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BOOK REVIEW

Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez. *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 275 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0830839261.

The 2010 Los Angeles census reports that just over 50 percent of the population identify as white, a 6 percent drop in twenty years. However, only 27 percent of the total number identifying as white identified as “white not Hispanic or Latino,” meaning that only a quarter of the population of Los Angeles is considered “Western white.” Los Angeles is a multicultural city, but many other North American cities show similar ethnic diversity. Multiculturalism is on the rise and the church needs to respond.

Branson and Martínez have co-written *Churches, Culture and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* to assist the church in responding to increasing multiculturalism in North America. Both authors are professors at Fuller Seminary and their book collaborates their academic prowess and determined experience in multicultural leadership. Branson, “a white boy from Kansas,” was ordained in an African American Pentecostal church, married a Chinese American woman, taught in Peru, coached pastors in the Philippines, and is a member at a Japanese American church. Martínez is a U.S. born Mexican, and being married to a Cuban, he writes, “[m]y own experience has also reminded me how multicultural the term *Latino* really is” (p. 23). He has worked with Latino congregations throughout the United States, was the rector of a Mennonite seminary in Guatemala, and teaches in both the Hispanic and traditional programs at Fuller. Martínez describes attending Korean services most Sundays so that he might better relate to

his Korean students.

In light of the multicultural shift, Branson and Martínez's work seeks to "promote more attentiveness, wisdom and faithfulness concerning intercultural life in and among churches, and between churches and their neighbors" (p. 13). "Paying attention" is an important part of adjusting to multicultural change, and they write "to help men and women . . . see differently and to gain the skills and competencies necessary for multicultural contexts" (p. 14). They do so by introducing a practical theological method of praxis and reflection amidst context, by discussing sociocultural perspectives, and finally by instructing church leaders in facilitating adaptive change.

The first section of the book introduces their practical theological method, ecclesiological context, and how sociocultural structures affect local congregations. Branson outlines the process of praxis and the steps required for practical theology:

- Reflect and describe current praxis.
- Analyze current praxis and context using cultural resources.
- Study and reflect on scripture, Christian theology and history.
- Recall and discuss stories from the church and the lives within the church in regards to praxis.
- Discern and shape the new praxis through imagination, prayer, experimentation, and commitment. (Figure 1.2, p. 45)

Another key foundation for the text is their leadership triad. Branson describes the model of overlapping spheres of interpretive, relational, and implemental leadership. These shape the meanings of reflection and study, help to foster relationships involved, and guide the activities to embody gospel meanings.

The next two chapters present the context in which multicultural churches in North America develop. Branson provides the missional ecclesiological context, noting that Christendom is not experienced by a number of nations in the world and that historical churches in North America were explicitly tied to national or ethnic origins, such as German Baptists, Ukrainian Catholics, etc. Branson and Martínez discuss socio-cultural structures and the resulting shift of multiculturalism within the local church. They assert that while much of national data on multiculturalism

utilizes race classification, the authors choose to focus on ethnicities or cultures. For instance a Latino from Mexico has a different culture than one from Cuba, and a white Argentinean has a different culture than a black Panamanian. Demographic data may be helpful, but the authors believe that it can only be qualified by cultural narratives.

Part 2 of the book addresses worldview, language, relationship, and perception. Branson draws on philosopher Jürgen Habermas's "lifeworld" and missiologist/anthropologist Louis Luzbetak's constructs. Habermas states that people have three lifeworlds—the objective world, the subjective world, and the social world—each in which a person might relate differently. For Luzbetak there are two dimensions of worldview. The emotional dimension concerns values, attitudes and interests and the motivational dimension deals with purpose, ideals and hopes.

Martínez highlights how social relationships and self-perception add to cross-cultural struggle. Language is formative and plays into one's thinking. Martínez makes it a point to discuss the limitations of thinking within the English language, for instance, "it is fairly easy in English to describe a relationship as love-hate, but it is much more complicated to describe human emotional interactions that exist along the love-hate continuum" (p. 118). Limitations of language alone can have a significant effect on relationships but self-perception within social relations magnify problems. For instance, Martínez generalizes saying, "white evangelicals only see individuals and want to solve the tensions by addressing the situation of individuals" (p. 139). Here Martínez assists the individualist reader in recognizing how this particular self-perception may not fit within the construct of a fellow parishioner from a collective construct. Branson and Martínez summarize Part 2 stating, "perception is not only the reception of sensory data, but it is also the valuing of data . . . leaders need to shape the group's capacities to attend to differences" (p. 174).

All the chapters preceding Part 3 build towards a discussion on leadership in multicultural congregations. Branson writes two chapters on intercultural communication and leading change, while Martínez concludes the book with "Practices for the

Calling.” Branson relies again on Habermas for intercultural communication. Cross-cultural communication can be distorted and often leads to crisis. To mediate crisis, leaders must provide space for and help each group narrate and interpret their life-worlds to then share and compare with others in a congregation. In the following chapter Branson gives lists defining the duties of a leader facilitating multicultural change. The duties, too numerous to include in this review, provide an adequate job description for leaders facilitating multicultural adaptive change. He summarizes the chapter stating, “an adaptive challenge is one that will require that the church move toward a future that it cannot see, become something different, learn things it does not know and innovate beyond the current imagination” (p. 222).

Martínez concludes the book with the chapter “Practices for the Calling.” He writes, “Effective leaders need competencies in technical understanding, analysis, and managing life and ministry in a changing environment,” but most importantly, “attention to relationships cannot be omitted” (p. 233). He calls multicultural congregations to share their narratives. Often the dominant cultural narrative becomes the “official narrative” to the exclusion of others. Making the “invisible” narratives visible and official within a congregation places a church in an important position to move forward multiculturally.

Branson and Martínez’s book is a must for pastors and church leaders who struggle through multicultural adaptive change. They demonstrate their passion for seeing the multicultural kingdom—every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7:9–10)—a current reality. They share deep insights from their personal experience of struggling and succeeding in multicultural congregations. Beyond wooden theory, they incorporate illustrative case studies and provide a leader with instruction in the tasks of leading multi-cultural adaptive change.

To make their book more ecumenically effective, Branson and Martínez could have included case studies of Orthodox or Roman Catholic churches that are also adapting multiculturalism amidst monocultural congregations. The book was not written in such a way that it excludes these traditions, however with greater explication they could provide even greater

understanding of multicultural changes in North American churches. A Russian Orthodox Church, until recently consisting almost solely of Russian immigrants and their children, must now address converts from outside a Russian immigrant culture. The Roman Catholic Church must address the massive amounts of immigrants coming from Latin America and shaping the form and culture of the local parish.

Branson and Martínez target a specific audience by addressing their book to local church leaders, lay or professional, and engaging multicultural adaptive change. The reader must be somewhat familiar with both the language and purpose of practical theology as well as other social scientific theory to fully grasp the tools provided, however, these more sophisticated tools must be provided to leaders if they are to tackle such an important change in a local congregation.

As multiculturalism grows out from North American city-centers to the suburbs and rural areas, Branson and Martínez's timely work prepares leaders for the rapidly coming change, and shows then how to reflect well the diverse face of God's Kingdom. Branson and Martínez take seriously the cross-cultural reality of the local church and do an excellent job to prepare church leaders to facilitate their congregations to meet this reality.

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