

2011

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Georgina (2011) "Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities [review] / Branson, Mark L. and Juan F. Martinez," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 5: No. 1, 98-99.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol5/iss1/10>

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BOOK REVIEWS

CHURCHES, CULTURES AND LEADERSHIP: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF CONGREGATIONS AND ETHNICITIES

*By Mark L. Branson & Juan F. Martinez, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press (2011) Paperback, 275 pages
Reviewed by GEORGINA MILLER*

This book is an artful integration of theology and cultural anthropology to introduce churches the complexity of the intercultural realities of contemporary churches. The authors who teach at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, CA, are aware of the fact that this is not an easy journey for most churches. For this reason they set out to encourage church leaders to create an environment that makes God's reconciling initiatives apparent in church life and in the missional interactions with the community at large. The book is well written and full of resources that support the goals of the book.

The authors emphasize that the social and missional identity of the church has often been shaped by an ethnic heritage and cultural scripts.

Our ethnic heritage brings narra-

tives, habits, vocabulary and mental frameworks to our spiritual formation as we seek personally and corporately to pay attention to God. Our social (congregational) formation is influenced by the relational, organizational and care-giving modes of our ethnic and cultural background. And our missional formation draws on the strength and weaknesses of how our cultural narratives have shaped the ways we interact with strangers or seek peace and justice. (p. 63)

Knowing these ethnic and cultural realities can help churches develop a missiological framework that embraces their identity and be receptive of God's work in the community. In the authors' mind it is the work of church leaders to shape an environment so that God's missional vision can be recognized and integrated. Throughout the book, Branson and Martinez artfully pose thought provoking theological questions to challenge readers' thinking and broaden their perspectives. An example of this type of question reads, "How would participants respond if they engaged Scripture, neighbors and Spirit with the expectation that God would reveal a missional life right in their context?" (p. 71). Reader are encouraged to engage in intentional thought about how they relate to others with this context in mind. Another question posed by Branson and Martinez is this: "How can a church's leader help people throughout the congregation see Scripture, their context and themselves in a way that is congruent with God's love for them and for the world around them?" (p. 74). Readers are encouraged to process their own leadership experience. In engaging in these theological questions, readers are assisted, guided and strengthened as they reflect on their own leadership journey.

When the church does not under-

stand the “lifeworlds” of its people and those in the community (p. 101) it has difficulties to move forward cohesively. To facilitate the exploration of such “lifeworlds” the authors suggest asking questions like: “Tell us your autobiography of worship,” “What biblical, historical and cultural forces have shaped your practices?” and “What biblical, historic and cultural resources are available for us to experiment with new practices?” (p. 101).

As a church attempts to reach out it has to learn to communicate more effectively across cultural and linguistic boundaries. In a fascinating chapter the authors help readers understand that language is “a complex system that weaves perceptions, meanings and imaginations into a ‘system of representation.’ Language is a means of sorting out reality at the boundary between objects (out there) and concepts (constructs in our mind)” (p. 115). We all tend to unconsciously assume that the language we speak is an accurate representation of what is “out there” and we assume that the language maps of others are the same or similar to our own. However, this can be a false assumption. “In multilingual, multicultural environments,” say Branson and Martinez, “the leader needs to be particularly sensitive to the complexities of the communication so that he or she can strengthen relationships across these differences” (p. 123).

Realizing that working in multicultural contexts requires skills in handling social complexity the authors borrow Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky’s (2009) phrase, that leaders need to “get on the balcony,” to discern the adaptive challenges and engage in interpretive, relational and implemental activities to facilitate necessary change.

This is a comprehensive book that

masterfully communicates the complexities of a multicultural church as well as providing relevant and practical solutions leaders can use to prepare their congregations to represent God’s intentions more faithfully. The authors have successfully accomplished the purpose for writing the book and have provided a wealth of insight as to the skills and competencies needed to lead in multicultural contexts and create environments that make God’s reconciling initiatives apparent in church life and in missional interactions with the community at large. Throughout the book the authors provide relevant Biblical examples useful for group studies and real life testimonies that apply the concepts taught. A special feature of each chapter is also a list of movies that deal with the issues raised in the chapter. This book should be used as a must-read handbook for all leaders, pastors and teachers who are concerned about the mission of the church in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural world.

Reference

Heifetz, R., Gashow, A., Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

A FIRST-RATE MADNESS: UNCOVERING THE LINKS BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND MENTAL ILLNESS

By Nassir Ghaemi
New York, NY: Penguin (2011)
Hardcover, 330 pages
Reviewed by JOHN GRYS

A First-rate Madness was recommended by a sociologist friend of mine, and though the title and general thrust of the book intrigued me, I’m not sure I was prepared for the opening salvo: