

# TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP: FROM COMPETITION TO *KOINONIA*<sup>i</sup>

*The purpose of leadership in the missional church is to form a "community of the kingdom," a company of God's people whose very way of relating to and caring for one another demonstrates what life is like inside the reign of God.*

For several decades now, the Center for Parish Development has conducted research to help congregations and other church bodies learn to become "communities of the reign of God."<sup>ii</sup> This ministry is based on the understanding that the church in all of its expressions – whether a house church, a cell group, a congregation, a regional church body, a national church agency, or any work group or leadership team within them – is to embody the reign of God. The church in all its expressions is a people called by God and sent into the world to be God's demonstration community. The ways people relate to and care for each other is to manifest, or at least point to, what life is like inside the reign of God.

## **Living Inside the Reign of God**

In this sense the church is to live under the rule of God's reign. Just as Jesus' baptism by John and his anointing by the Holy Spirit placed him under covenant obligations and promises and focused his entire ministry on the kingdom or reign of God, so the church in all its expressions is to embody the reign of God by living under its authority. The reign of God must set the tone and the criteria for everything that occurs in the life of God's people.

The quality of life together as a community of God's people is to be a *sign* that points not to ourselves but beyond us to the reign of God. Just as a sign points to something else that is greater than the sign, so the church as a *sign* points to the reign of God. The church is called to be a unique community of those who live inside the reign of God. It is to display the first fruits of the forgiven and forgiving people of God.

The quality of life together as a community of God's

people is to be a *foretaste* of life inside the reign of God. A foretaste represents something that is yet to come. So the church as *foretaste* represents God's redeeming purpose for the world that will be fulfilled in the future. It is to be the harbinger of the new humanity that lives in genuine community.

The quality of life together as a community of God's people is to be an *instrument* of the reign of God. An instrument is a means or a medium for getting something done. So the church as *instrument* is the primary way God presents to the world an alternative way to be a society. The church in all its expressions is to demonstrate within its own common or shared life a form of companionship, friendship, and wholeness that God intends for the whole creation. In a broken and divided world, the church as the community of the reign of God is to demonstrate a oneness with one another "so that the world may believe" that Jesus has been sent by his Father (John 17:21).

Just as Jesus exhibited his union with his Father in obedient submission to God's rule and thus could say, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," so too God has designed it so that when people have seen God's "peculiar" people, the church, they have caught a view of God. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).<sup>iii</sup>

Before the church does anything or says anything, it must first devote time and energy into learning to become the unique community (*com + unity*: "with oneness") that it is called to be -- a faithful sign, foretaste, and instrument of the reign of God. For Christians, this involves learning the ways of love. The New Testament uses the word *koinonia* to name this new fellowship of holy living, loving concern, and mutual support which is to characterize the quality of life within the church. It means unlearning deep patterns of domination and submission, passivity and violence, competition and winning at all cost, that permeate western society and, unfortunately, have been incorporated into the life of most church communities.

## Learning the Practice of *Koinonia*

Many church bodies never achieve the quality of *koinonia* they seek. Instead of *koinonia*, they experience fragmentation, competition, various kinds of power plays, destructive conflict, a few members who feel "in" and the vast majority who feel "out" of the information loops, breakdowns of trust and confidence in leadership (both clergy and lay), backbiting, low positive motivation toward the church, other symptoms of unfaithfulness in the body.

Few clergy and lay people are trained in the kinds of relational leadership skills that help congregations learn the practice of *koinonia*. "In an impersonal, fragmented, and competitive world, these relational skills do not come naturally. They must be learned, tested, and practiced within a community of people who come together to participate in God's new creation: an alternative way of living and working together."<sup>iv</sup>

North American culture teaches competitive, not relational, practices. The economic systems, political systems, educational systems, and even religious organization systems, are all based on competitive norms and teach us the ways of competing with each other. School children learn to compete for grades, recognition, honors, scholarships. Churches compete with one another for members and resources. Businesses compete for customers and profits. We learn how to suppress others' ideas in order to promote our own, to guard our communication carefully in order to keep in the dark others with whom we disagree. We learn to break off communication, to impose our preferred solutions on others (usually making use of *Roberts Rules of Order* to do this, in an orderly way, of course). We learn to create winners and losers through our competitive decision-making processes, and when we lose, to resist the solutions we don't like by becoming non-cooperative.

