms of function ("a noble task"), not of status or office' and that Paul's encouragement is for leaders to seek responsibility, not status. Liefeld (2011, 560660.27) states that the King James Version of scripture used the word "office" multiple times, despite being absent in the Greek, contributing to the concept of "office" gaining wide acceptance.

In the second century, to combat heretical teaching threatening the church, "the authority of bishops and apostolic succession" was highlighted (González 2010, p. 114). The purpose was to demonstrate that the church's core teachings were passed from Jesus to his disciples so that while bishops within the catholic church could demonstrate that they were "successors to the apostles", false teachers could not (p. 80). Crucially, a church did not need to demonstrate a direct link to the original apostles; instead, they needed to hold to the faith passed down from them (p. 80). González (p. 80) contends that apostolic succession was inclusive initially, specifically when contrasted with the exclusive *special knowledge* of heretical teachers. However, over time it became increasingly exclusive, to the point where eventually, ordination could only be performed by bishops who could prove apostolic succession (p. 80).

There exists a consensus among scholars that churches that began as "charismatic" over time were becoming more "institutionalised" and hierarchical (Clarke 2000, p. 251; Patzia 2001, p. 153). A charismatic church would be defined as one that "supposedly operates under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit" and whose "members exercise their spiritual gifts (*charismata*) for the common good" (Patzia 2001, pp. 153-154). Among these gifts, 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 state clearly that "the Spirit "gave" certain leaders to

the church”, yet these leaders were not “regarded as superior to other members of the congregation” (Patzia 2001, p. 154).

Paul’s Pastoral Letters, which describe Timothy’s ordination and instruct Titus to “appoint elders”, are held up as evidence of the church becoming increasingly institutionalised (Patzia 2001, p. 154). However, Liefeld (2011, 560660.27) contends that there is no evidence to support that the gift Timothy received at his ordination was an office. Elders have, and should continue to, occupy an essential role within the church. However, these roles should not be viewed as part of a hierarchy or be separated from function.

Murray (2018, 882225.10), who regards Christendom’s arrival as an unmistakable force in the church becoming a hierarchical institution, notes that there is evidence that the church was becoming hierarchal prior to Constantine. In the six decades before Constantine’s embrace of Christianity, the church experienced rapid growth and transitioned from a “socially insignificant cult to mainstream religious community” (882225/10). This change precipitated the church’s governmental structure increasing in complexity and its leadership becoming more hierarchical (882225.10). Also, the church began making allowances for wealthy individuals of high status (882225.10). These two shifts helped make the church more amenable to the transition Constantine proposed than it would have been fifty years previous (882225.10).

Murray’s point that the church was already becoming hierarchical and that wealthy individuals were already receiving preferential status prior to Christendom does not indicate

that these were proper, simply that they existed. Both examples, regardless of when and how they began, are contradictory to the teaching of Jesus.

Three Crucial Aspects of Christendom's Legacy

Kreider (2016, p. 264) notes that although Constantine began identifying as a Christian in 312 CE, he did not receive catechism or baptism until 337 CE and asks how differently history may have unfolded had Constantine's habits, practices and convictions been shaped by the church. This question underscores the truth that the church was transformed more by Constantine than he was by the church. Three core aspects of the church's life that Christendom drastically changed are addressed below.

The Clergy/Laity Dichotomy

A significant shift perpetuated within Christendom was the clergy and laity dichotomy, whereby the laity became increasingly passive participants in the life of the church (Murray 2018, 882225.13). Torjersen (2008, p. 391) contends that scholarship which holds that "ecclesiastical hierarchy and the clergy/laity dyad, was evolutionary" and occurred incrementally is flawed and that instead, these were read back into the history of the church. "Textual evidence for a clear divide between clergy and laity, the bishop's monarchical authority and the connections between church office and the liturgy does not appear until the third century" (Torjersen 2008, p. 391). Scholarship in this area has relied primarily on "ecclesiastical and theological sources" to demonstrate this evolution, while contrary sources were only referenced "tangentially" (Torjersen 2008, p. 391).

