Social Networking
and Church Systems

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We live in a new participatory age. Just consider how, in the twentieth century, Americans were content to receive the day's news from an authoritative anchor like Walter Cronkite or Peter Jennings, or perhaps from a single trusted newspaper. Today, increasing numbers of people want to have a hand in shaping what they see, hear, and know. A rapidly expanding array of media (cable channels, websites, blogs, and so on) allows twenty-first-century users to create culture in multiple new ways. We can upload our own opinions to blogs, our home-shot videos to YouTube, and even our reporting about world events to CNN.[1] Whereas once people were primarily consumers of mass-media culture, increasingly they are collaborative coproducers.

At the heart of this shift are networks. Networks are rapidly becoming the basic organizational paradigm of twenty-first-century Western culture. If the Internet is the central cultural metaphor, the network is the underlying architecture for how we relate and structure our lives together. Sociologist Manuel Castells observes, "Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture."[2]

[1]See www.cnn.com/ireport/.
[2]Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2d ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000) 500.

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What does this mean for church systems? Most existing church judicatory and denominational systems were shaped by mid-twentieth-century organizational paradigms that are coming under increasing stress today. The shift to a network society brings with it profound challenges to ways in which the church has structured its life, particularly around questions of authority, uniformity, and centralization. These emerging forms of networked life, while destabilizing, also invite a fresh theological imagination for being God's called, gathered, and sent people in a new age.

SOCIAL NETWORKING: THE BASICS

Research into networks began in the field of mathematics but has now spread across multiple disciplines, including sociology and ecology. At its simplest level, a network is comprised of three components: *nodes* (individual points or participants), *links* (communication relationships between nodes), and *hubs* (nodes that are linked to multiple other nodes).

Researchers have discovered the key role that hubs play within networks. In most networks, 80 percent of network activity goes through the 20 percent of the nodes that are hubs. These hubs are so vital that one can actually remove up to 80 percent of the nodes in a network and the network will still function—provided the hubs remain intact. When the hubs are removed, the effect on the network is devastating. In ecosystems, the hubs are the keystone species, without which an ecosystem will collapse.[3]

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In social networking, people are the nodes and hubs, and relationships are the links. Sociologists who analyze human communities call hub people "key influencers."[4] Some people in every human community are simply more widely connected to others. You know these people in your church—the opinion makers without whose support no change or innovation will spread very far.

Twenty-first-century information technology has vastly expanded the possibilities for social networking, removing traditional limitations of geography and temporality. Today, websites such as Facebook allow one to renew or initiate contact with people who in the past would have receded from view or never entered one's relational world. Research on social-networking technologies reveals two primary effects on social life. First, preexisting relationships with friends, family, and neighbors are actually thickened through easier and more frequent communica-

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[3]Albert-László Barabási, *Linked* (New York: Plume, 2003) 96–120.

[4]See Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*s, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003).

tion. You can keep in touch with people already close to you that much more readily. Second, there is the emergence of limited-purpose, loose relationships on a vastly greater scale than previously possible. Through social-networking media around various affiliations or interests, people are making acquaintances and contacts with whom they may never develop a close personal connection.[5] Fears that the proliferation of these technologies (Internet-connected computers, cell and smart phones, texting devices, and so on) would further isolate people from one another seem misplaced; the Internet has for many people simply replaced time spent watching TV.[6]

A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Networks are shaping and making possible striking changes in how we associate, collaborate, and make meaning in our lives. *Participation* has become a defining theme for how people today envision themselves and their world. "The emergent worldview has been described as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author," assert social scientists Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury.[7] The Harvard scholar Yochai Benkler describes the replacement of the "industrial information economy" of the twentieth century—in which a narrow range of high production-value cultural goods were distributed widely by a few producers—with what he calls the "networked information economy." "What characterizes the networked information economy is that decentralized action—specifically new and important cooperative and coordinate action carried out through radically distributed, nonmarket mechanisms that do not depend upon proprietary strategies—plays a much greater role than it did, or could have, in the industrial information economy."[8]