It is almost impossible to grow up in North America and not be exposed to competitive norms and practices. Therefore it should not be a surprise that competitive norms and practices are carried with us into the church. Most church organizational structures, whether denominational or local, are reflections of North American political structures and inherently competitive. Most congregations and other church bodies use competitive decision-making processes that create winners and losers instead of a community of the kingdom. In fact, the values, structures, patterns of

leadership and participation currently operative in most church bodies actually prevent *koinonia*. They effectively block the activity of the Holy Spirit. If the practice of *koinonia* is to be learned, all of these structures, values, and patterns of leadership need to be critically examined, changed, and replaced with values, structural arrangements, patterns of leadership and participation that create a climate in which a community of the reign of God can be formed.

This change requires a major transformation, both personal and organizational. It involves conversion.

### A Particularly Promising Approach

A particularly promising approach to helping leaders, leadership teams, and whole church bodies learn the practice of *koinonia* is present in the resources and supports of the Center for Development. These resources help to guide the development of the church body in the direction of *koinonia*. They help leaders and leadership teams, learn, assimilate, and integrate an approach to church leadership which –

- is biblically and theologically grounded.
- is based on substantial empirical research and solid organizational theory.
- is congruent with the calling and mission of the church to be a community of the kingdom.
- includes technical resources necessary for diagnosing church leadership, recognizing current strengths and opportunities for improvement while addressing organizational problems.
- opens up communication channels and enables the really important information about the quality of relationships and performance to flow quickly and accurately between members and the leader and among members with one another.
- includes skill training for clergy and other church leaders to help them become proficient in the use of this more faithful and effective leadership system.
- draws upon an extensive data bank for facilitating accurate and insightful diagnosis.

Every church, in whatever its current situation is, embodies one of four leadership systems, and sometimes more. A leadership "system" refers to the whole complex of interactions between leaders with each other, leaders with members, and members with each other that creates a climate of the church, which in turn washes over everything that happens within that church. The

system that most reflects the *koinonia* of the kingdom is called "System 4". In brief, *System 1*, *System 2*, *System 3*, and *System 4* models are described here:

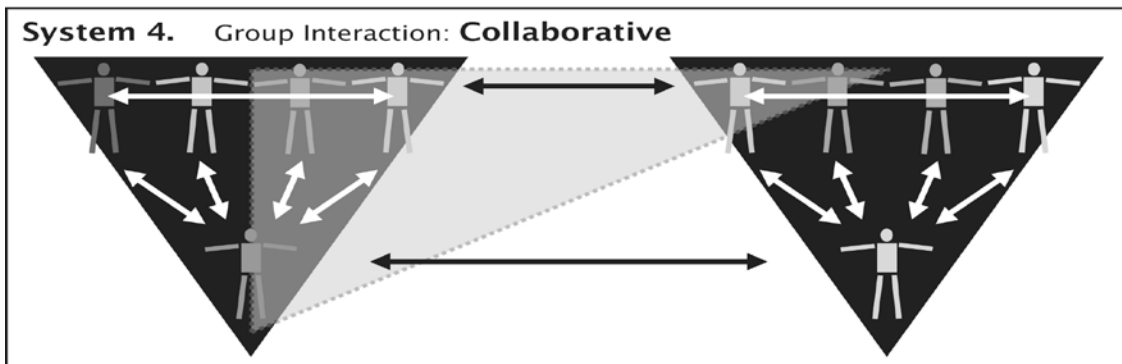
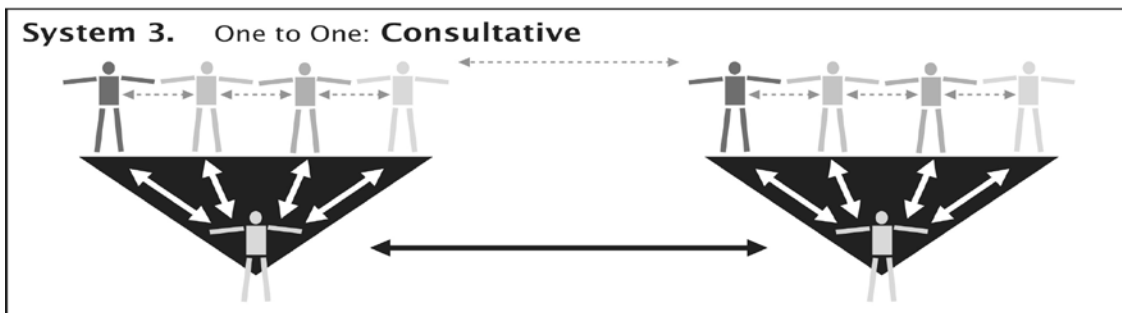
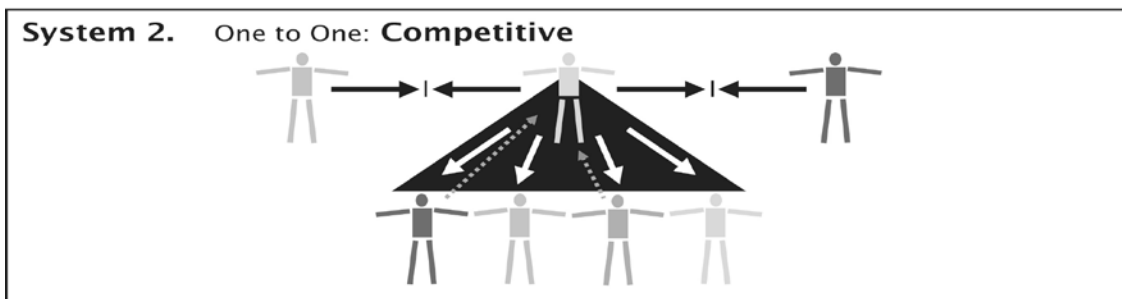
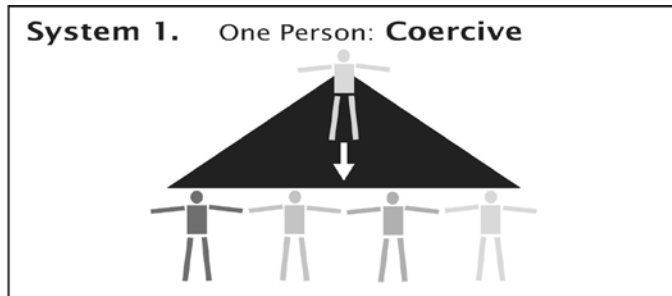
*System 1*: an exploitative authoritarian model where the leader is experienced as coercive.