Although a “*clerical caste*” had emerged before Constantine, his adoption of the Christian faith provided “enhanced status, power, and wealth” and, in turn, led to the clergy becoming “religious civil servants” similar to other professionals serving the Empire (Murray 2018, 882225.13). Although clergy had begun to exercise increasing authority, they were selected from among the congregation and remained within it (882225.13). Under Christendom, church leaders, with the involvement of the Empire, were transferred from church to church (882225.13).

Before Constantine, a clear demarcation existed between the church and the world (Murray 2018, 882225.13). Once everyone was Christian, that demarcation vanished and was replaced with the dividing line placed firmly between clergy and laity (882225.13). Within this new reality, responsibilities once carried out by the whole church community were progressively relegated to professional clergy (882225.13). Over time, clergy accumulated special privileges, wore special attire, delivered sermons in a language most could not understand, restricted singing to clergy and trained choirs, and eventually forbade “Agape meals” (882225.13).

Although there had always existed ministry functions within the church that were distinct, writers of the New Testament justified ‘no hierarchical division between “clergy” and “laity,” not even using that kind of language’ (Snyder 2004, 2986797.13).

While the Reformers sought to bring correction to many of the problems of Christendom, rather than seeing the entire Christendom project as flawed, they tended to see Christendom’s problems commencing in the sixth or seventh century rather than at its

beginning (Clapp 1996, p. 27). They attempted to address the clergy-laity dichotomy upholding the “priesthood of all believers” as normal (Murray 2018, 882225.14). However, the priest was replaced with a pastor or preacher, and “the hierarchical and clerical structure that had governed the church throughout Christendom survived intact” (Murray 2018, 882225.14).

The clergy/laity division remains a central issue within the church. The issue is summed up succinctly by Peterson (2009, location 266), who writes that the hierarchy created by the clergy-laity division is a “barefaced lie, insinuated into the Christian community by the devil” and adds that “laity” is among the most debilitating words within the church.

Status, Privilege and Power

“Status is central to all hierarchies” (Kouzes and Posner 1995, p. 6).

Closely related to the clergy-laity divide is the issue of status, privilege and power. As Torjensen (208, p. 389) correctly states, “the distinction between clergy and laity in its most elemental form is a way of creating and setting apart an elite”.

Parkinson (2020, p. 79) proposes that the disciples’ unwillingness to take on the servant role and wash feet was “the existence of an ongoing, simmering dispute about who was the greatest”, while Jesus’ willingness to take the role of the lowest servant is founded upon his relationship with his Father and “his sense of security in the Father’s love and provision”.

Fitch and Holsclaw (2013, location 1414) add that Jesus’ freedom to serve others in this way was empowered by his refusal to seek status.

As noted previously, the influence of bishops was increasing prior to the fourth century; however, under Constantine, bishops in Rome had access to status and riches and “became grandees on a par with the wealthiest senators” (Duffy 2014, 2450737.9; Stark 2014, 2391771.10). The money, influence and status now attached to these positions led to people seeking clerical roles who were not baptised followers of Jesus, and to simony, the practice of buying ecclesiastical privileges (Stark 2014, 2391771.10).

The mission and purposes of the Empire and the Church were not aligned, and for the Church to function within the Empire, it reframed and reinterpreted scripture (Murray 2018, 882225.13). One result of this merger was that justification was provided for outsiders to be addressed with violence (Clapp 1996, p. 30). While acknowledging Augustine as a brilliant theologian, Murray (2018, 882225.12) also credits him as crucial to this process and considers him the architect of Christendom. An example of Augustine’s effect on the church was his formulation of “a coherent perspective on warfare that allowed Christians to take life” (Murray 2018, 882225.13).