This means that bureaucratic centralized control, uniformity, and unidirectional processes of communication are giving way to networks characterized by higher levels of reciprocity, grassroots innovation, localized diversity, and cocreation linked by technology across often vast geographical spaces. Contemporary culture is being created dynamically by literally millions of local participants engaged simultaneously, often on their free time. In part because of the technology itself and in part because of this profound decentralization, the pace of change has rapidly accelerated. Benkler writes, "We are seeing a shift from individuals who depend on social relations that are dominated by locally embedded, thick, unmediated, given, and stable relations, into networked individuals—who are more dependent on their own combination of strong and weak ties, who switch net-

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[5]Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 357.

[6]Ibid., 375.

[7]Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, "Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration," in *Handbook of Action Research*, ed. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (London: Sage, 2006) 7.

[8]Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 3.

works, cross boundaries and weave their own web of more or less instrumental, relatively fluid relationships."[9]

This makes many church leaders uneasy. For many in today's emerging culture, belonging to a spiritual community such as the church is being redefined away from the settled patterns of commitment, duty, and loyalty that often characterized previous generations. Traditional forms of authority, particularly those embedded in professions such as medicine or the clergy, are coming under threat. Today, it is increasingly common for patients to arrive at the doctor having already researched their symptoms online, with definite opinions about diagnosis and treatment. Views on spirituality and theology are being formed as powerfully by popular media as by the traditional teaching of religious professionals.

CHURCH BUREAUCRACIES IN A NETWORK AGE

The stress is being acutely felt on the level of church organization. In the early to mid-twentieth century, many denominations and church systems in America adopted the primary form of organization that was ascendant within national life at the time—the modern corporate bureaucracy.[10] During this period, many denominations created large, centralized headquarters, with extensive staffs, programs, and committee structures.[11] What had been looser affiliations of churches and judicatories were standardized along the lines of a multinational corporation, with a significantly expanded institutional footprint.

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Modern bureaucracies, which exist to rationalize work, are based upon several key assumptions. First, bureaucracies emerged within a linear universe of interchangeable parts—the Newtonian cosmos, where all of life can be broken down into constituent components for observation and manipulation. As in the modern industrial corporation, where workers could be relocated at will by the bureaucracy, clergy within denominational systems were trained and credentialed according to nationalized standards, with the assumption that they could serve anywhere in the system. Second, authority, knowledge, and control were centralized at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy. This functioned very well in an industrial econ-

[9]Ibid., 362.

[10]Russell E.Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essay*s, ed. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 84–87.

[11]See Craig Van Gelder, "From Corporate Church to Missional Church: The Challenge Facing Congregations Today," *Review & Expositor* 101/3 (2004) 425–450.

omy, when decisions could be made at the top and disseminated down for execution at lower levels. In twentieth-century America, denominations become cradle-to-grave providers of religious and social goods and services, from Sunday school curricula to hospital and nursing-home care, all within a coherent national "brand" identity. Clergy were the resident "experts" on theological and spiritual matters.

As denominational loyalty waned in the social upheavals of the 1960s and '70s and the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s, these bureaucracies tended to respond through a new stress on regulation.[12] Policies and procedures multiplied. Meanwhile, budgets steadily declined, and denominational and judicatory executives and staff carried the burden of trying to keep these organizations running with fewer and fewer resources. At the grass roots, church members expressed a growing ambivalence about denominational priorities and commitments[13]—a trend that continues today. Meanwhile, new networked organizations such as the Willow Creek Association have arisen to fill needs for training and resources that denominations once met.

