

POLYCENTRIC MISSION FOR EUROPE

Jim Memory

In missiology, the study of Christian mission, our attempts at understanding the advance and retreat of Christianity through history and in the present day frequently involve the creation of categories and concepts that help us make sense of the complexities of the reality 'on the ground'. We frame the data into a certain narrative; we identify models and persons who played an exemplary role (whether positive or negative); we highlight significant places and events; and we rethink our mission theology and practice in the light of what we observe.

We also create new labels (neologisms) to consolidate this knowledge and communicate it to others. In this respect, a new word has emerged in recent missiological studies to describe one of the features of the spread of Christianity in today's world: polycentric. Whilst not as ubiquitous as the word "missional" which we critiqued in a previous edition of Vista (Issue 13, 2013), the terms polycentric mission and polycentric leadership have been popularised by a number of authors (Yeh, Franklin, Handley), and have featured as the theme of conferences such as the 2016 Global Mission Consultation of the World Evangelical Alliance: Polycentric Mission - From all nations to all nations.

EDITORIAL

The power of an adjective

In English, an adjective describes a noun, to 'denote a quality of the thing named, to indicate its quantity or extent, or to specify a thing as distinct from something else.' In this edition, we explore polycentric mission: an adjective that is becoming widely used. But is it widely understood?

Of all the topics covered in 40+ issues of Vista, the concept of 'polycentrism' has sparked the most debate amongst the editorial team, and the articles reflect their various perspectives.

Jim Memory describes the concept of 'polycentrism' and its impact on European mission. Harvey Kwyani asks us to consider 'whose centres, and whose mission?', whilst Alex Vlasin takes a view from Eastern Europe. Evert van de Poll explores the implications of European polycentrism, and Jo Appleton interviews Joe Handley, author of Polycentric Mission Leadership.

Vista has always considered issues from multiple angles and we trust this exploration of the meanings of polycentrism will deepen our understanding and practice of mission in Europe today.

Joanne Appleton



This article, and by extension the whole of this issue of Vista, seeks to explore the meaning and use of the word polycentric in Christian mission studies today and, more specifically, consider its implications for mission in Europe.

Polycentric Approaches are Everywhere

Polycentricity is not a concept limited to mission studies. Graham Hill's definition, and his review of the breadth of domains in which polycentrism has become influential (business, politics, governance, leadership, and urban development to name just a few), is really helpful as a starting point:

Emerging from the Greek term meaning "multiple centers," polycentricity stands as a pivotal construct spanning diverse disciplines. The principle embodies systems populated by numerous autonomous yet symbiotic decision-making entities. ⁱ

When it comes to mission studies, the definition has a more precise referent:

In 1910, missions was "From the West to the Rest". In the twenty-first century, missions is "From Everywhere to Everywhere"... because, instead of being unidirectional, it is polycentric and polydirectional. ⁱⁱ

This quote from Allen Yeh neatly provides both a definition and a narrative. Christian mission no longer has a single centre of power nor a single trajectory of transmission. This description of our contemporary missiological reality is undoubtedly true. Yet a closer interrogation of Yeh's statement reveals a bias that must also be challenged.

The Myth of Unidirectional Mission

Klaus Koschorke and the "Munich School of World Christianity", a research centre which has critiqued Eurocentric perspectives of the history of Christianity, has provided a wealth of literature to demonstrate that "the history of world Christianity is characterized by polycentric structures, not just over the last two centuries but already from its very beginning." ⁱⁱⁱ

There has always been a plurality of church structures, cultural expressions, confessional variations, and indigenous initiatives. The idea that polycentric mission is a new reality, that there ever was a time when a single centre had hegemony over the task of Christian mission, is a myth.

Moreover, the Munich School's research "suggests that we understand the history of world Christianity as a history of multidirectional transcontinental interactions by focusing especially on transregional and transcontinental links between Christian movements and churches in different parts of the world." ^{iv} Our increasing global connectedness is facilitating transcontinental interactions between churches in different continents but these interactions are not qualitatively different from those that existed in previous centuries.

The Rise of World Christianity

Yeh's questionable affirmation about the emergence of polycentric mission does reveal a truth however from the perspective of the church in the West, that the phenomenon of World Christianity is a seismic reorientation. The shift in the demographic centre of gravity of Christianity to the Majority World as first noted by Andrew Walls, has huge implications. The emergence of countless books, journals, and institutions with "World Christianity" in their titles is evidence of this paradigm shift. This de-centering of Christianity from its 19th Century strongholds in Europe and North



America to new centres in the Majority World, may not be completely new but it is only recently that Europeans and North Americans have become conscious of it. As Frederiks has observed:

The postulated but frequently implicit background to this conceptualization of World Christianity seems to be a representation of European Christianity as a tale of secularisation and decline. Against this context, the construct 'World Christianity' seems to function as a discursive reassurance that due to the "meteoric rise of non-Western Christianity" (both in loci and in its migration settings) there is hope for the Christian faith after all.^v

The arrival of millions of Majority World Christians into Europe in the last fifty years has changed the face of the European church. It is a reason for hope. Yet as Friedriks observes, discourses of World Christianity often obscure the stories of Christian resilience and revival amongst indigenous Europeans.

Europe in the 21st Century may be more of a mission frontier than a mission stronghold but that is not a reason to ignore the voice of the European church. On the contrary, as churches in other parts of the world face the challenges of secularisation in the decades to come, the experience of the European church may be vital.

Furthermore, as legitimate postcolonial critiques highlight the failings of European mission endeavours in the past and present, this de-centering of Christianity must not so disempower the European church that its place in world mission is marginalised. We do not become more polycentric if all we do is to replace old centres of power with new ones.

The Polycentric Perspective

The polycentric perspective acknowledges and values the wisdom and potential of all those engaged in mission around the world and looks for opportunities to work together. It is sensitive to marginalised and muted voices and seeks out ways of bringing their insights into the conversation and into the implementation of initiatives.