Other tenets of the Christian faith likewise did not fit within the Empire. For instance, a Saviour who stood with and blessed the poor and marginalised while challenging the rich and powerful was recast and used to undergird and protect the wealthy and the “dominant culture” (Murray 2018, 882225.13). Additionally, the Old Testament was viewed as more important than the New, while Jesus’ life and teaching were explained so that only a select few could follow them, while most of the populace could live within a “nominal Christian society” (Murray 2018, 882225.13).

Beyond its inherent opposition to servanthood, seeking status is incompatible with following Jesus (Marshall 2003, p. 87). Status and power are frequently viewed together because the benefits inherent in high social status make the threat of its loss “so costly that it virtually ensures that the office holder will try to hold on to the position by means fair or foul” (p. 88). The division status creates between leaders and those they lead “feeds pride and fosters vanity and conceit” and “encourages arrogance by subtly inducing in leaders a sense that they somehow belong to an elite superior to other people” (p. 87).

The Loss of the Church as Community

Strengthening distinctive Christian community is at once one of the most essential and the most formidable challenges the church faces in our world (Clapp 1996, p. 193).

The New Testament presents the church as a unique community that received baptised followers of Jesus (Davidson 2004, p. 112). It was a community that viewed itself as a family, where a common life was lived, care for others was normative, and possessions were shared with any who had need (Davidson 2004, p. 112). The church commonly failed to live up to its ideals, and any argument that the church pre-Christendom was flawless is incorrect (Clapp 1996, p. 24; Clarke 2000, pp. 173-174).

It has been noted that the core purpose of spiritual gifts, including APEST, is the building up of the church to maturity and unity. The advent of Christendom was a crucial factor in accelerating the breakdown of unity and community within the church, beginning with

institutionalising the division between the church leaders and the wider church community (Torjersen 2008, p. 391; Murray 2018, 882225.13).

Moltmann (1983, p. 158), cited by Murray (2018, 882225.13), describes the transition instigated by Christendom by writing, “Community in the church was replaced by community with the church. In this way, what we nowadays call ‘the church from above’ came into being, the church which takes care of the people, but in which the people themselves have no say.”

While several ways exist to express the loss of community, a survey of community meals is instructive. Society in Jesus’ day was highly hierarchical, and “meals expressed social stratification” (Kreider and Kreider 2011, 887219.15). Jewish dietary laws ensured that they did not eat the same foods as their Gentile neighbours, which prohibited a shared table. Jesus was frequently criticised because of with whom he shared a table (Matthew. 9:11; Mark 2:16). He likewise critiqued how meals were used, not to demonstrate hospitality but rather to establish and enhance status (Luke 7:39-47, 14:7-11) and Paul similarly sought to foster “a contrasting society that emphasised meals in which all members of a unified body” dined together and where “each one had a contribution to offer” (Kreider and Kreider 2011, 887219.15). Paul scolded the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) and Peter (Galatians 2:11-14) for their actions at the table, where they treated others as though they were not of equal status. As noted above, within one hundred years of the advent of Christendom, the church banned the “Agape meals” (Murray 2018, 882225.13).

Under Christendom, faith shifted from a community experience and became a personal and private pursuit (Clapp 1996, p. 33). That problem persists today.

The final chapter proposes a polycentric model of leadership that addresses the three consequences of hierarchy detailed here.

Chapter 3: A Theoretical Model

Society is experiencing rapid change on multiple levels (Bolsinger 2018, p. 39; Murray 2018, 882225.9). Globalisation, mass media and the internet have transformed how individuals relate to information, their neighbours, community and churches (Bolsinger 2018, p. 39). Murray (2018 882225.9) notes that the prefix post, on terms such as post-Christendom and post-Modern, while helping to make sense of the epochal transitions the world is experiencing, is “backward facing” and emphasises that while we are moving away from something we lack the understanding to describe our new reality adequately.

Throughout its history, a strength of the church has been its ability to adapt to new cultures and people groups (Getz 2003, p. 231). As Christendom and Modernity fade into history, the church must adapt to new realities and discern how it lives, ministers and interacts with the world it inhabits (Murray 2018, 882225.9). The model presented here is offered as a starting point suitable for diverse cultures and communities. It should not be viewed as a list of rules or boundaries but rather as a roadmap enabling church communities to thrive within their culture and prepare them to adapt amidst society’s continuing evolution.