As American society shifts further from an industrial to a knowledge economy, modern corporate bureaucracies are being rapidly restructured, with flattened organizational pyramids and decentralized operations. General Motors might have served as an inspiring organizational model for the twentieth-century denomination but can hardly do so today. The judicatory and denominational structures we have inherited are increasingly at odds with today's world, and the trend toward diminished resources and grassroots resistance to centralized authority will likely only grow. What is required is a reconceptualization of church organization for a network age.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A NETWORKED CHURCH

The good news is that the church has been here before. The early church functioned essentially as a network of local congregations and house churches linked by personal relationships. In *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark traces how the gospel spread through social networks in the ancient world along the routes of the Roman Empire.[14] Churches were held together not by centralized organizational structures, standardized policies, or hierarchical lines of authority, but rather by bonds of fellowship, teaching, and support among leaders and members, including itinerant apostles. Paul's rhetoric in the Corinthian correspondence, for instance, demonstrates the character of this relational bond. His personal relationship with that community enabled him to challenge and rebuke them but precluded his exercising direct control over their life. While the church in

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[12]Ibid., 436–437.

[13]Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism," 87–92.

[14]Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

its first several centuries eventually came to adopt Roman imperial forms of governance, which tended to concentrate power in hierarchical bishops overseeing discrete geographical areas, the church began as a social network.

If networks are social communities characterized by distributed, decentralized authority and high levels of mutuality and participation, there are striking parallels with the Christian doctrine of God. Recent decades have brought a renewed understanding of the Trinity as a social community, particularly as expressed in the ancient concept of *perichoresis*, the dynamic, mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit in an open, circulating movement.[15] The Trinity is a community of reciprocity and interdependence, of mutual exchange and shared life that flows from one person to the other and spills beyond to create and sustain the life of the world. The Trinity presents us with an image of personhood grounded in relationality—an image with new resonance in a participatory culture.[16]

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Moreover, the church as a community that reflects the image of the Trinity is animated by the Spirit of God, who empowers, liberates, inspires, and reconciles disparate people into a new humanity in Christ. The Spirit is poured out "on all flesh" (Joel 2; Acts 2), enlivening and prophesying even and especially through those persons often marginalized in human society—women, the oppressed, the young, the old. The Pentecost vision is one of profound and inclusive participation and of dispersed authority. Throughout the remainder of Acts, it is the Spirit who surprises, provokes, leads, and instructs the church as the apostles are driven across cultural barriers. Innovation and change (for instance, the incorporation of Gentiles) tend to come not from the center (Jerusalem), but from the edges (Antioch), under the Spirit's guidance. It is Peter who must learn from Cornelius through the Spirit how the gospel reaches across cultures. As in a network, new insights and innovations often arise from the edges in the New Testament, not from centers of power.[17]

The early church's process of growth and discovery as it took root in multiple cultures reflects the basic principle of incarnation—the body of Christ's transformation of particular locations of human life. The changing nature of Western cul-

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[15]Jürgen Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000) 111–125.

[16]See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), and John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

[17]See Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 15–46.

ture in the early twenty-first century calls for fresh incarnations of the church and its organization. Historically, the church's organization has always reflected the cultures in which it is set; that is intrinsic to its incarnational character. What, then, does church look like in a network society?

NETWORKED CHURCH SYSTEMS: A NEW VISION

American denominational systems were initially created to do mission somewhere else—across the nineteenth-century western frontier, or overseas.[18] Today, however, mission is increasingly understood to take place primarily through local congregations in their contexts, as churches bear witness to God's reign in a multitude of ways in a post-Christian society. Missionaries are more likely to be sent *to* America from Africa or Asia than the reverse.[19] Local churches are at the heart of mission, and many know that they need to be connected in order to participate in God's mission faithfully and effectively. The missionary rationale that prompted the formation of denominational and judicatory structures must be reclaimed, yet reframed toward the grass roots.

Network structures are particularly well suited for this kind of connectionalism. Instead of seeing local churches primarily as providers of money and the occasional specialist missionary for mission efforts organized and carried out elsewhere through denominational bodies, the logic is reversed. Judicatories and denominations can be reconceived as networks of local churches in mission, engaged in their local contexts, as well as collaborating together in partnership for mission in other locales or to address regional, national, or international challenges and opportunities. The priority is on the local church, empowered in mission.