Handley considered the implications of this perspective for mission leadership and found, on the basis of his research, "that polycentrism offers a stronger model for effective mission leadership in the world today" and concluded thus:

Giving freedom to each leader, region, and country to make decisions in their own settings allows the adaptive and creative energy to flow based on the local context and situation. ... As mission leaders empower the various centers of gravity in their networks and organizations, deeper levels of ownership are fostered, leading to greater unity in the diversity and effectiveness in mission.^{vi}

Implications for Europe

I. Recognition of polycentric mission in Europe

The polycentric perspective recognises and values the breadth of potential and wisdom across the whole of Europe. Too often the dominant voices (predominantly in Northern and Western Europe) drown out Central and Eastern European perspectives and stories. Our privileging of English over the thirty other indigenous languages of Europe is one of the main causes of this. Our understanding and appreciation of what God is doing across Europe suffers as a consequence.



2. Attention to marginalised and muted voices

The polycentric perspective is not only about sensitivity to geography and language. There are muted or marginalised voices in many of our countries, something that we have already explored in Vista 24 and 33, finding that the voice of women, the young, and many diaspora churches in Europe, are rarely heard in our mission consultations. We are simply not listening to all that “the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Revelation 2:29).

3. Appreciation of transcontinental and transnational connections

The polycentric perspective celebrates the multidirectional interactions between countries and continents. These connections have always been a vital part of Christian mission, yet they are rarely celebrated in national churches. Transnational networks like European Evangelical Alliance, Lausanne Europe, European Leadership Forum, Revive Europe, as well as the transnational connections within denominational families like the Pentecostal European Fellowship, European Baptist Federation, and so on, are tremendously influential and have really come into their own in facilitating responses to the Ukraine Crisis. Transcontinental connections must also be facilitated more actively.

4. Fostering of collaboration between all Europe's mission actors

The polycentric perspective challenges us to expect collaboration and seek it out where it is not yet happening. The presence of millions of Majority World Christians in Europe is not having the impact it might because diaspora church leaders and native European church leaders rarely collaborate together intentionally. Yes, there are multicultural churches and intercultural initiatives in many places, but this should be the expectation of all God's people in Europe. Mission in a polycentric world necessarily implies collaboration.

5. Affirmation of the enduring voice of the European church in the global conversation

The polycentric perspective encourages European Christians to play their full part in the Mission of God. Yes, “the centre of gravity of the global church has moved South”, but the experience and resources of the European churches is considerable. Yes, we do need to repent for the evils of mission during the colonial times and for our arrogance towards the Majority World in the present, but the answer is not to be silent and to “down tools”. The polycentric perspective invites us to consider what we have to contribute and to offer it to the global church in humble service.

Epilogue: Lausanne 1974

When evangelicals came together in the Swiss city of Lausanne for the International Congress on World Evangelization in July 1974, it quickly became apparent to those behind the scenes that there was a serious disagreement. The church growth school of North American academics from Fuller Theological Seminary (McGavran, Winter, Wagner and Glasser) were being challenged by a minority voice from the Majority World (Padilla and Escobar). “Escobar and Padilla criticized the church growth theory for transforming mission into a marketing strategy. And they insisted on lifting high the social responsibility of Christians and of churches.”^{vii}

It is difficult to imagine that the Lausanne Covenant would have had anything like the impact that it did around the globe without John Stott's inclusion of Article 5 on “Christian Social Responsibility” as a direct result of those conversations. This is the polycentric perspective in microcosm: the recognition and valuing of other perspectives and voices, and the bringing of those ideas and voices into synthesis.



Polycentric mission may be a new expression, but it codifies a truth that has characterised the church of Jesus Christ since its beginning: “God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” (1 Corinthians 12:18-20)

May we give our bodies, our hands and feet, our ears and voices, to play our part in God’s mission. But let us also welcome the hands and feet, ears and voices of others, in our nation, across our continent, and around the world, that together we might all participate in the polycentric mission of God.

Jim Memory

“ That together we might all participate in the polycentric mission of God.”



Endnotes

- i Hill, Polycentric Mission and Ministry – “From Everyone to Everywhere”, <https://grahamjosephhill.com/polycentric-mission/>
- ii Yeh (2016), Polycentric Missiology, Downers Grove: IVP, p.216
- iii Hermann and Burlacoiu (2016), Journal of World Christianity, 6 (1), p.64
- iv Ibid.
- v Frederiks (2021), “World Christianity: Contours of an Approach”, in Fredericks and Nagy (Eds.), World Christianity: Methodological Considerations, Leiden: Brill, p.13
- vi Handley (2022), Polycentric Mission Leadership, Oxford: Regnum, p.71
- vii Melhus (2014), “To Tell the Whole World”, in Dahle et al. (Eds.), The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives, Oxford: Regnum, p.93,94



POLYCENTRIC MISSION: WHOSE CENTRES? WHOSE MISSION?

Harvey Kwiyani

Polycentric Mission—usually understood to mean “mission happening from many centres around the world”—has become a key theme in contemporary missiological discourse, especially since the turn of the century.¹ As a term, “polycentric mission” is plausible because it speaks of the possibility of the work of mission involving Christians from all continents, with each of the continents being a centre for mission. As such, it represents a radical shift from how mission has been done before and how it happens today. A great deal of mission history suggests that mission in the 19th and 20th centuries has been from the West to the rest. Subsequently, the West, (and, by this, I mean Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand)² has been the centre of mission.

In reality though, non-Western nations have engaged in mission before. Indeed much of the missionary work in the world has been done by local evangelists and missionaries, even where Europeans and North Americans have been involved. In many African countries for example, Westerners started the spark, but it was local evangelists who fanned it into a flame and carried it to the rest of their communities. In addition, even among Western countries, there have been many centres; the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France, Australia, New Zealand, and many others. Therefore, to some extent, mission has been polycentric for centuries.

At the centre of the argument for polycentric mission is the suggestion that mission is no longer something that only Western Christians get to do in other parts of the world. Mission in the 21st century must involve all Christians worldwide. Western countries can no longer be the only centres from which missionaries are sent to other parts of the world. The rising African, Asian, and Latin American missionary movements must also mean we will increasingly see these continents, or at least, some of their cities, emerge as centres of mission.