This dissertation’s question concerns whether a polycentric leadership structure utilising the APEST paradigm could empower a church to model the servant leadership ethos that Jesus exemplified. The model presented here does not seek to address every aspect of church leadership and structure. It does offer a non-hierarchical framework addressing the concerns noted in the last chapter.

Polycentrism is a shift from “solo leadership to team leadership” and requires mature leaders willing to live out and model mutual submission to their community (Woodward and White 2016, pp. 53-54). Parkinson (2020, p. 121) cites agreement with Western (2013, p. 42) in noting that establishing a culture of leadership that is “truly collaborative and dispersed” requires the initial work of an experienced and capable leader who establishes the groundwork on which this model can be built. Individuals tend to reproduce what they have experienced, and as most have experienced only hierarchical leadership, the model proposed here would be exceedingly difficult for a young, maturing leader to initiate.

A Polycentric Leadership Structure

The initial step in this model is to establish a leadership community. Ideally, five distinct teams representing the five APEST gifts will be formed. Experienced leaders qualified as elders or deacons within the church should serve as leaders on each team, and each team should have members whose primary employment is outside of the church, as both groups offer significant contributions.

The size of these teams should be commensurate to the size of the church. A church plant or a smaller church may require individuals to serve on multiple teams, utilising secondary giftings until adequate representation exists. Other teams focused on specific ministries or concerns will likely form on long-term and short-term bases. These will function within the five APEST team structure.

Establishing this leadership model requires assessing where these gifts exist within the leadership community. While online assessments are available,¹² Fitch (2016, pp. 155-156) notes that his church's leadership works through an assessment in Breen's (2001, pp. 227-235) *Building A Discipling Culture*. Fitch (2016, pp. 155-156) contends that the assessment's accuracy is not the crucial issue; rather, the conversation as team members work through the assessment, discussing their strengths and weaknesses, is vital for building interdependency, trust and mutuality.

As teams are formed, a conversation concerning which team assumes leadership in specific instances should be ongoing. An overarching conversation would involve who leads at various stages of the church's life. Apostles and prophets would likely be central leaders at the planting stage, while evangelists, pastors, and teachers would assume supporting roles (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, pp. 102-103). An established church would likely have pastors and teachers assume more prominent roles; the apostles, prophets and evangelists would shift to supporting roles while seeking new opportunities for kingdom growth and expansion. Should the church find itself in a season of transition or decline, this question would be readdressed.

Crucial issues would likewise require discussion as different aspects of the church's life and mission would lie within the purview of a specific team. Benevolence, family conflict, and counselling would be capacities where the pastoral team would assume leadership while serving marginalised communities, and social justice issues would be areas where the

¹² Hirsch's assessment is found at <https://5qcentral.com/tests/>, and currently costs \$10 (USD).

prophetic team presides (Hirsch 2017, pp. 114, 116). As ministries are designated within a specific APEST domain, it would be standard practice for that team to assume leadership when those topics require a process of discernment.

Challenges to this Leadership Structure

A danger for organisations attempting to implement a polycentric model is that if roles are not clearly defined “in practical terms”, the model will lack the processes necessary for implementation, resulting in leaders tending to “make up the rules as they go along” (Catchim 2021). Catchim (2021) adds, “when a concept that aims to redistribute power in groups is not clearly defined [it can become] another form of centralizing power in the hands of those to define what that distribution looks like according to the whims of the situation”.

Without clearly defined roles, this model reverts to another form of hierarchical leadership. Likewise, if decisions are made unilaterally or members of the leadership community believe they were excluded from the process, establishing the trust necessary for shared leadership will be impossible. Ongoing conversations provide space to recognise that as situations change, so will a team’s understanding of how it functions.