*System 2*: a benevolent authoritarian model where the leader stimulates competition among members.

*System 3*: a consultative model where a benevolent leader works one-to-one with members.

*System 4*: a collaborative model where the leader and members build high-trust, cohesive relationships and direct themselves to achieve common goals.

## LEADERSHIP PATTERNS



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Research shows that when leaders and leadership teams practice behaviors that are primarily System 1 (coercive) or System 2 (competitive), those who participate in the work of the team or church generally tend to respond in a particular way: Their field of vision narrows. Rather than seeking what is best for the whole body, members will pursue their own self-interest, express suspicion of each other and the leader, experience diminished motivation toward the church, engage in win/lose behavior, attempt to impose their preferred solutions on others, become secretive and often subversive, sometimes fearful, as they politicize every issue. They will undercut one another and the leader.

However, if the same leaders and leadership teams demonstrate System 4 (collaborative) behavior, then over time, members will learn to become supportive of one another and the leader, cooperate with each other, share important technical information with each other, share power and influence, and seek solutions that all

members can endorse with enthusiasm, and seek what is best for the whole body. As a result, members will have a high level of satisfaction with their work for the church, high morale, low frustration, and a positive attitude toward the church.

Church organization systems and their leadership teams are dynamic – they can change and grow. Spiritual leadership practices that can be observed and learned are available. These are skills that any church leader and leadership team with training and coaching, and with feedback processes guiding reflection and action, can learn to practice consistently. Those who take these steps will be gratified with the positive changes that occur as trust replaces suspicion, collaboration replaces competition, concern for the whole replaces self-interest, and the church learns to become more of a community of the reign of God.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Why is the quality of the church's life important, what difference does it make?
2. What within the life of your congregation nurtures, models, or enables the experience of *koinonia*?
3. In what ways would you like to strengthen the quality of life and work within your congregation's leadership groups?



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  - <sup>ii</sup> Initially this research effort was conducted with support from the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in partnership with Rensis Likert Associates.
  - <sup>iii</sup> Darrell L. Guder (ed.), *Missional Church: A Theological Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, pre-publication edition, 1998) p. 53.
  - <sup>iv</sup> Inagrace Dietterich, "How Shall We Build An Open, Collaborative Climate?" Parts 1-4. *The Center Letter*, Vol. 23, No. 5, 6, 7, 8. (Chicago: The Center for Parish Development), May-August, 1993.