All this makes sense. It is appropriate for us to anticipate that mission today will reflect the worldwide spread of Christianity itself. We ought to shift our understanding of mission—and our association of mission with Western Christianity—to appreciate that God has called all followers of Christ to God’s mission and they can serve wherever in the world God wills them to minister. Such a shift is critical because of the racialised foundations of a great deal of the mission strategies of the past five centuries, viz-a-viz, white supremacy, manifest destiny and the belief that it was the white man’s burden to civilise and Christianise the world.³ Consequently, there are quite a few issues that we need to





wrestle with as we think of polycentric mission. I will discuss only a few of those with full awareness that this is just a start of a conversation.

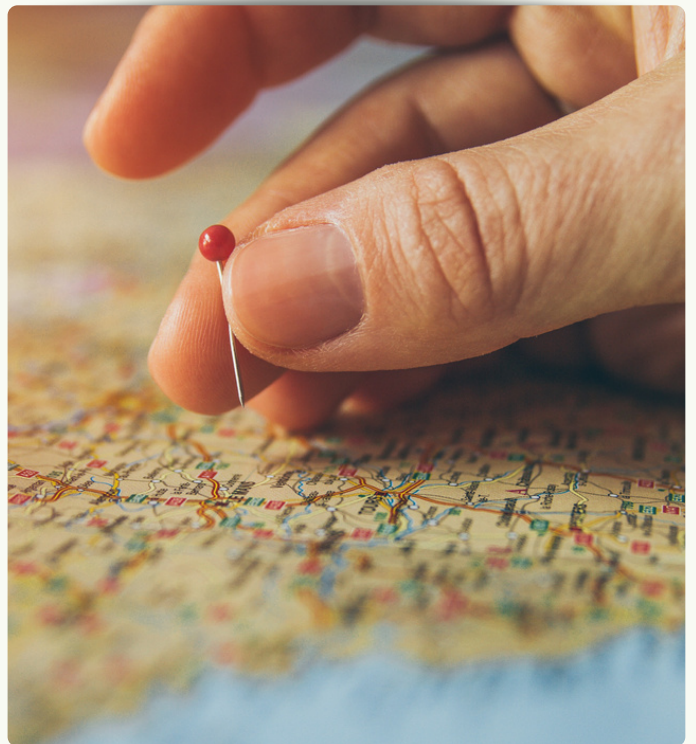
Whose Centres?

First, I wonder about the language of “multiple centres” itself. Whose centres are these? What makes them centres? What happens at those centres? And, if there are centres, there must be margins. So, again, who is at those margins? Why are they at the margins? What happens at those margins? By talking about new centres of mission, it seems likely to me that we are expecting the emerging non-Western mission movements to be “centred” just like the Western movement was. I hope that they will be decentred (and decentralised). Their strength will be in their democratised approach to mission. We have seen it in Africa where Christianity has exploded, to a great extent, due to the democratic nature of the ministry of evangelism.⁴ If anything, going by the story of mission in the last two centuries, mission done from centres of societal power can easily collude with human empires and seek to dominate and assimilate those who convert while marginalising those who do not. We cannot effectively talk about mission in a postcolonial world while replicating colonial structures in other parts of the world.

Whose Mission?

Of course, the realities of mission today are such that the West is still the centre, both in finances and theological/missiological leadership. Non-Western missionary movements are indeed emerging, but mission today is still Western. Yes, South Korea and Brazil are among the leading mission-sending countries and millions of Nigerian Christians have been scattered to all continents, bringing their faith with them. Yet, Western institutions still define mission for the world. Most of what we read in mission is written by English-speaking Westerners for other Westerners, for their service somewhere in the world, outside the West. Even books written by non-Western scholars tend to be shaped, to a great extent, by Western theological thought. They fail to use their own cultural resources to help us think about the mission of God in new and exciting ways. Without making space for and encouraging authentic indigenous missiologies, whatever centres emerge in other parts of the world will only be extensions of their parent centres in the West. Andrew Walls once remarked, “Western theological leadership of a predominantly non-Western church is an incongruity.”⁵

“By talking about new centres of mission, it seems likely to me that we are expecting the emerging non-Western mission movements to be “centred” just like the Western movement was.”





We need new languages

Furthermore, the promise of a true polycentric mission will not happen until we agree that all mission is equal. This means that the mission of God is the same, whether it involves Europeans working in Africa or Africans working in Europe. Our language must reflect an awareness that the same God who sends Westerners also sends Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Our current language that qualifies non-Western mission as “diaspora mission” or “reverse mission” is not justifiable. We end up with mission as something that Westerners (mostly white people) do in other parts of the world while when black and brown people (from Africa, Asia, and Latin America) engage in mission in the West, it is not really mission but “diaspora mission” or “reverse mission” which, generally speaking, only involves black and brown people reaching other black and brown people. If mission were, indeed, polycentric, Western Christians would be ready to work with missionaries from the rest of the world in their cities. Otherwise, in this polycentric mission discourse, it would appear that Global South missionaries are only welcome on other Global South continents. Polycentric mission cannot happen when Western Christians believe they are superior or higher than the rest of us. In this century of world Christianity, there should be no second-class missionary. Any segregation in our missionary movements renders the whole idea of polycentric mission unattainable. How can it be polycentric when it is divided?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am not opposed to polycentric mission. I am just a bit cautious it is too good to be true. Its promises, as far as I see in mission today, are unattainable. We still have a strong Western hegemony in mission that will not be decentred soon. This hegemony has the financial power to determine much of what happens in mission in other parts of the world. Mission will be polycentric when the power structures shift and African, Asian, and Latin American Christians can participate in mission in their own ways, using their own resources.

Harvey Kwiyani

“Mission will be polycentric when African, Asian, and Latin American Christians can participate in mission in their own ways, using their own resources.”

Endnotes:

1. For a fuller discussion on this, see Allen L. Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: Twenty-first Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).
2. I use “the West” in a rather generalised manner, understanding that now all Western countries are part of this story. However, speaking as an African here, there has been little difference in the mission praxis whether it was North American, British, French, German, or Australian missionaries. They often identified with one another and worked together. If I were to separate individualise Western countries, focus on one country after another, this essay would not be possible in its current format.
3. For more on the racist and colonial history of mission, see Mekdes A. Haddis, *A Just Mission: Laying Down Power and Embracing Mutuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).
4. Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, American Society of Missiology Series, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 58. In most African churches, evangelists and missionaries are the same. Thus, in African Christianity, we have witnessed what it looks like when all believers have a sense of being called to God’s mission.
5. Andrew F. Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-first Century,” *Transformation* 19, no. 4 (2002): 221.

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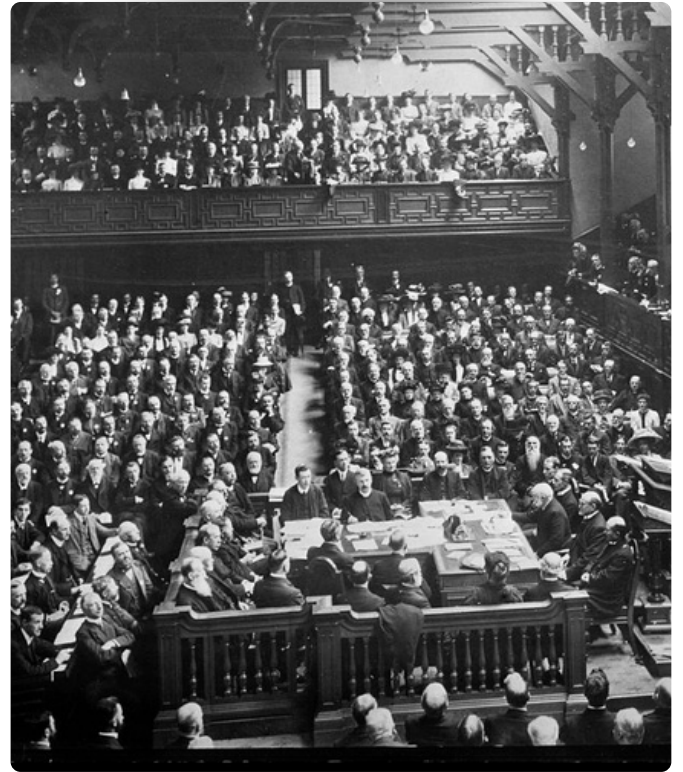
WHAT IF THERE IS NO MISSION CENTRE?

Alexandru Vlasin

Opportunity – No (poly)centric mission behind the Iron Curtain

Ever since the 18th century; and the commencement of the modern mission movement initiated by William Carey in English-speaking countries,¹ the desire to craft strategies and give directions became an attractive and necessary effort in order to organise and structure the missionary approach and labour. A few years later, the need to understand the task before them led to groupings that did not exist before

When the 1910 Edinburgh mission gathering happened, most Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries were part of the “rest” of the world,² meaning they were mission fields in need of exploration and conquering by the mission of the churches in the West. Between the two World Wars, several countries in CEE experienced persecution while trying to officially establish their newly founded evangelical churches in their respective countries.³ However, while most of the mission gatherings happened during this time, the CEE countries were under heavy persecution and isolation caused by the harsh communist regime and consequently could not be part of any thinking in global missiological development and action. Also, for many years, the evangelical churches in this part of the world were receiving missionaries from outside who, although paying a high price to cross the Iron Curtain, could understand and contribute very little to the development of missionary thinking and strategies locally due to encountering many limitations there. Therefore, no mission centres could be initiated by nationals or missionaries behind the Iron Curtain.



The 1910 World Missionary Conference, or the Edinburgh Missionary Conference

Despite the adverse context, God’s mission and work took place. Nevertheless, what matrix are we to use when thinking in terms of polycentric and multidirectional mission in this part of the world? How can the churches kept in isolation and under national persecution stay connected with other similar churches or mission bodies around the globe?

“How can the churches kept in isolation and under national persecution stay connected with other similar churches or mission bodies around the globe? ”



Priority – Survival

Soon after the fall of the Communist regime in Romania, a Western pastor arrived at the Bucharest Baptist Theological Seminary to teach theology. Dreams of new opportunities to study and serve were in everyone's minds. During his speech, he attempted to also explain how mission works by saying that "the golden rule in mission is that whoever has the gold makes the rule." Over the years, this statement was repeated several times by influential local leaders when mission was discussed. Not knowing the intentions of the pastor who first voiced it, the intentions of those who repeated it were to argue that a church (or even an association of churches) with little financial resources are not capable of engaging, planning and sending global missionaries.

With isolation and persecution lifted for CEE churches, doors were opened for more help to arrive from other nations to the region, mostly from Western countries. But has this been helpful to hearten and support the local churches to become able to birth a mission centre in the region? Initially, most received aid was in goods and basic resources. However, some missionaries came to engage in evangelism and church planting, coupled with teaching and camp ministry. Churches and believers were exposed to what cross-cultural missionary work is and some were invited to join in and go to other nations for missionary work.⁴

Very few responded and even fewer churches engaged in world mission to send and support missionaries. The priority was material and financial survival and if possible, to succeed in their desire to plant and build more churches locally, as well as train and employ more pastors while expanding their theological education programmes. Consequently, for the leaders of Central and Eastern European evangelical churches, global mission was very low on the priority list. Until recently, very few churches would have a mission committee and almost no resources were destined to be spent and sent towards such effort. Nonetheless, with the help of Western missionaries, some mission structures have started which are mainly offices of international agencies such as Cru, OM, Wycliffe and others, forming national groupings of both international and local initiatives in mission.

On the one hand, there is a frustration voiced by some Western missionaries in CEE at the slow pace at which churches are willing to send missionaries to other nations.

On the other hand, most Western missionaries are loyal to their sending agency and the ministry they were sent to perform. This allows them little involvement with the local church to help them to grow and understand global mission. Very few have engaged with the local church to understand the mechanism and to contribute from within. Therefore, it could be easy for a local believer or church to think that polycentric leadership and a multidirectional approach in mission is something the Western churches enjoy and need.

However, within the context of the financial survival of local churches, while thinking about multidirectional mission and polycentric mission leadership in Central and Eastern Europe countries, there are basic questions to be asked: is the help of Western missionaries encouraging local churches to construct their global mission trajectory? Who can prepare them for times of freedom and the challenges Western churches currently face? What help would they need to become mission initiators and blaze their own trail in global mission? What would the Western missionaries need to know and do in order to help the nationals? How and who can train the Western missionaries for such ministry?





Diversity – Is there something more than polycentric mission?