A second challenge is that shared leadership is commonly dismissed as unworkable. It has been argued that effective team-based leadership is unattainable and that a church or any organisation must have a primary leader, or the organisation risks descending into “chaos

and anarchy” (Woodward and White 2016, location 1301).¹³ Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus are used to argue for a primary leader in the church (Getz 2003, pp. 222-223). However, as Yung (2021, 2998283/5) correctly notes, Titus and Timothy are the only examples in the New Testament “where one person appears to have sole authority in a church” and argues those are “unique missionary situations”. “The terms “elder” or “overseer/bishop” when used for local church leadership” elsewhere in the New Testament, without exception, have plural leadership in view (Yung 2021, 2998283.5). Yung (2021, 2998283.5) cites the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) as an example of a plurality of leadership in action.

Benefits of this Leadership Structure

This model addresses the three issues raised in the previous chapter. Polycentric leadership confronts the clergy-laity dyad by extending leadership and allowing multiple individuals to contribute at every level. By intentionally eschewing power centres and creating “interconnected communities”, Franklin (2016, p. 13) offers that there is an opportunity to learn from a broader range of people within the community, “especially those from within the margins”.

The issue of status and power is confronted within this model as every member will have the opportunity to lead but must be willing to step out of leadership, submit to the rest of

¹³ Ford (1991, pp. 153-154) and Getz (2003, pp. 217-226) both argue that there must be a primary leader, although Getz (2003, p. 217) acknowledges there is little in the Bible concerning the local church to make that argument.

the community, and follow when another assumes leadership. In a relational team where mutual submission is practised, attempts to usurp authority would be less likely.

This model emphasizes function over titles, whose use should be avoided. “This person is a pastor within our church” is appropriate, whereas using their function as a title such as “Pastor Smith” inserts status and will frustrate this process.

Polycentric leadership requires mutual submission (Fitch 2016, pp. 152-153). Those perceived, correctly or not, as having status and power within the church will require character, maturity and experience to lead in this area (Woodward and White 2016, p. 59). Woodward and White (2016, p. 63) contend that leading polycentrically should be seen as “a skill”, which will require leaders to shepherd others through the various phases of development.

Handley (2021a, p. 7) and Woodward and White (2016, p. 59) explain that polycentric leadership requires maturity within a community that has developed strong relationships through living and serving together. This type of leadership does not permit the siloing of teams or individuals but requires a community committed to working together. Trust among the leadership team that each member will act in the church’s best interest is requisite. This level of trust can only be developed within relationships and is based on experience over time. If trust is not firmly established and nurtured, suspicion and fear will make this model unworkable.

How Decisions are Made – Communal Discernment

A church functioning with a polycentric structure requires a decision-making model supportive of this paradigm. The image of the holy man ascending the mountain to meet with God and bringing his word back to the people, suits a hierarchical structure and continues to impact church leadership. *Communal Discernment* is offered as an alternative to a solo model of decision-making.

Barton (2012, location 1935) writes that discernment is “the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God both personally and in community” and is central to spiritual leadership. Fitch and Holsclaw (2013, location 2139) assert that only through discernment can an individual or a community “participate in God’s kingdom work”. They explain that discernment begins with the presupposition that God is already working, which allows the church to “wait patiently, listen, pray, inhabit scripture, and discern the Spirit in each situation” (Fitch and Holsclaw 2013, location 2152).

Woodward and White (2016, p. 68) note that decision-making is not the primary role of leadership; instead, the leader’s paramount role “is to develop people, awakening their inherent priesthood and inviting them to submit all of life to King Jesus”. Irving and Strauss (2019, p. 5) concur that equipping people to serve “with a goal of spiritual maturity and a deeper relationship with Christ” is “the ultimate goal of all Christian leadership”. However, because making decisions is a significant aspect of leadership, opening the church’s discernment process to multiple voices and providing seats at the table to a diverse community is crucial for developing leaders. Opening the decision-making process to diverse

voices helps establish an ethos of trust and provides the opportunity for the maturing of potential leaders.