In the corporate bureaucratic paradigm, those at the top of the bureaucracy were assumed to know best where and how to spend the money being redistributed from the grass roots. In a network structure, expertise is assumed to lie primarily at the local level. Churches share an interdependent collaboration characterized by mutual accountability, resource sharing, and encouragement. Church leaders and members link up laterally as needs and opportunities arise to share in ministry, rather than expecting that work to be coordinated, controlled, and managed by judicatory or denominational staff in a top-down superstructure. This allows for higher levels of mutuality and reciprocity.

A recent example from one mainline judicatory illustrates this. A dying Anglo congregation in a changing urban neighborhood came into relationship with a large community of recent immigrants from Southeast Asia who were looking for a church. As the immigrants began to join in large numbers and word spread among the other local congregations about what the Spirit was doing in the renewal of this church, a team of lay leaders organized a network to support this burgeoning

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[18]Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism," 80–82.

[19]See Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

ministry. Rather than attempt to secure funding from the central judicatory budget, they set up a partnership within a number of congregations, shared the story and vision of this new ministry and its needs, and raised the funds necessary through the network. Given the high levels of resentment of the judicatory bureaucracy, people were more ready to give generously directly through such a network than sending their money through apportionments to the central budget. The collaboration was peer to peer and took place at the grass roots, with the judicatory executive playing a key communicative role in helping to connect the immigrants to the congregation.

Reenvisioning church systems in this way means that judicatories and denominational systems themselves become networks, rather than corporate bureaucratic superstructures overlaid on top of congregations. This means a significant flattening and streamlining of the organizational footprint—something that is occurring on a forced basis today anyway, due to financial retrenchment in many church systems. Networks require smaller staffs and leaner budgets than bureaucracies. At their heart is a basic functionality of communication, which requires a different set of skills and emphases than attempting to run a full program or regulatory operation.

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In this sense, judicatory and denominational leaders become network facilitators. One of the anxieties that typically surfaces when considering this shift from centralized authority embedded in regulations, common budgets, and hierarchies to decentralized networks is whether things will devolve into a fractured congregationalism. That need not be the case. The Internet has demonstrated how networked communities can be more robustly connectional and communicative than siloed bureaucracies, which often foster internal competition.

As organizational scholar Mary Jo Hatch observes, networks require intentional identity cultivation.[20] In a network structure, identity is not maintained through uniformity or top-down control, as in a bureaucracy. Rather, it must be cultivated through sense-making, communicative leadership (what Paul was doing with the Corinthians, for instance). At the heart of this is the teaching function of oversight ministry (whether embodied in the episcopate or other forms), which tended to be underemphasized in the corporate bureaucratic paradigm in favor of governance. It is largely through teaching and communication, not rule enforce-

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[20]Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 192.

ment, that ecclesial identity is developed and preserved in a network system, for networks are fundamentally uncontrollable.

As Christians, our theological anthropology should keep us from romanticizing networks as a cure-all solution to human organization, in which it is assumed that a greater democratic ethos and distributed authority will remove the dangers of coercion and corruption endemic to all forms of human society. There always remains the need for mutual accountability. Yet the authority to exercise such accountability in a network is shared among participants rather than held primarily above. A good example of how this functions on the Internet is Wikipedia.com, in which the online community essentially polices itself in ensuring the site is accurate and not abused. Those who run the site were responsible for creating an ethos and some simple ground rules, but the site is now "owned" by its many thousands of users.

The uncontrollable nature of networks is the most promising feature for a new age of mission in Western societies. Widespread, grassroots innovation is required for the church to thrive today. The gospel must be taken across cultural boundaries, and new forms of church must emerge that embody and proclaim God's promises afresh to new generations and populations. Networks foster exactly that kind of innovation; certainly the burgeoning Internet economy and culture are a case in point. While corporate bureaucracies stressed uniformity and standardization, networks encourage diversification and adaptation. A network age is an invitation to church leaders to trust the Spirit to guide local church members into surprising, provocative, and creative missional engagement with a dynamic and complex world. ⊕

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