At The Lausanne Congress in 1974, two Latin American voices were heard and it changed the outcome of the gathering. Escobar and Padilla, were both trained in and spent years in Western countries, which enabled them to engage and advocate for social justice, something their countries of origin needed the most at that time. What is needed most today in CEE countries? What does a church in survival mode need the most, but which they may find difficult to express?

In the past years, the voices from Central and Eastern Europe were forcefully silenced by harsh political regimes, but God heard them clearly and used it to ignite the hearts of many believers from the region, who willingly paid the price of suffering in order to continue the work of the Church within those given limitations. Likewise, over many years their example inspired the mobilisation of a great Western missionary force sent out in challenging locations around the world.

As for the churches in CEE, they inherited from the past mutual support among the believers and much prayer and bible reading, which together created the resilience base for the present times and what was to come. This rather simplistic method proved to be very powerful to the believers and local churches. There are many other churches in various non-Western countries whose voices may be different but not loud. The churches in the West want global direction and macro systems while churches in other cultures find more value in relationships and partnerships. What can the weak voices teach those who have the platform to call for strategies and global systems as the way forward? Without prior exposure to cross-cultural mission and concrete involvement in global mission activities, CEE churches may lack the audience's language (professional and literal) and risk being misunderstood. Their explanations may lack coherence to the listener, perhaps even distorting the existing reality regarding the mission in the respective region. Hence, who has the patience and listening skills to hear and discern the weak voices' message to the global mission? Today, the voices from Central and Eastern Europe are not loud. What to do with those feeble voices who might be different than those suggesting polycentrism? They may not ask for a simple decentralization either but instead they need perhaps other working ways to join



“Hence, who has the patience and listening skills to hear and discern the weak voices’ message to the global mission”



world mission. What if there are different views and ways to engage in mission? Where is the place for such voices to be heard? What if those that have different views do not have the capacity and language

to express their thoughts, their understandings and practices? What do we do if their mission takes place in a subtle but sublime way, without claims of becoming a specific centre or to give direction, but with a simple understanding of the love of God and as a result of a beautiful walk with Him? The answer could be that what the CEE churches need the most is living together in the love of God. The kind of love that flows from the Father to form the unity of the church that Jesus prayed for in John 17 and Bosch so beautifully fashioned as: "Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people"⁵. Could this theme be heard by mission leaders and initiate a global gathering where everyone learns how to listen, be humble and enables the flow of love needed for unbelievers to acknowledge God's presence among his people? And what if themes such as this never surface in our global gatherings but rather are enjoyed and efficiently used locally for the glory of our Father? This might be the time to learn about the local movement of the Holy Spirit and connect together in what our God loves.



“What do we do if their mission takes place in a subtle but sublime way ... with a simple understanding of the love of God and as a result of a beautiful walk with Him”

In conclusion, let's continue to examine our desires to do mission, explore other ways other people use to serve, listen more to each other and enjoy the Missio Dei together.

Alexandru Vlasin

Endnotes

1. See Carey's Enquiry who promotes new ways of thinking for "missionary apologetic and strategy," in A. Ernest Payne, "Carey's 'Enquiry,'" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17, no. 3 (July 1993), 313.
2. We will refer to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries as those countries who are in the eastern part of Europe starting from Poland, Former Yugoslavian Federation all the way to Greece in the south and Belarus in the north. For the political map of Central and Eastern Europe see: <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/central-europe-map.htm>. Later, most of these countries would be placed behind the Iron Curtain that divided Europe between the communists and the free world. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Curtain.
3. For a good explanation of what is Eastern Europe and its historical development in the midst of persecution and pain see: Peter Kuzmič, *Christianity in Eastern Europe: A Story of Pain, Glory, Persecution and Freedom* in "Mission in Central and Eastern Europe – Realities, Perspective, Trends," Edited by Constantineanu C., Macelaru M., Himcinschi M., *Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series*, Vol 34, Regnum, Oxford 2016, pages 13-29.
4. Read the impact of 25 years of mission work in CEE, in: A. Vlasin, *Twenty-Five Years of Mission Movement in Central and Eastern Europe: An indigenous Perspective* in "Mission in Central and Eastern Europe – Realities, Perspective, Trends," pages 56-66.
5. David Bosch, "Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission." Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 392.

When we talk about the role of Europe in the world in the past and today, whether in the area of economics, politics, colonisation, science and technology, or with respect to the missionary endeavours to spread the Christian faith, we are tempted to see Europe as a whole, as a single centre of power and influence amidst the other world 'powers that be'. This view however is quite mistaken.

What we call 'Europe' is in fact a conglomerate of several peoples or ethnic identities, living in several nations, each of them with its own language (or languages, as in Belgium or Switzerland), its own history and culture, its own army, and its own national institutions and enterprises. They are all 'European', but each of them in their own particular way.

Viewed from the outside the outlook of all European countries is quite similar, as compared to other regions of the world, so much so that they are collectively called 'European'. This similarity is also felt by the Europeans themselves despite their differences. There is among these peoples a widespread sense of belonging to a larger whole called 'Europe'. Usually this idea of 'Europeanness' is defined in terms of common cultural and religious roots, a common historical experience, and common values such as democracy and human dignity.

But looking at Europe from within, these peoples and countries appear to be quite different. They are often opposed to each other. Europe is not so much a culture or a civilisation but rather a cultural realm. Diversity is its hallmark. For that reason, Europe has not a definite centre. Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece, Sweden, and all the others, each of them is in its own particular way a centre of European culture.

A new approach to uniting Europeans

Throughout history there have been several attempts to unite all the European peoples under one crown, in one empire, under one political banner, at the cost of much suffering and bloodshed. All these attempts have failed. The only successful project of unifying Europe to date is the process of integration that began after the Second World War, with the reconciliation between the former enemies France, Germany, and Italy.



“Europe is not so much a culture or a civilisation but rather a cultural realm. Diversity is its hallmark”

“The only successful project of unifying Europe to date is the process of integration that began after the Second World War...”