Outlining a Community Discernment Process

The model presented here uses aspects of discernment processes outlined by Fitch and Barton. Barton (2012, location 1925 to 2112) describes an in-depth process of communal discernment that a leadership community could utilise. She notes that the process of “community discernment at the leadership level is not mechanical, nor is it always linear” and adds that as a community becomes more familiar with the process, it will be experienced “less as a step-by-step procedure” and more as a fluid and creative process (Barton 2012, location 1987).

A Community Discernment Process:

1. Clarifying the Question for Discernment.

The first step in the Communal Discernment Process is “clarifying the question for discernment” (Barton 2012, location 1990). Once a matter for discernment arises, the leadership community gathers, and crucially, each APEST role approaches the question before the community from their gifting (Fitch 2016, p. 156).

The individual or APEST team who initially raised the concern submits a proposal detailing the issue and the consequences of allowing the situation to continue unaddressed as they perceive them. The recommendation will include suggestions proposing action (Fitch 2016, p. 156). Mutual submission is crucial as the team leading in this instance does not dictate the next steps but submits its proposal to the rest of the leadership community for

discernment. At that point, the various APEST leaders will have the opportunity to share how they understand the issue before them (Fitch 2016, p. 156). This conversation should lead to all involved having clarity on the issue before them, including which APEST team should assume leadership. Should clarifying the question reveal a need to invite others with expertise or who are impacted by the question into this process, that would be addressed ensuring the right people are involved.

2. Enter a Time of Discernment

After the question is clarified, a process of discerning God's leading commences. Barton suggests several aspects of the discernment process to which those involved commit. First is the "commitment to *pray without ceasing*", which Barton (2012, location 2036) points out is agreeing to pray throughout the process. She emphasises the importance of "*indifference*", the willingness of each individual to acknowledge and set aside their desired outcome for this process and hear what God is saying (location 2042). In addition to "*pray for wisdom*", the process involves "*listening on many levels*", which Barton (location 2057) illustrates by referencing the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. She notes that interested parties, including Peter, Paul, and the Pharisees, had the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives, while James shared from the Scripture to relate this decision to "the larger Story of God's redemptive purposes" (location 2064). When James uttered his decision that "it seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit", Barton (location 2066) writes, "he functioned as a spiritual director who sat back and listened and then named what he heard God saying in the group".

Fitch (2019) describes using a one to five rating scale within his church community to express where they are when discerning an issue. A one would represent complete disagreement with the proposal, while a five would be complete agreement (Fitch 2019). He claims that his church generally does not move forward until everyone is at least at a four, representing agreement but with reservations, or a five, but tells of occasions where people at three state that, while they are not sure, they trust the rest of the community and are willing to move forward (Fitch 2019).

Barton (2012, location 2083-2101) acknowledges that decisions are not always resolved as clearly as the Jerusalem Council and that time needs to be taken to allow resolution, wisely suggesting that there be confidence that God will work in and through people's reservations.

3. Decide the Next Step

This process aims to reach a decision and "actually do the will of God as we have come to understand it" (Barton 2012, location 2107). Once this process has discerned a path forward, the proposal may be brought to the broader congregation for further consideration and discernment or perhaps delivered to those with the expertise to implement the proposal.

Challenges of Communal Discernment

Committing to a process of communal discernment will present multiple challenges for many as it necessitates shifting from a "reliance on cognition and intellectual hard work, to a place of deep listening and response" to God's Spirit (Barton 2012, location 1951). "The

temptation to compromise basic Christian values—love, community, truth-telling, confession and reconciliation, silent listening and waiting on God for discernment—for the sake of expedience is very great” (Barton 2012, location 217). The church in the West has emphasised urgency and performance-based criteria as it highly focused on the number of people attending services, the amount of money coming in, and other growth-based criteria. Discernment places priority on patience rather than urgency.

Within hierarchical systems, decision-making tends to occur more rapidly on the front end, as leaders at the top gather relevant information, make decisions and then disseminate that information throughout the larger organisation (Woodward and White 2016, p. 59).