Why could it succeed? Precisely because it did not depend on one centre of power. Instead of one nation trying to impose itself as the leader of the rest, several nations chose to work together for peace and prosperity on the basis of mutual agreement. This was not a project of replacing the states by one superstate, but of a community of nations, working for the common good. They created supranational institutions of governance, but they remained sovereign in many areas. Moreover, they agreed upon a number of common values to guide the process of integration, such as solidarity, subsidiarity, democracy, human dignity, and above all unity in diversity.

All of this is laid down in a series of European treaties. None of these treaties ever mention the term 'polycentric', but this term is quite appropriate to denote the model of governance that has been chosen to realise the European integration. This comes out in a number of ways.

Capitals and rotating centres

Firstly, rather than being concentrated in a single capital city, the institutions of the European Union (EU) are seated in four different cities; the European Council as well as the European Commission and its administrative offices in Brussels, the European Bank in Frankfurt, the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, and the European Parliament in Strasbourg. EU agencies and organisations have their locations across the Union.

Furthermore, the presidency of the European Council of Ministers, where the main decisions are taken, rotates among the member states of the EU every six months. During that period, the capital of the presiding nation is the centre of Europe.

Similarly, every year the Council of Europe designates one or more cities on the continent 'cultural capital of Europe'. Hereby, it aims to bring to light that Europe is truly polycentric in the area of culture and art. Every nation has its famous places of interest, together they constitute the richness of the European cultural heritage.

Multilinguism

Following the same polycentric principle, the European institutions have adopted a policy of multilinguism. The EU has recognized 24 official languages, besides a number of regional languages. The current Spanish presidency of the European Council has submitted a proposal to give three regional languages in Spain the status of official EU language (Catalan, Galician, and Basque). Official texts are published in at least the major languages. Each European commissioner and each European MP have the right to publicly speak their own language, which they invariably do. Thanks to a host of simultaneous interpreters, communication is possible in this modern Babylon.

“The EU has recognized 24 official languages, besides a number of regional languages...”

Italian author Umberto Eco once said: 'Europe is translation', in order to emphasise that linguistically, Europe is polycentric. Instead of imposing one language for all, we have to translate each other's languages to assure that every nation can make its own voice be heard. Moreover, translation is the precondition of maintaining our diversity. And only through learning each other's languages can we appreciate each other's cultures, and work together for the common good, European-wide. Even though English is becoming more and more dominant, the other languages resist. Huge funds are invested to keep all of them 'alive', in publishing, higher education and scientific research, the media, and the arts.



Geographical midpoint of Europe

Even when it comes to defining its geographical midpoint, Europe appears to be polycentric. Where is the centre? Different answers are given, depending on where one draws the borders of Europe and on the method of calculating the middle. Europe has never had a generally agreed upon midpoint. More than a dozen locations have been proposed to carry the title 'centre of Europe'.

In fact, there is a long history of determining the geographical centre of Europe, since the Polish astronomer and cartographer Szymon Sobiekrajski calculated that it was located in the town of Suchowola in modern north-eastern Poland.¹ Today, there is still no unanimity among geographers, but the number of serious candidates for the title is now reduced to three. One is the Hungarian village of Tallya, the second is a village on the island of Saaremaa in western Estonia, and the third one is Polotsk, near Lake Sho in Belarus.²



Monument to the Geographical Centre of Europe in Polotsk, Belarus.³



Don't overlook the east

In the midst of this confusion, one thing is sure. Whatever method one uses, one finds the midpoint always somewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, far away from the economic centres in the West, far away also from the political, administrative, and financial centres of the European Union. Many Western Europeans are biased by the idea that their countries constitute the heartland of Europe, and that people in the east would do best to 'catch up with us'. They should clean their spectacles and realise that they are simply not 'in the middle'. They are just the western half of the continent, rooted in Latin and Rome, besides the eastern half that is rooted in Greek and Byzantium.

I recall the words of the Orthodox metropolitan Mikhael Stakos in a speech for the Clergy-Laity Conference in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 2000, in which he severely criticised the Museum of European History in Brussels, created by the European Commission. The museum makes this history begin with the time of Charlemagne. 'This is a limitation of our history and in insult to the European spirit', said the patriarch. 'Do not the Minoan culture of Crete, the Acropolis of Athens, and the Hagia Sofia of Constantinople (Istanbul) belong to all Europeans and to all Christians?'⁴ His words remind us that Europe is polycentric, not only on the cultural but also on the spiritual and religious level.

"...Europe is polycentric, not only on the cultural but also on the spiritual and religious level."

Changing face and centres of European Christianity

This reality is amplified by the far-reaching demographic change that is taking place since the 1970s. As a result of continuing immigration from outside Europe, and the higher birth rates of the 'new stock Europeans' as compared to those of the 'old stock' Europeans – to use the terminology of Philip Jenkins⁵ – an increasing part of the population has a non-European ethnic and cultural background, and they are much more religious than the largely secularised old stock Europeans. Instead of assimilating, many migrant communities develop a form of bicultural mix, so that there continues to be a difference with their 'old stock' surroundings.



The consequences are paramount. Islam has become a new religious centre, besides Christianity and the non-religious population. Both Muslim Europe and Christian Europe in themselves are not monolithic but polycentric. As for the latter, through the growth of migrant churches and the growing presence of migrant background Christians within 'old stock' European churches, we are witnessing the emergence of a new centre of influence, besides the traditional ones, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical.

"...through the growth of migrant churches and the growing presence of migrant background Christians within 'old stock' European churches, we are witnessing the emergence of a new centre of influence, besides the traditional ones, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical."



Conclusions for Christians in mission

How does this survey of polycentric Europe have a bearing on Christians in mission? By way of conclusion we would suggest the following four points.

First of all, the need for a polycentric understanding of European societies, cultures, and religious communities.

Secondly, the importance of multilinguism in Europe. This is a real challenge for mission organisations that are increasingly dominated by English as the language of theological reflection, of mission conferences, and of communication between mission agencies. This creates a linguistic power centre, which advantages native English speakers over those who have had to learn the language later in life, and which can easily marginalise or even bypass large sectors of the European cultural and religious realms. And it leads to many blind spots. In this respect, there is much to be learnt from the policy of the European institutions.

Thirdly, the importance of recognising cultural and national diversity. 'Europeanness' comes in many variants. This is another challenge for mission organisations that are tempted to use one country as a base to 'reach out' to the rest, instead of creating real partnerships with people in other countries. Here again, much can be learned from the experiences of the European integration project.

Finally, from a polycentric viewpoint, no church or organisation should feel marginalised, whatever their geographical location. Each one of them can take centre place in the communication of the Gospel in Europe, similar to the rotating presidencies and cultural capitals mentioned above.



Evert Van de Poll

Endnotes

1. See for this history: Gardner, N. 'Pivotal points: defining Europe's centre', in *Hidden Europe* (5), November 2005, p. 20ff.
2. Source for the map below: public domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Extreme_points_of_Europe.png
3. Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Polotsk_Centr_Evropy_1.JPG
4. Metropolitan Michael (Stakos) of Austria, 'The Contribution of Orthodoxy on the Course Towards a United Europe.' Speech at the Clergy-Laity Conference, Constantinople (Istanbul), 24 November 2000
Source: http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/church_history/michael_contribution_orthodoxy.htm
5. Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent*, Oxford University Press, 2007.



POLYCENTRIC LEADERSHIP : AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE HANDLEY

Alongside Polycentric Mission, the leadership qualities required to enable organisations and networks to work in this way are described in the book 'Polycentric Mission Leadership', by Joseph Handley, based on his PhD studies on the topic.

He defines Polycentric Mission Leadership as “a collaborative, communal leadership empowering multiple centers of influence and a diverse array of leaders to meet today's challenges,” and the following interview gives a further insight into some of his thoughts around the topic.

Where did your interest in Polycentric Leadership come from?

I've always been more of a team person; even in sports I preferred team sports like basketball to lone ones like running. Growing up, I also experienced diversity where my best friends were from different cultures. Then my work environment in mission meant I crossed different cultural streams all the time.

I was quickly thrown into leadership and became disappointed with top down and leader-centric leadership models being operated with the context in which I served, where the CEO made all the decisions and multiple players on the team were marginalised or not heard. Often the marginalised ones were on the fringes of influence or society, with no power, meaning the issues that were most important to them or their cultures or nations were unaddressed. I'd bring up issues with them saying 'you're worried about this, should I raise it to the people in that organisation?', and they would say 'please don't, the bottom line is the white guys always win'. So these were the dynamics behind my dissatisfaction and thinking there must be a better way to go about things.

So where did you look for the different models of leadership?

Well I'm a practitioner not a theoretician, so it was painful doing a PhD! The breakthrough came when I read a book by Allen Yeh, a professor at Biola University who looked at the events celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the Edinburgh Conference¹. His thesis was that there was one event in 1910, and mission was uni-directional, the West to the Rest, whereas mission has now changed to the point where there were five congresses in 2010, all with a fuller



Joseph Handley

“ Growing up, I experienced diversity where my best friends were from different cultures.”



representation of the sense of the diversity of the Kingdom of God in the work of mission. This catapulted me into a new reality where I started mining data that was surprisingly affirming to the new ideas I was grappling with about how we can have better collaborative systems.

I started studying the idea of Polycentrism which has some heavy roots in Europe – think of the EU, where you have multiple countries with one kind of umbrella group trying to hold them together. Combined with the theory of polycentric governance, developed by Elinor Ostrom, an economics academic from Indiana University,ⁱⁱ I started me on the journey to define a new leadership theory from a global leadership perspective. But I am aware it needs to go deeper, integrating leadership theories from East and South Asia, Latin America and Africa.

You say polycentric leadership is a new model of global leadership – is the current one not good enough?

I don't think current global leadership theories are comprehensive enough. The ideas of global leadership that I've studied, such as Hofstedeⁱⁱⁱ or the Globe study^{iv} are fairly nascent and I'm not sure they have captured all of the nuances of leadership in a global setting. When I've read those models I don't see as much about the communal nature of the work. And because I'm dealing with the mission world, a unique area is the spirituality of leadership. There is a category in the Globe study called 'Charismatic leadership' which does address character, your integrity and your trustworthiness. This is different from Charismatic leadership theory which is more about the 'woo' and 'winsomeness' of the leader.

“...because I'm dealing with the mission world, a unique area is the spirituality of leadership.”

I think you pre-empted my next question – I reacted strongly against your use of the word 'Charismatic' as a characteristic of Polycentric leadership. Did you consider using a different word to avoid it being misunderstood?

No I didn't, although I think that further research will determine whether some of the themes should be merged or further developed, or called something different. One of the words I changed was 'freedom' to 'entrepreneurial' – but I mean having the freedom to act in the way you feel is right in your context. And these are nuances in the language that are going to flesh

Sidebar I: Polycentric mission leadership traits

Handley has identified the following traits within the polycentric leadership model:

CHARISMATIC: Includes a strong foundation and a strong set of core values. Charisma is more than just having charismatic personality. It involves strength of character, trustworthiness, and a faithful presence. Charisma is vital to effective polycentric leadership. Whether it be good character, spiritual inspiration, or casting and carrying out vision, charisma is vitally important to leading well.

COLLABORATION: Includes working together in a shared participative manner. Effective leaders must be collaborative in their approach, willing to work in team-centred paradigms where no one rises above the others and all work together toward the goals of their particular network.

COMMUNAL: Leading through community is integral to polycentric leadership. In the fellowship and family-like atmosphere of serving together, leaders gain perspective and insight from one another and are better able to function through checks and balances, holding each other to higher standards and modeling the collective behaviours they seek to engender toward fulfilling their mutual vision and mission. Collaborators become a community, establishing a contract where vision is shared so they can function as a team. Leaders that work with others in community bring change to their various networks; they foster an environment that has the momentum to go farther together. As the teams work together, comradery



themselves out over the long haul.

Is there the risk that the word 'polycentric' becomes just another fad, the way the word 'missional' was used a lot ten years ago, but isn't heard very often now?

It's possible that it is just another buzz word that people have latched on to, but I think it's interesting that it's only in the evangelical world that it is a new concept. You could argue that you can trace its roots right back to early Christian practice. The Bible articulates a plural vision for leadership. In the beginning, God said let 'us' make man in 'our' own image. For me, this forms a leadership paradigm that flows throughout scripture. While some pastors have described a Mosaic mantle for CEO/top-down leadership, the reality is that Moses said he didn't speak so well when asked to lead, and God gave him Aaron. Later Jethro advised him to decentralize leadership. Even the kings had prophets to advise them as the Lord clearly preferred that there only be one King (himself). Follow into the New Testament and the scriptures describe a plurality of elders and deacons to provide leadership. When Paul planted churches, he would equip not only a shepherd but elders to guide church life. This model appears to be core to the early life of the Church.