However, those decisions require a longer implementation process as people further down the organisational ladder often must be convinced of the validity and correctness of those decisions (p. 59). Woodward and White (p. 59) note that while reaching decisions tends to be slower when using a discernment process, implementation is more fluid as the community has been involved in the decision and, therefore, is more likely to understand and support its wisdom and validity.

Benefits of Communal Discernment

In addition to the benefits listed above, this process would address the three consequences of hierarchy. Each person involved in this process has an equal opportunity to express their views and have their concerns and hesitations treated seriously, which addresses the clergy/laity division and the issue of status. Individuals’ participation is based on their gifts and responsibilities rather than an office or title.

This model encourages equipping everyone within the community to practise discernment to make personal decisions. In addition to learning to discern God's will, it addresses the issue of western individualism as others are brought into the process. As the larger community becomes experienced with communal discernment, it strengthens the church's ability to utilise this skill. This process has the potential to spiral in a positive direction.

When individuals are brought into a discernment process, they learn how to practice discernment in their own lives. As they grow more comfortable and confident, they can trust the process regarding more significant decisions. As this occurs, the church has a ready supply of leaders who default to decision-making by discernment.

Opening Ministry Roles to the Wider Congregation

Parkinson (2020, p. 118) notes that factors which tend to demotivate and disempower those not currently in leadership include a "disparity in authority" and "being excluded from opportunities to shape the trajectory of the organization". He adds that when church leaders hold onto leadership and keep its activity exclusive, "the fruit of their ministry is a disempowered and passive laity" (p. 119). This disempowerment can be experienced by observing others excluded from meaningful opportunities (p. 119).

While substantial means of involving the broader congregation in meaningful leadership roles have been presented in this model, unless essential leadership and ministry roles are open to qualified and mature individuals within the congregation, the issues of status and the clergy-laity dichotomy will persist. This section presents a road map demonstrating how

one specific ministry function, the sermon, can become accessible to the broader church community.

Sunday morning preaching and teaching are roles within most congregations where inherent status and influence exist. Facilitating mature individuals to step into this role would create an ethos of empowerment and demonstrate that the priesthood of all believers is taken seriously. While it is one example, it is offered as a model for how other roles throughout the church can be opened to increased participation.

This idea is inspired by Ferguson's 2007 book, *The Big Idea*. In his book, Ferguson emphasises crafting a creative Sunday morning experience, including the sermon, music, and multi-media. While that is not the purpose of this section, Ferguson's ideas provide a helpful framework.

Although many churches create space for lay leaders to teach at public worship services, the learning curve to step into that role is steep. Preparing a complete, theologically sound sermon and delivering it in a public setting is a step that some potentially gifted individuals will never take. This model breaks down the process to provide a more accessible on-ramp, allowing for growth and skill development to occur over time.

Standing before a congregation to teach or preach from the Scriptures is a crucial role within the church. Opening this ministry to a larger group of people is in no way downplaying the importance of biblical study, training, or hermeneutical acuity. There are abundant resources and educational opportunities for individuals who desire to grow in this

area. The benefit of individuals within the community developing this gift would positively impact culture.

A Suggested Model

First, create a teaching team, hold regular meetings where sermons are planned and invite potential teachers. Advanced planning will require that preparation for Sunday sermons be started, at a minimum, weeks ahead of time. In the teaching team meetings, upcoming themes for sermons are discussed and planned. Participation in this meeting allows potential teachers to experience the sermon creation process from the beginning before they prepare their own. When candidates are responsible for preparing material for a sermon, they will have weeks rather than days to think, research, and ask questions (Ferguson 2007, p. 120). This experience and the inclusion of sufficient preparation time is a crucial step in setting individuals up for success.

Make sermons collaborative. The extra planning time would allow for collaboration on sermon preparation and delivery. A new teacher could be assigned to prepare a section of a message rather than an entire sermon. In addition to creating a more accessible first step, a back and forth between those working on a specific message would help the new teacher gain insight into the overall process and gain experience crafting a sermon.