"...it's interesting that it's only in the evangelical world that polycentric mission is a new concept."

You say you think the theory can be improved – what does that look like?

I want people to test my theory in their practice, and come up with better systems and models. I think it can be drastically improved so I'm hoping that it will catalyse research – there are at least six people that I know of who are doing dissertations on this. I'm also looking at personally doing more research on it and coming out with a more pragmatic approach on how to operationalise it. And the third stream is that I've been challenged to write about the Trinitarian form of leadership as part of the model. When I came up with that idea, majority world leaders just like embraced it and the people who pushed back the most were Western theologians who said it was putting too much onto the idea of the Trinity. So I want to explore that more.

builds, vision coalesces, and action begins to take shape.

RELATIONAL: Spending time with one another, getting to know one another, and going beyond just working together—is imperative. Leading well involves a depth of relationship that goes beyond partnership or collaboration. It flows within the communal theme mentioned above but goes further pressing into deep personal ties.

ENTREPRENEURIAL: Self-governance and freedom are crucial for local teams to operate effectively. Entrepreneurial freedom engenders effective leadership. This is especially true for successful startups that thrive in a culture of risk-taking, entrepreneurship, experimentation, and innovation. Freedom means independence from overarching structures in terms of decision-making and agenda-setting. This includes teams' freedom to structure on their own accord and around the more entrepreneurial aspects of leadership.

DIVERSITY: Leaders who value and recognize diversity are able to work across regions, networks, and cultures. The diversity of leadership gifts described in Ephesians 4 is paramount. For diversity to be fully employed within a polycentric leadership model, it must represent every facet of diversity represented within a network, movement or society. It is in this diversity of leadership that strong bonds develop which overcome obstacles, create unified momentum, and catalyse ideas toward a better future.



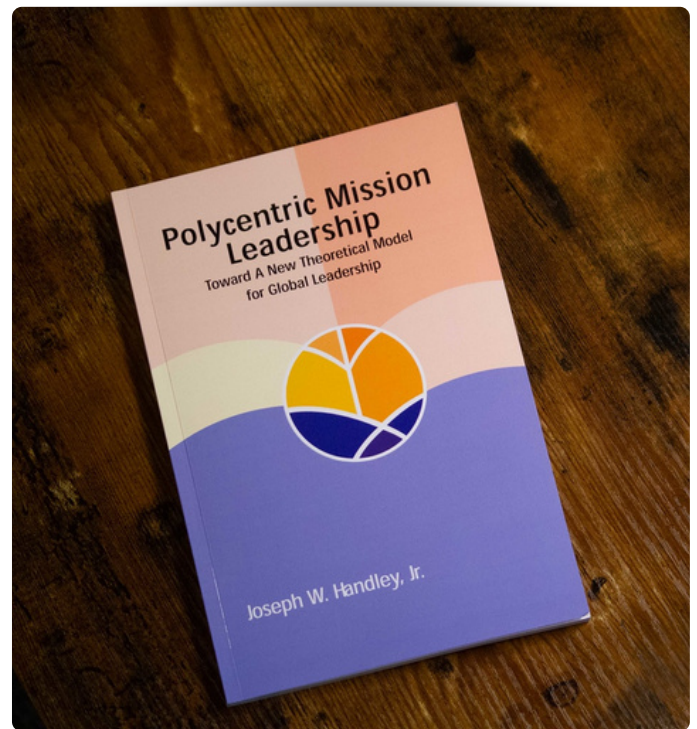
So if you have an organisation who is inspired by your book to become more polycentric, what needs to happen?

Let me tell you a story – when I joined my mission fifteen years ago, we were known as a pretty collaborative organisation. But in the first year, I heard of all these White guys flying around the world, making decisions with only one Asian guy in the room. At the same time my colleague did a study of movement leadership, for example social movements. We started adapting our systems to where we empowered people and leadership became much more localised.

We learnt to listen really well. For example, the words my Cambodian friend hated the word ‘sustainability’ – for him the word meant ‘abandonment’ – it means no ongoing relationship. So we went from aiming for independence from dependence to an interdependent organisation, As soon as I talked about this, my friend said ‘this is what we need’. Now we have imported these voices into our leadership for the future. If they are being quiet in the room we tell the others to keep quiet.

"...we went from aiming for independence from dependence to an interdependent organisation."

So if an organisation or network wants to become more polycentric, I think that is the biggest change they require – really listening, doing it with humility, and then having the integrity to follow up on what you are hearing.



Polycentric Mission Leadership: Toward a New Theoretical Model for Global Leadership by Joe Handley is published by Regnum books and available from online booksellers

About Joe

Joseph Handley has devoted his life to accelerating leaders for mission movements. He is the president/CEO of A3, a global network that equips leaders for the Church (A3Leaders.org) and marketplace (A3.business). He serves as a Global Catalyst for Leadership with the Lausanne Movement and affiliated faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary. Prior, Joe was founding director of Azusa Pacific University's Office of World Mission and lead mission pastor at Rolling Hills Covenant Church. His book *Polycentric Mission Leadership* can be found here: www.polycentricleadership.com

You can find out more about Polycentric mission leadership on the website <https://polycentricleadership.com/>

Endnotes

ⁱ Yeh, Allen. *Polycentric Missiology: 21st Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere*. 2016

ⁱⁱ Ostrom, Elinor (June 2010). "Beyond markets and states: polycentric governance of complex economic systems". *American Economic Review*. American Economic Association. 100 (3): 641–72.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hofstede, G., and Hofstede, G. J. (2005). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*.

^{iv} Robert J. House, Peter W. Dorfman, Mansour Javidian, Paul J. Hanges, and Mary F. Sully de Luque, *Strategic Leadership Across Cultures: The GLOBE Study of CEO Leadership Behavior and Effectiveness in 24 countries*. 2014