Ferguson (2007, p. 161) believes one of the benefits of advanced planning and collaboration is that it produces “*better theology*”, adding that “interpretation of Scripture, like every other function of the church, is meant to be done in community”, and one individual will not

be able to match what can be accomplished in a “community of theologically gifted leaders and teachers”.

The setting for Ferguson’s (2007, pp. 163-164) book is a multi-site network of churches, and his *Big Idea* involves teachers from each of those sites collaborating on every message rather than each preparing a different sermon which he considers “a *better use of time*”. Collaboration and sufficient time will allow for “*better content*” (Ferguson 2007, p. 161). Inviting additional eyes and voices into the process means blind spots are less likely, and a wealth of experience and insight are brought to each sermon. Even lacking a multi-site model, any church could begin to utilise a collaborative teaching team, permitting pastors and other leaders to focus more on their community's significant concerns and less on preparing a weekly sermon.

This model and this example specifically address the issue of status and power by opening what is often the most exclusive, status saturated role within a congregation to the broader community. It is not intended to communicate “anyone can do this” but directly confronts the clergy-laity division and invites multiple voices into this vital process. Additionally, it provides another opportunity for community to be developed among the church’s teachers. As with the larger theoretical model, it demands a high level of trust.

Eat Meals Together

The final aspect of this model is likely the most crucial and the simplest; the church must eat meals together as a regular practice. It was noted in the previous chapter that Paul’s desire

was for churches to be communities where meals were prominent and all ate together (Kreider and Kreider 2011, 887219.15).

A polycentric model requires a community with deep relational ties based on trust, and eating together is central to how this occurs. While Jesus' teachings caused controversy, his eating and drinking habits frequently provoked anger from the religious leaders of his day (Woodward and White 2016, p. 176). Jesus did not only receive criticism for his table practices; he critiqued his culture's use of the table to segregate and affirm social stratification (Luke 7:39-47, 14:7-11). He criticised this practice while using "the enfleshed practice at the table to immerse his disciples in a new social order of family, a kingdom family" (Woodward and White 2016, p. 176).

Fitch and Holsclaw (2013, location 3221) reflect on Luke 22 and note that it was at a table where Jesus states, "and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (v. 29 RSV). The kingdom was breaking in among the disciples. And the kingdom is breaking in among us whenever we come to the table".

Murray (2010, p. 23) correctly states that Christendom can be understood as "an attempt to transform an entire society incarnationally *without* the witness of a distinctive community". That distinctive Christian community requires relationships built on trust and mutuality and made up of individuals with a desire and willingness to serve like Jesus. That begins around a table and provides the support needed for this model.

Conclusion:

Chesterton (2012, p. 57) famously wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” Christendom and its hierarchical ethos have impacted the church's thinking and practice for over 1500 years, and non-hierarchical church leadership, when conceived at all, has likewise been found difficult and left largely untried.

This dissertation has presented hierarchical leadership as diametrically opposed to Jesus’ teaching on leadership and has offered a polycentric model that fosters collaboration, mutual submission and trust as a model for how a church could begin implementing a non-hierarchical structure utilising the APEST paradigm. This model may be easier to implement in a church plant or a smaller church. However, neither Scripture nor the other literature indicated that collaborative leadership and mutual submission could only function up to a particular size congregation, and then hierarchy becomes necessary, invalidating Jesus’ clear teaching on the topic. That said, how this model would adapt to facilitate an established congregation, a larger congregation, or a growing network of churches would be a worthwhile study beyond this dissertation's scope.

The report on the rampant abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention was released during the final editing of this dissertation and underscored the havoc hierarchical systems create in the lives of countless Christians. Although the impact of abuse was not a topic this dissertation was able to delve into as intended, it remains a central issue the church must

address. Although neither this nor any other model can eliminate status issues or abuse of power, these are unquestionably features of hierarchical leadership.

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